

Companies find tangible benefits in wellness programs

Programs can cut health insurance costs, study says

BY CINDY RILEY | SPECIAL

After learning one his colleagues had a higher-than-expected body mass index, Matt Mitchell decided to drop a few pounds as a show of support.

In all, seven other employees at Burr and Forman LLP decided to join the effort. It's just one example of a wellness program that local businesses are using to cut health care costs, reduce sick leave and make employees more healthy.

Like many wellness programs, this one was initiated by necessity.

"We took part in a health fair, and the readings weren't as good as some had hoped, so we decided to make it a competition to lose weight," said Mitchell, who is an attorney with the firm. "Between us, we lost 108 pounds in 10 weeks."

David Elliott, chairman of the firm's wellness committee, developed a series of employee improvement programs with the help of other staffers and a consultant.

"A healthy work force is a happy work force, and it cuts down on employee absences," Elliott said. "We sat down and came up with programs we thought would help everyone live a healthier lifestyle."

The program not only included the impromptu weight loss competition, but also a walking program where teams

would try to walk a certain number of miles over a three month period.

"The response has been overwhelming," Elliott said.

According to the World Health Organization, the programs often result in benefits to the bottom line. A report from the organization found that every dollar spent on corporate wellness programs yields a savings of \$3 in future expenses, such as sick leave, absenteeism and health care costs.

A 2002 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report found that at work sites with physical activity programs, employers cut health care costs up to 55 percent, reduced short-term sick leave by as much as 32 percent and increased productivity, in some cases, by 52 percent.

"Employees who are healthy come to work," says Judi Braswell, director of employee assistance at Behavioral Health Systems Inc.

Because of that fact, Braswell said more companies are conducting workplace appraisals to provide employees with individual health assessments.

That allows companies to find their specific risk areas.

"One company might be at high risk for diabetes, while another may have cardiac concerns," she said. "Instead of throwing something out and hoping some of it sticks, they can have a program specifically designed for them."

Once a program is in place, Braswell

said the companies that are successful are the ones that are consistent and stick to their plans.

"It's not about starting off with a bank and then having people fall off," she said. "You want to help individuals follow through."

That could include developing cohesiveness and encouraging people to eat the right foods and exercise. Sometimes it's as simple as working with human resource managers to revamp their vending machines with healthy options, she said.

Braswell said some companies have even painted their stairwells to make them more inviting.

Other programs, such as Behavioral Health's Quit for Life smoking cessation program, are more structured, but also result in clear financial benefits.

According to a 2005 article in Billings Gazette, each smoker costs an employer an additional \$3,856 a year in health care costs and lost productivity. The Centers for Disease Control claims nationwide smoking-related productivity losses from 1997 to 2001 cost \$92 billion.

American Behavioral Benefits Managers Inc., which offers wellness programs for companies in the areas of mental health and substance abuse, uses a wellness coach to follow-up on any patient hospitalized to encourage participation in aftercare and to monitor medication compliance.

Maureen Gleason, vice president of operations, said the company also has dozens of health assessments and resources for companies to use.

Gleason said companies use a variety of programs to help employees stick to

their programs.

Many companies offer tokens to employees that participate in the program, which are accumulated over time and redeemed for prizes or benefits periodically.

"Some will actually reduce the employee's health care premium for participating in exercise programs or other health improvement activities," Gleason said.

Even though reduced health care costs and employee productivity are obvious benefits of the program, Aimee Comer, human resources manager for Robins and Morton, said concern for employees' well-being is their main motivation for the programs it offers.

The local general contractor, which posted more than \$900 million revenue in 2007, has created several competition-themed programs to help employees lose weight.

That includes the annual Battle of the Holiday Bulge and the Walking Works competition, where employees are given pedometers to track the number of steps they took during the month and the company awards prizes to whoever took the most steps.

Comer said the programs likely save the company money, but it's not something they are tracking.

"Our president, chief operating officer and CFO support the program not for the bottom line that we may see, but the investment the wellness program is making in our people and their families," Comer said.

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Braswell