

Wishing them wellness

More companies are utilizing specialized programs to keep workers healthy and happy

BY ANEESA MCMILLAN & RACHEL BERNSTEIN | ACBJ

Employers are learning it may take more than an apple a day to keep the doctor away.

And it takes more than a simple discount on gym club membership to get employees to take proactive steps for a healthy lifestyle.

Over the past decade, health care insurance costs have been rising as well as general health care costs. And with the economy causing added stress to employees, employers are looking to keep their workers happy, healthy and fit in all aspects of their lives and are rolling out the wellness initiatives to keep workers productive.

It's been no surprise the health of U.S. workers is on the decline. The National Center for Health Statistics said 62 percent of adults are not physically active, as of 2007, and only 24 percent are active three to four times a week.

But companies who can reverse those trends could see a bottom line benefit, according to researchers.

For every dollar a company spends on

health and wellness, in two to five years, it could see another \$3 to \$4 in savings, according to a 2005 study by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

It makes sense: healthier employees could cost companies less in health care and worker's compensation claims, analysts say. And a healthier work force may also mean fewer days lost to absenteeism.

For Michele Pawlick, director of health services for Protective Services, the key to a successful wellness program is continuity.

"An employer would have to decide what type of personnel would be dedicated to the program," Pawlick said. "You need to be willing to commit to this... not a vision that's here today and gone tomorrow."

According to Pawlick, employers must also be clear about what they want to accomplish through the program.

"You have to decide where your focus is going to be," said Pawlick, whose company often hosts lunch and learns on wellness topics. "You'll get more bang for your buck if the program promotes behavior change."

Pawlick's company provides its employees with a nutritionist they can meet with and an on-site workout facility.

Judi Braswell, director of employee assistance for Behavioral Health Systems, added that clear communication is also vital.

"You should consider what communication works best," Braswell said. "If you are a diverse work group, then you may want to look at a program that provides correspondence through e-mail and phone."

But, no program is complete without incentives, she said.

"If they aren't used, you're going to see a 5 to 15 percent participation rate," Braswell said. "With one, you can get that up to about 85 percent."

But, the incentive has to be something that your employees feel they can use.

Other tips:

- Have a well-detailed and written plan that lists the programs and guidelines of your company's wellness plan.

- Listen to employees. Conduct an annual survey of employees' experiences with the wellness program and what they see can be improved or added to the existing plan.

- Collaborate with resources and wellness providers for a plan that makes sense for your employees and is tailored to fit their needs.

- Choose someone to be dedicated full time to the program (preferably someone with a health background).

- Remain consistent and don't expect instant results.

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Protective Services

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