

Tech firm, health advocates, offer strategic Covid data to small business

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When the time comes for businesses to get back to work, it might be good beforehand to have as much data as possible about trends within a company or the region, so social distancing and mitigation can be catered to an individual company's operation.

That thinking is behind an effort by the Lancaster County-based Central Penn Business Group on Health, and Innovu, a Pittsburgh-based data and tech firm, that are working with other groups to develop data sets specific to the coronavirus. The intention is to determine whether companies can ensure that workers are doing what they can to stay healthy as they return to work, especially those with underlying conditions.

The Central Penn Business Group on Health initially teamed up with Innovu in 2016 as a way to gather data so self-insured businesses could be armed with solid information when negotiating contracts with providers, said Diane Hess, executive director of the group that is funded with sponsorships and membership dues. For example, if businesses can know how much procedures or drugs cost in their market and have indicators that ensure quality, they can help employees find the best care at the best price, which helps keep costs under control.

"That is why the data is important," Hess said. "You know, and the providers know you know. That changes the dynamic of the relationship."

With the coronavirus affecting every company in the country, data sets specific to the crisis would help companies better prepare for going back to work but also help them make better decisions overall, said Hess and Hugh O'Toole, CEO of Innovu.

O'Toole noted that the virus is so new that the projections being made by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other groups, such as at Johns Hopkins, are based on models of what the experts think will happen.

"At the end of the day, the projections continue to be modified," O'Toole said, adding that models can only offer just so much insight. If specific data can be gathered and analyzed on a company level, and then a regional or statewide level, businesses will have the best information possible to make their decisions.

In normal times, the data sets — which do not identify specific people — give companies information about many patterns, such as whether employees are taking their medications, getting their medications in the most cost-effective manner, seeking procedures that are medically necessary or that can be done at the best cost and highest quality.

That information is collated by Innovu and routinely reported back to individual companies, with specific reports prepared every quarter for them, O'Toole said. The Central Penn Business Group on Health reports regional data twice per year. Those reports also are open to the public, so all businesses can benefit from the data, even if they are not group members, Hess said.

A main goal of the group is to educate as many businesses as possible so that the focus on quality and cost spreads and helps everyone, she explained. The next regional report will come out this summer, which should be enough time to collate specific data and analysis involving the coronavirus in the region, she and O'Toole said.

The efforts also involve the Pittsburgh Business Group on Health and members of HealthCare 21 in Knoxville, Tenn., both of which are Innovu customers, Hess said. Nationwide, there are 40 to 50 business coalitions, including one in the Lehigh Valley and one in eastern Pennsylvania that serves parts of New Jersey and Delaware, Hess said. While the groups share information at national conferences, they each might work with different data providers. This specific coronavirus effort involves the Pittsburgh, Central Penn and Knoxville groups and their work with Innovu, she said.

In addition to gathering information from its clients, Innovu has access to other data sets and can create wider-reaching reports on coronavirus since virus-specific health codes were made available to providers nationwide for billing purposes early in April. The virus was so novel that the codes weren't available until new ones were created, O'Toole said.

The three groups also have asked Innovu to track certain claims categories that may be impacted in utilization or cost. Innovu clients can access customized dashboards and view any subset of their population at any time, according to a news release on the effort.

"Quick access to data is essential in helping employers proactively address gaps in care created by this extraordinary circumstance," Gaye Fortner, president and CEO of HealthCare 21, said in the news release.

Hess and O'Toole said that one concern is how the virus will have strong indirect effects on employees, such as with mental health and substance abuse and those suffering from chronic conditions. That information will help businesses best understand what they need to do to help employees before trends become unwieldy. The analyses, when compared to Innovu's vast benchmarks, will help identify issues by "age bands, geography and industry," the groups said.

Each business has its own unique circumstances, as does each worker, O'Toole said. He noted that he has a friend with underlying conditions who has his three adult children home with him during the crisis. Once they go back to work, their ability to come back into the home will be affected. The more data people have, he said, decisions about critical issues will be the best possible.

And that is the purpose of the detailed analyses.

"Employers are faced with an unprecedented challenge in ensuring their employees are getting access to the care they need should they require it," Jessica Brooks, CEO and executive director, Pittsburgh Business Group on Health, said in the news release. "Employers must rely on relevant, real-time data to inform their decisions as to how they help protect the viability of their organizations while safeguarding their workforce."

For more information:

To learn more about the groups involved in the efforts to gather information about the coronavirus to help businesses, go to:

- Innovu: www.innovu.com
- Central Pennsylvania Business Group on Health: www.cpbgh.org
- HealthCare 21, Nashville TN: www.hc21.org
- Pittsburgh Business Group on Health: www.pbghpa.org