

One size does not fit all with corporate wellness programs

Skyrocketing health care costs and increases in obesity and chronic disease are just a few reasons why America's corporations are creating wellness initiatives at record rates. Last year alone, there was a threefold jump in the number of U.S. companies implementing wellness programs. In fact, close to 700 companies surveyed recently said they have ongoing wellness strategies.



Strategies

CJ DuBé

Today's programs run the gamut from smoking-cessation programs to onsite fitness classes and everything in between. In terms of spending among large companies, the dollars are growing in lockstep: 40 percent of large companies are spending upward of \$200,000 annually. Another 20 percent say their ante tops \$1 million a year. But, as wellness becomes more entrenched at major U.S. corporations, C-level executives are taking a hard look at costs and asking tough questions about return on investment (ROI).

The fact is that demonstrating measurable ROI is not an overnight task, no matter how leading-edge and ultimately powerful the program may be in managing health issues and improving performance. But one thing is certain: In order to achieve any measurable impact within an organization, a significant percentage of employees must participate in the initiative. And to get people to participate, they must be engaged. That means programs that are custom-made to an organization's culture and structured to reward performance.

Any organization considering a wellness initiative should start with a single driving objective: to achieve broad employee engagement, participation and completion of the programs being offered. If getting employees jazzed about wellness is the goal, getting there will require an organization to show its commitment:

- Start at the top. The organization's senior

leadership team must sign up for the programs. If they do it, employees will follow.

- Wellness must be integral to the company's strategic plan. In the case of effective programs, one size definitely does not fit all in the wellness arena. Each company must ask "How does this look for our organization? What do our people want to do?"

- Incentives must be built in to stimulate broad, ongoing participation. Many organizations are tying "total rewards" to wellness with impressive results.

- Never underestimate the "fun factor." That's why programs need to be custom-tailored to the unique culture of each organization. One company's Wii tournament is another's Walking Book Club.

- Make it convenient. Many wellness programs fail because they require more time — a commodity nobody has. Integrate wellness into the workday. Incorporate activity into work routines: Hold walking meetings; stand instead of sitting; replace water fountain breaks with game breaks.

- Keep it simple. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Park at the far end of the lot. Walk to nearby meetings.

In designing great wellness programs, it's important that they reflect an organization's unique culture. Recently, Oberon and our affiliates SALO and NumberWorks collaborated with Dr. James Levine of Mayo Clinic on a study that sought to prove that by moving consistently at work — even a little bit — people would become healthier and lose weight. Since we're a high-energy group, "movement" was a terrific focus for our wellness initiative.

The program incorporated many of the principles outlined above, and the results were impressive. Of our 19 participants, we lost 156 pounds, our cholesterol levels dropped significantly and our productivity accelerated — actually, we had our best quarter ever while in the midst of this study.

Today, we're also seeing many leading-edge companies build their wellness initia-

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tives around the concept of "total rewards" — not dissimilar to frequent-flyer programs that reward loyalty and participation.

Early data suggests that there is a direct correlation between "involvement" and higher productivity. And higher productivity translates into advancement of a company's strategic goals — another reason that wellness is catching on as a top corporate priority. The key is to make rewards and recognition central to wellness initiatives and to create programs that are fun and tailored to an individual organization's needs and interests.

If you decide that "wellness" is where you want your company to go, approach the development as you would any major strategic corporate initiative: Work with the professionals who specialize in wellness. The best consultants will assess your company's unique needs, create a tailor-made program, design an implementation strategy and help you roll it out.

In the end, wellness programs don't need to be complicated or expensive. But they do need to incorporate a few key elements that have proven they work. The most successful of these are defined by a positive, can-do attitude that permeates the entire organization. Nike figured that out long ago and said it perfectly: "Just Do It."

CJ DuBé is managing partner of Oberon, a Salo company. She can be reached at (612) 230-7030 or by e-mail at ideas@oberonllc.com.