

Curing Wellness

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By Carol Patton

Hundreds of excited employees at Colonial Life and Accident Insurance in Columbia, S.C., surrounded the atrium in the company's headquarters building back in February of 2003. They were cheering co-workers who were racing against the clock to do at least 42 push-ups and 42 sit-ups, each within two minutes. Standing next to them was a member of the U.S. Army's local recruiting office, playing the role of drill sergeant.

No one was being recruited, however. The event was actually an attempt by the company to help its staff get in top physical shape. Although Colonial Life had implemented a comprehensive wellness program in the 1980s - complete with an on-site exercise facility - participation was lukewarm. It was time for a change.

"People are interested in out-of-the-box types of things that they've never done before that will energize them," says Don Montgomery, assistant vice president of human resources for the 900-employee company. "This was a great inspiration to these people. It truly was exciting."

When it comes to wellness, simply having a program isn't enough. Encouraging employees to eat healthier, abandon their couch-potato lifestyle and get fit takes persistence, imagination and finesse, and too many companies are failing in this regard, says one expert.

However, some employers are going the extra mile through wellness initiatives that offer employees fun activities and tangible rewards - without stretching their corporate budgets. Others are beefing up their financial incentives, and requiring employees who don't participate to foot the bill for those who do.

An Army of Actuaries

When Colonial invited the local recruiting battalion to its campus, the insurer wasn't certain whether employees would buy in to the challenge of passing the same fitness test given to the Army's active-duty personnel.

Still, the recruiters went ahead, laying out a two-mile course that met the Army's standards for maximum elevation and even demonstrating to interested employees the correct positions for doing sit-ups and pushups. After Colonial promoted the event via employee e-mails and posters, 20 people signed up.

When the event day came, hundreds came out of their offices to support the 20 volunteers, shouting words of encouragement, says Montgomery, adding that 15 people passed the test and were awarded gift certificates to a local sporting-goods store. In the end, the company spent well under \$1,000 for t-shirts, posters and fruit for employees to munch on while watching the event.

Within the next two months, participation in the company's wellness program increased by more than 20 percent. The company plans to repeat the event this year but this time around, with added rivalry: Major employers in the area are sending employee teams to compete against each other.

"It sends a message that we really care about employee health and reinforces to the whole community that this is a great place to work," says Montgomery.

According to a 2003 survey of 354 U.S. companies conducted by the American Management Association, 71 percent promote wellness among their workforce, while 29 percent offer some type of employee incentive to participate in wellness programs.

Average participation rates in these programs range from 10 percent to 25 percent, says David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America in Omaha, Neb. He believes the low rates are due to a lack of imagination among employers.

"It's all about creativity," he says, adding that usually 60 percent of employees are either overweight or obese. "Companies innovate by energizing their programs."

He tells the story of how a manufacturer in Iowa successfully encouraged its nearly 300 employees to lose weight. They all stepped on a grain scale, hoping to collectively lose a ton, or 2,000 pounds, within one year. During each quarter, the employees weighed in and again at the end of the year. Having reached its goal, the company sponsored a huge wellness festival for employees and their family.

"That cost the company zero," says Hunnicutt. "What really was smart was the way they creatively got everybody involved and kept them motivated. It's that kind of thinking that's refreshing, but relatively rare, in the field of health promotions."

Even annual events can send a strong message. Consider "Walk Out on Your Job Day," created by a health-care provider in Kearney, Neb., says Hunnicutt. One day each summer, employees in the rural farming community walk from work to the local park - which can take some up to an hour - for a healthy picnic lunch.

Hunnicutt says less than 20 percent of American employers offer well thought-out, creative and effective wellness programs, despite the fact that healthy employees consume fewer health-care dollars, are more productive, less sick and disabled and are less likely to need workers compensation.

The other problem with traditional wellness approaches is that they lack passion. Companies must stop placing wellness on a shelf and integrate it into their culture, says Michael Thompson, principal in the HR services division at PricewaterhouseCoopers in New York. Some of his clients have done this by establishing health-care reimbursement accounts for employees, similar to medical savings accounts.

Some accounts are based on a point system: The more health-related activities employees engage in, the more points they receive in their account, which can be exchanged for additional benefits not covered under their company's regular benefits plan.

Other ideas: One of Thompson's clients starts every staff meeting with a safety or health tip. Another provides online nutrition counseling that helps employees customize daily menus and monitor their nutritional intake. Some are even making stairwells physically attractive and piping music into them to encourage employees to take the steps instead of the elevator.

Thompson says companies are looking for broad-based solutions that don't cost a lot of money and capture employees' imagination.

"You need to make a healthy lifestyle an easy thing to do," he says, adding that employee wellness must become a core value. "The more fun and whimsical it is, the more it can really turn on employees."

Really Stretching It

Some companies incorporate multimedia into their programs. White & Case, a New York law firm, recently asked the director of its on-site fitness facility to create an exercise DVD for its 1,800 U.S. employees featuring different exercises using resistant bands (giant rubber bands roughly three feet long). So far, about 500 employees have requested the DVD, which comes with an instruction booklet and a resistant band.

"The kits cost less than \$2 each," says Susanne Wamba, director of health and welfare benefits for the law firm. "In Manhattan, people don't have room in their cubicle or apartment for fitness equipment. We've had some really great feedback, like 'I didn't know this existed.' "

Likewise, Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago offers points to employees who participate in healthy activities. If they attend a yoga class, for instance, they earn two points. Exercising for 30 minutes at home is worth one point, participating in an organized walk or climb equals 20 points and running a marathon or playing on a sports team is valued at 50 points, says Peggy Gutman, director of occupational health at the hospital, which has 3,500 employees.

The program costs approximately \$2 per employee and is based on the honor system. Points can be cashed in any time at giftcertificates.com, an online incentive vendor. For 50 points, employees earn a \$25 gift certificate, 100 points can be exchanged for a \$50 gift certificate and 200 points earns a \$100 gift certificate. The highest gift - worth 250 points - is a paid day off. Last year, 22 employees received this reward, says Gutman.

In the future, the hospital hopes to link injured employees returning to work with activities in its wellness programs, she says, explaining that they'll complete two questionnaires - at six and 12 months - designed to help HR track how exercising impacts their overall health.

"We're building relationships with our employees that affect everything from productivity to absenteeism," Gutman says. "It's a process of changing culture, developing a culture where people feel we're doing things to support their personal and professional growth."

Educating the Educators

In 1994, the Washoe County School District in Reno, Nev., which is self-insured, implemented a wellness program for its nearly 7,000 teachers and staff that is focused on individual responsibility and incentive-based activities.

In an interesting twist, although the district's wellness program is theoretically funded by a \$40 monthly fee charged to each employee, in reality the program is funded primarily by employees who don't participate in the program. Employees who choose not to participate in an annual health screening sponsored by the district automatically pay the full monthly fee (at last count, approximately 500 workers declined to attend the screening). Employees who do participate in the screening pay \$30 per month.

The monthly fees are further reduced by \$10 increments for each health-risk factor if employees can demonstrate they're taking active steps to address those factors. For example, if overweight employees who smoke and have high blood pressure join an exercise class, enroll in a smoking cessation program and see a doctor about their blood pressure, they can reduce their monthly payment to zero.

Laura Dancer, assistant superintendent for HR at the district, says the program relies primarily on the honor system.

"[The program] is entirely funded by assessments to employees who continue to have risk factors in their lifestyles," she says.

During the last school year, employees contributed \$235,000, while the program spent \$176,000 on everything from flu shots and blood work to incentives ranging from pedometers to exercise outfits, plus an estimated \$40,000 for the program manager's salary. Any remaining dollars are rolled into the following year's budget.

Additional activities sponsored by the program include cholesterol screenings, food safety programs and wellness adventures that include kayaking on nearby Lake Tahoe. One of the most popular is the "Holiday Weight Challenge." Employees weigh themselves before Thanksgiving, and again after the New Year. Of the 2,000 people who participated last year, 1,600 maintained their weight, receiving gym bags as a prize.

The program has encountered resistance from some employees. Initially, Rich Gray, a lead custodian at Mendive Middle School in Sparks, Nev., believed the mandatory contribution was an intrusion into his lifestyle. But he changed his mind after participating in the program.

"I learned the value of not being sedentary," says Gray, who credits the program for

helping him shed nearly 15 pounds. "I do my best to point out the good parts of the program to people who speak negatively about it. I've helped people make lifestyle changes because of my belief in the program."

There have been other points of contention: Recently, one employee wrote a complaint letter to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services claiming the monthly contributions were illegal, says Aaron Hardy, the district's wellness coordinator. The department audited the program and found it to be in complete compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Privacy Act and the Public Health Service Act.

But does the program work? A study to determine its short-term impact on employee health-care costs and absenteeism rates during 2001 and 2002 was conducted last year by the college of health and human performance at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. The findings revealed that absentee rates for program participants dropped by 20 percent, saving local taxpayers \$3 million.

Still, the district is hoping for an even bigger impact. "The benefit that will matter the most that we hope to see in a couple of years is its impact on health-insurance costs," says Dancer.

Meanwhile, she believes the program offers employees opportunity to reach their fitness goals and demonstrate healthy behaviors for students. Either way, Dancer says, "The program is very positive stuff."

Send comments or questions about this story to hreletters@lrp.com.

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