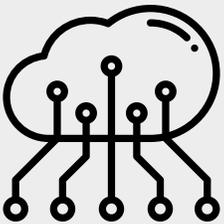# ESPYR

Strategic app development helps deliver pocket-sized mental health support to employees
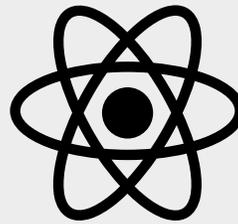
7FACTOR

At a glance

Creating a simple, effective, employee wellness empowerment tool adaptable to post-pandemic realities of remote and hybrid work.

This solution is hosted on AWS
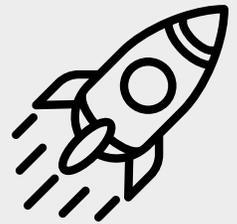
3 compartmentalized security components

React Native mobile application

Productization services path

Key Insights

300+
Nationwide Clients

91%
User satisfaction rate

200+
Additional features since launch

"Mental health is definitely important. We have to pay attention to it. It's not something that people emphasize enough. We, as a company, support mental health; we, as a company, support ensuring people have good mental health. If a product supports that, we're very proud to build it."

Jeremy Duvall

Founder, 7Factor Software

Introduction

Espyr is more than a mental health provider. They are redefining what it means to sustain well-being in the workplace. At a time when employee mental health has taken a critical downturn— Espyr answers the call for more immediate forms of reinforcement.

When the Espyr team turned to us to build an app that would change the game of improving employee wellness, we jumped at the chance to help deliver pocket-sized employee well-being and support.

A mental health crisis in the making, everywhere

Employees bring their whole selves to work, and that includes the toll of the recent global pandemic. The COVID crisis posed a considerable financial, emotional, and physical burden for almost everyone, exacerbating mental health struggles nationwide. In 2022, 19.86% of adults in the U.S. – or nearly 50 million Americans – were experiencing a mental illness. And in one study, nearly half of respondents reported worse mental health at work since the pandemic's arrival.[2]

Employers still struggle to attract and retain talented workers, support them in doing their best work, reduce absenteeism and burnout, control the healthcare costs of severe and chronic mental illness, and cultivate a culture of innovation, engagement, and customer service. Most understand that effective employee wellness practices and programs can help them with all these goals, but they may be challenged to manage the complexity of offering such programs and often fall short of their goals for employee participation.

They need a simpler, more effective way to empower employee wellness . . . and they need it to adapt to the new post-pandemic realities of remote and hybrid work.

~ 50m Americans struggles with mental health

Half of the respondents mental health worsen during the pandemic

Employee Assistance Programs to the rescue

Employee wellness is top of mind for employers as they strain to fill positions — and as employees continue to grapple with the drastic shifts brought on by COVID. As a result of the extremely tight labor market, solid mental health support for employees has become more than a resource. Now, it's an essential recruitment and retention tool.

Even prior to the COVID pandemic, many were already turning to employee assistance programs (EAPs) — either directly or via an insurance company — as an investment in employee health. EAPs can span a variety of activities and perks, from discounted gym memberships, to educational programming, assessments, and more. Typical goals of these programs include:

- Improving employee health behaviors
- Mitigating prevailing health risks
- Controlling healthcare costs
- Raising workplace productivity
- Encouraging presentism
- Elevating recruitment and retention

How Espyr is Redefining the Traditional Employee Assistance Program

Espyr provides well-being solutions that extend beyond the traditional EAP. Their solutions focus on addressing and preventing mental health and behavioral issues that impact personal and organizational performance. By constantly evolving its offerings, the company has been able to address the changing needs of their clients, including those brought on by COVID-19.

Part of what makes Espyr different from a traditional EAP is their dedication to accessibility. The Espyr team focuses heavily on fostering high engagement rates for their products and programs. By delivering resources and services through different modalities, they're able to expand the ways people access mental health support, whenever they need it.

The next logical step for Espyr was to offer a mobile app for its wellness programs. So they came to 7Factor, asking us to develop a new mobile app that would allow employees to access Espyr's rich selection of wellness programs, whenever and wherever was most convenient for them.

"Everything we do is designed to increase engagement and outcomes, and therefore effectiveness," says Rick Taweel, Espyr's CEO. "Intuitive user experience is a critical part of achieving that, especially as we continue to evolve and deliver clients exactly what they need from a well-being perspective."

Challenge

Esypr needed to meet the pandemic moment with the latest digital functionality and the right resources and support for employees. By developing a well-architected mobile app designed to deliver their services and resources easily, they would be able to improve their member experience tenfold. But in addition to hitting the mark quickly in the short term, they also needed to engineer as much flexibility as possible into their product designs so that they would be adaptable to future digital trends and employee health needs.

Aware of 7Factor's reputation for engineering quality systems that are secure, stable, scalable, and extensible, Espyr asked us to take on the challenge of developing their new mobile app, Espyr Connect.

The Task At Hand

Translate Espyr's goal of delivering constantly evolving mental health solutions and high client engagement into a new future-proofed mobile app, Espyr Connect, that would serve users right away and also adapt to meet new mental health challenges (and digital capabilities) moving forward.

Obstacles

1. Getting approval from the big guns

Just as consumer packaged goods (CPG) vie for brick-and-mortar retail placement, so too do new apps wait at the digital gates of the most coveted of app stores: Apple and Google. Gaining entrance means complying with strict requirements made even stricter by the added privacy concerns when dealing with healthcare data. Health-focused content published by the app would invite even more strenuous reviews.

"Apps in the healthcare sector get a particularly high level of scrutiny," explains 7Factor Software Engineer Chad Robinson. "If you're putting out things like articles about COVID, Apple is looking at you very hard."

2. Protecting identities while opening access

These privacy requirements raised an important balance we needed to strike. The idea was to create easy access to self-help resources – and yet we needed to keep user identities and sensitive data protected.

In other words, we had to engineer a secure, user-protected experience that didn't simultaneously block everyone from the vital information they needed due to security scrutiny.

▶ Problem

Obstacles

3. Not your typical workflow

The idea of Esypr Connect is to guide users through relevant digital content, assessments, and activities that help members reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout. Typically, we would use an admin interface to control settings, but this app wouldn't have the same admin workflow as many others. Instead, the app experience needed to feel like a website, and the Espyr team needed to be able to publish new content daily —or even multiple times in one day.

4. Time: the old standby

As with any development project, we needed to stay as efficient as possible without sacrificing quality or performance. On top of that, we had to plan for the lengthy review cycles and adjustments that come with applying for app store placement from Apple and Google.

"Mobile apps in general, take a while to get through the process," Robinson continues. "You can't do a release every hour on them. There's a review cycle to get through the app store. If something needs to be changed or fixed, it does take some time to do that. We need to allow for it in the dev cycle."

▶ Solution

Solving for technical requirements

For maximum flexibility, we developed the app in React Native, using Retool for the admin interface and AWS for backend infrastructure. In order to deliver analytics, storage for profile data, and push notifications, we took advantage of Firebase tools.

To facilitate the client's publishing needs, we deployed a Drupal content management system (CMS) to offer rich text editing. That way, the Espyr team would be able to relate items, link between them, and insert media images. Building the backend with a CMS, rather than hand coding it, gave us a big running start to accelerate our timeline.

Testing & iteration to the rescue

Unlike with other development deliverables, mobile apps don't lend themselves as well to automated testing frameworks, so Patty Lovely, 7Factor QA Engineer, performed QA testing throughout the development process. She made sure feedback loops met product specifications and all releases were deployment-ready.

"Coming in during the middle of the project, I loved a lot of the frameworks that were already set up. It was very clear what the vision was, what the screenshots looked like, what the user flows were going to be," Lovely says. "It was nice to see visuals of what the AC [accepted code] was, and then I could compare that against the actual app and go through it as an admin. Even though there isn't really an admin portal, there is some administrative work. And then I also went through it as a potential user."

In an app experience, every detail matters, so Lovely looked for moments of potential friction along the user journey.

"I focused on small things that would drive a user crazy, like, why isn't this committing? Well, it's because the field is required but I don't have any information in it," she explains. "And then just the way you like to see information, how you want to consume it." From there, the team could regroup to determine any necessary changes to resolve important issues.

But Lovely wasn't the only feedback source throughout the process. By taking an iterative approach with regular client check-ins, we were also able to incorporate the perspective of the Espyr team.

"We'll pick a batch of items and set some expectations with the client about what we hope to achieve in that interval. And then we'll do a demo," Robinson adds. "We do a work delivery demo every week. In that demo we collect feedback. Oftentimes ... we might have thoughts on some refinements or the client might look at it and say, gee, that's confusing, is there anything we can do to improve this? We brainstorm it in the call."

Regular feedback loops help our team ensure that end products deliver on experience, even if that means pivoting from initial designs.
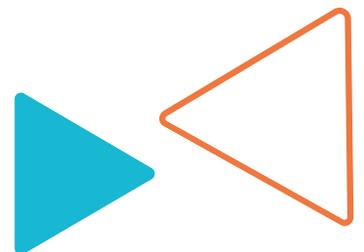
3 Key App Features

Rich Content

Timely educational articles, videos, affirmations, and resources on a variety of topics related to wellness and self-help

Tool

Users can complete standardized assessments to determine additional resource needs. Assessment responses are encrypted, then transported over SSL to ensure the protection of sensitive data.

Contact

Users can connect with a mental health provider or coach directly through the app. An external chat tool addresses privacy concerns for storing personal identifiable information (PII).

Meet Espyr Connect

Employers such as the U.S. Coast Guard, major universities, and large enterprises offer Esypr Connect to their employees as a complement to typical wellness programs. Users gain access to tools for life guidance, self-help resources, and even the ability to connect with a counselor or coach, all from the comfort of their own phones.

Embracing the back-and-forth

"There is typically a lot of that back and forth in the cycle right now," **says Robinson.** "I think that's healthy. I think that's what iterative software development is supposed to be about, not having a crystal ball and being able to see exactly how something should feel. Sometimes you need to put it together and then see how it feels when you actually look at it."

A Smooth Solution with Measurable Impact

Espyr Connect now helps hundreds of employers offer more guidance and support to their employees, when and where they need it. Many of those employers represent sizable workforces, a further testament to the app's impact.

"Each company represents a large user base, and it spans everything from companies to organizations," noted Lovely. "We've got the US Coast Guard, which is military. We've got companies, we've got all kinds of people using this app, and they continue to add more."

The new and improved Fit to Pass follows suit as a key coaching resource for employers looking to solve the driver shortage and provide actionable solutions for the many challenges facing CDL drivers today.
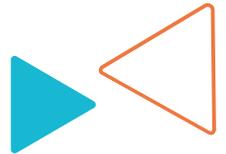
91% of clients say Espyr helped them be more effective on the job

Strategic partnership for the (true) win

At 7Factor, we don't count our successes exclusively by numbers. It's critical for us to earn our clients' trust and create a two-way value exchange throughout the process. While developing Espyr Connect, we were able to provide strategic input that the Esypr team found valuable — a key performance metric for our engineering team.

"We regularly have conversations where, at 7Factor, we like to think of ourselves not just as mechanics, but as advisors and partners," explained Robinson. "I think that's been important [with Espyr] because we have had a long relationship. We're looking forward to it being even longer."

Future-proofed agility

Beyond the intuitive experiences and quality performance users can enjoy through Espyr Connect, the systems we engineered will support Espyr's competitive differentiation moving forward among EAPs. How? We made every effort to future-proof the configuration of features so that the Espyr team can add and evolve as employee needs and digital trends change–even if it required more work from us in the short term.

"As part of iteration, it can be very tempting to do things as simply as possible. Right? It's a logical thing," explains Robinson. "We're all driven to try to find quick solutions. And so if you have a new feature, you might try to just hack it in there in some way. The problem with that is that over a couple of years of doing that, it becomes unmaintainable. Every time we've been asked to add a feature, I've always tried to find a way to provide the Espyr team with the ability to maintain the item."

What did future-proofing look like for Esypr Connect?
"Not hard coding items, making sure there are good editorial tools that drive them and so on," Robinson enumerates. "For instance, when we worked on the provider directory feature, we had a spreadsheet of initial providers. But we knew that list might change over time. And so we knew we needed to build an admin interface to it, not just have the providers be in the app."

Building a brighter future

Above all, we at 7Factor were thrilled to partner with Espyr on a tool whose impact reflected our own values as a company–and we look forward to continuing the partnership well into the future.

"Mental health is definitely important," says Jeremy Duvall, 7Factor founder and CEO. "We have to pay attention to it. It's not something that people emphasize enough. Instead, we blame evil and other buzzwords, rather than actually thinking that maybe circumstances are causing individuals to do things that they normally wouldn't do. We as a company support mental health; we as a company support ensuring people have good mental health. If a product supports that, we're very proud to build it."

We Build Good Things
Let us show you how