

Managers Letter

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Worksite Fitness Programs Pump Up More Than Employees

by *Liza N. Burby*

Ever since the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute released the Body Mass Index (BMI) charts earlier this year, 55 percent of Americans find themselves to be overweight. Since numerous studies link weight gain to increased risk for a host of ailments, including diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, prevention has become big business, and helping employees improve their health is good for the bottom line. That's why increasing numbers of companies are creating worksite health programs that run the gamut from lunchtime speakers to on-site health centers. Statistics indicate that such a move improves not only the health of the employee, but the health of the company as well.

Company Benefits

The advantages of worksite health promotion activities range from improved employee health and reduced absenteeism to contained health care costs and increased productivity. In addition, companies report reduced worksite accidents and workers' compensation claims. Fitness programs in the workplace yield a benefit/cost ratio of \$3.43 saved for every dollar put into the program, according to Shari McMahan, Ph.D., research associate of the Health Promotion Center of the University of California at Irvine. Most comprehensive programs (in which the company offers a fitness program and other programs, such as stress management) have a benefit/cost ratio of \$5.52 for every \$1.15 spent, and reports indicate lower annual medical claims for exercisers compared to sedentary individuals. Other benefits include reductions in worker turnover and health care costs, improvements in health, productivity, social climate, morale and company reputation in the community.

According to the Wellness Councils of America, more than 81 percent of America's businesses with 50 or more employees have some form of health promotion program. Most employers offer them because they think the benefits are worth the cost. They also help business leaders to control huge annual increases in health insurance premiums and health care costs; prevention, in the form of worksite wellness, is the most cost-effective way to do that.

Providence General Hospital in Everett, WA, offered financial incentives to employees who demonstrated responsibility for their health and fitness. The program resulted in reductions in the use of health benefits, lower medical claims, less absenteeism and improved health habits — and saved the company an estimated \$1.5 million over a three-year period.

“Fitness programs in the workplace yield a benefit/cost ratio of \$3.43 saved for every dollar put into the program.”

— *Shari McMahan*
Health Promotion Center
University of California at Irvine

The “Stay Well and Alive” program at Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company in Las Vegas, NV, has cost \$76.24 per employee during the two years it has been in operation. Participants have significantly lowered cholesterol levels, blood pressure and weight, and experienced 21 percent fewer lifestyle-related claims than nonparticipants. The resulting savings to the company: \$127.89 per participant.

A Variety of Wellness Programs

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, selected preventative services include periodic health or physical exams, tests of blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol and cancer screening. Some companies offer smoking cessation programs and information about HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases, mental health and stress management, prenatal education, alcohol and drug education, general workplace safety and back care. When companies have physical fitness and activity programs, many provide information, incentives, testing, counseling and access to on-site facilities and equipment.

Getting Started

On-site fitness and weight management programs offer time-crunched employees an opportunity to be proactive about their health. In addition to the obvious health benefits, these programs are also outstanding stress reducers.

McMahan says that organizing on-site fitness programs doesn't have to be complicated. The easiest and cheapest program to begin with is a walking club that meets for a half hour during lunch periods.

Once you have a group of people who want to participate, have them fill out a health risk awareness checklist. You can download the test from the American Heart Association website (www.americanheart.org). Employees who are found to be at risk should be required to get exercise prescriptions from their doctors to avoid liability.

Then you're ready to have a kickoff meeting. Map out the routes for a safe walk in your business community. You may have different levels of walkers — advanced, intermediate, beginners — so plan the route accordingly. Some companies have parcourses where different stations are set up along the walking trail for pushups, stretching and situps.

Other Programs

Another way to incorporate fitness in the workplace is to offer 50-50 subsidies for a local gym. Many gyms offer company discounts for each group of employees who join. Company team competitions, such as softball or baseball are also popular, as are community fund-raising events such as walks to support breast cancer research. All of these are at relatively low cost to the company.

McMahan says that managers should promote wellness awareness through free resources and speakers. Look in a nonprofit directory for organizations that have related information, such as the American Lung Association. Many will provide speakers you can host during a lunch hour. The American Heart Association also has a new online service called "The Heart at Work."

Although they may not be promoting it, McMahan says most health care providers do have a great deal of free resources they can provide, such as osteoporosis screening. You could also have a vendor come in to talk about stress reduction or offer five-minute massages.

Nutrition Education

Jodi O'Neil, president of the Association for Worksite Health Promotion, says that weight management programs are also important. You can have worksite nutrition education activities like counseling, group classes, workshops, lectures, special events, posters, brochures and videos. Take a look at your cafeteria as well. About 43 percent of worksites have a cafeteria snack bar or food service. You can make it a point to have the providers label the food on the basis of nutritional value. Have the vending machines filled with healthy snacks like juices and low-fat yogurt, rather than candy and chips.

Whatever program you decide upon, McMahan advises that you regularly monitor its effectiveness, costs, benefits and participation rates.

Getting Upper Management on Board

Larry Chapman, chairman and senior consultant for Summex Corporation in Seattle, suggests the following approach for convincing company decision makers that on-site fitness and health programs are a good idea. First, know the full range of potential benefits of health promotion and find which potential benefits are important to your decision makers. Use a practical approach to build and present your case for health promotion, such as circulating material about other companies' programs. Get key management people involved in local wellness or health promotion groups, like a local wellness council. Emphasize the organization's social and community responsibility (capitalizing on management's desire to lead and innovate in this area). Finally, build health promotion programs into your health cost management efforts.

In these busy times, when it's a challenge to make time for one's own health, managers are in a position to provide a key service to themselves and their employees that is healthy for the bottom line.

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