

## Take the Stairs

### Workplace Wellness Programs Pay Off for Companies of All Shapes and Sizes

by Jamie Huish Stum

According to several recent studies, Americans carry more body fat today than any population at any time in history. Utah is mirroring the trend: 66 percent of males and 54 percent of females in the state are overweight or obese, according to the Utah Health Status Update released by the Utah Department of Health in September 2007.

To see how you stack up, walk yourself through an average day at the office. You grab a latté before the commute, park as close to the office as possible and swipe a doughnut at your morning meeting. It's a burger and fries for lunch, then a Coke at about 3 p.m., plus a fun-size candy bar from the snack bowl every time you walk to the printer.

Sound familiar?

"Many workplaces create a toxic environment if your objective is to maintain health," says Richard Bullough, program manager for the Utah Department of Health. "Many are in areas that do not provide an opportunity for physical activity, people are tied to their computers and every cubicle down the hallway has candy."

Health has a direct correlation to how well employees perform their jobs, Bullough says. As body mass index increases, missed work days and health care costs also increase, according to the American Obesity Association. Couple that with the rising costs of insurance premiums and employers are faced with a hefty bill for workers' poor health habits.

To combat the costs, many employers are turning to health promotion programs in the workplace. Nearly one-third of Utah businesses offer worksite health programs, according to the Utah Department of Health. These programs can create healthier, more effective employees and positively impact the bottom line, experts say.

"More businesses and organizations are seeing worksite wellness as an opportunity to affect the increase in health care costs," says Kathy Paras, program manager for Healthy Utah, the wellness program for state employees and local governments. "If you look at how much time an employee spends at their workplace, it's a logical place to support wellness. They're there for eight or nine hours; that's a large part of their day."

#### The First Leg

A worksite wellness program can be any regular act that advocates a healthy life-style within the workplace. This includes health education through activities and an environment that supports wellness in and out of the office, according to the Utah Department of Health. A program can be as simple as a monthly seminar on a health-related topic or as comprehensive as access to an onsite gym.

Even small companies can find ways to promote a healthy workplace. Wise Provider Networks in Provo, a nine-person firm that supplies customer networks to large employers, holds onsite yoga classes during lunch three times a week. The stretching and core training has turned out to be a great way to reverse aches from the computer hunch, says Bonnie Hall, principal consultant at Wise Provider Networks.

"We don't have any attendance problems; we rarely have anybody calling in sick; there's nobody who's at work but not really working," she says. "Having this in the middle of the day as exercise and to distance yourself from work, it energizes you. You do not find a dull afternoon here. It never happens. There's just a ton of energy."

Like Wise Provider Networks, companies that promote wellness see an increase in employee morale, productivity and a general improvement of attitude, Paras says. Eighty percent of employees at the Union Pacific Railroad reported they believed the company's exercise program increases their productivity and 75 percent said the program helps them concentrate at work, according to non-profit organization PreventDisease, located in Ontario, Canada. It can also be a major plus for employee retention, Paras says.

"If [employees] see that the company cares enough to devote some resources to wellness, they feel like this is an additional benefit and that's something a lot of employees appreciate and know they won't find everywhere," Paras says.

Investing in healthy employees adds up to savings for the company, experts say. A worksite wellness program can reduce the number of sick days taken, prescriptions filled and doctors visited. Insurance premiums can stabilize or even be reduced if health claims go down for an organization, Paras says. For example, Johnson & Johnson cut hospital costs by 34 percent within three years of introducing a wellness program, according to PreventDisease.

#### Motivation Station

Many companies support the idea of wellness but have the same problem as their unhealthy employees: getting off the couch. An assessment of employee needs and company resources can provide some motivating ideas to start, says Denise Hall, owner of Salt Lake-based Salus Lifestyles. Hall builds customized workplace wellness programs for all sizes of employers.

Hall's programs can include wellness seminars, fitness classes, email newsletters and baseline fitness testing. Everything is done onsite, so employees don't have to try to fit another stop into a busy day.

"This is really for those people who don't have any other time; they have kids at home and families, maybe they're working two jobs. It's, 'When do I have time to fit this all in?'" she says. "Employees need to know what they can do in those eight hours."

Hall's practices include dips off a desk chair, workplace yoga, meditation practices and resistance band routines. She also uses what she calls the "push-back program," a series of exercises workers can do by pushing back an office chair from a desk and using the space for a workout.

The most common health problems Hall confronts are obesity, high cholesterol and smoking, she says. To combat these lifestyle-induced problems, Hall incorporates basic nutrition into most programs.

"Most people don't even realize what's in their food or what a healthy menu looks like or what portion control means," Hall says. "Even with exercise, I think a lot of people are very intimidated as far as, 'Where do I start, what do I do?' Getting employees the key to taking those baby steps is huge for them."

Through Healthy Utah's leadership, Paras says she has seen employees commit to health and find wellness solutions that work for their companies.

"We've seen them start their own onsite worksite wellness councils, get upper management to provide a policy to allow them to exercise at work or start a policy where food at luncheons or meetings that's paid for by the company has to be healthy," Paras says.

Other agencies have found no-cost options, such as a walking program where employees strap on tennis shoes and hit a trail near the worksite at an appointed time each week. Some, including the Utah Department of Health, allow exercise release time that can be tacked onto a lunch break.

## Health Inspection

Many resources offer step-by-step guides for creating a worksite wellness plan, but experts agree on a few major steps. The Wellness Councils of America suggest a company should appoint someone to direct the wellness efforts of the business. This could be a human resources director, an executive or an interested employee. Time and resources should then be allocated and a worksite wellness council can be formed to ensure lasting focus and an influx of new ideas. The team can also conduct an assessment of employee health needs, interests and wants, or bring in a professional to run the program.

Once wellness requirements have been determined, creative plans can encourage participation in the program. A healthy recipe contest brings employees together to share nutritious meal ideas; organized sports activities at lunch can use competition to get employees moving, according to the Utah Council for Worksite Health Promotion.

Many wellness directors complain that programs are only utilized by those who already value physical activity and nutrition. To engage individuals who wouldn't otherwise exercise, cash prizes, workplace competitions and rebates on health care have proven to be effective incentives, Bullough says.

Salt Lake advertising firm Richter7 has been using the spirit of competition to make employees healthier for three years. Each January, the company holds a voluntary weight loss competition based on the television show "The Biggest Loser." For four weeks, employees compete against each other to shed the highest percentage of body weight. Every Friday, company officials conduct a weigh-in and after a month, cash prizes go to the first, second and third place weight droppers. CEO Scott Rockwood throws in an additional chunk of cash to the person who can slim down more than him during the challenge.

By turning weight loss into a competition, more employees participate and will go the extra mile to trim pounds, says Marcia Winn, business manager for Richter7.

"We've got some very competitive people on our staff so they will exercise and watch what they eat pretty carefully," Winn says. "It shows them that they can be healthier and it carries over into the following months."

Coupled with other wellness programs, the contest has generated results, Winn says. Employees are rarely sick and the agency's health insurance rates have stabilized. The contest is also a big morale booster because employees look and feel great; this year's biggest loser lost almost 11 percent of his body weight, Winn says.

"Anytime you tell people, 'This is a competition, we're throwing down the gauntlet,' people rise to that. Our society is really big into challenges," Winn says.

## Full Circle

Though committing to a comprehensive wellness program does bring costs, experts say the return on investment is worth it. Health expert Ron Goetzel reported in the American Journal of Health Promotion that in 32 studies of businesses with wellness programs, 28 found a drop in medical care costs and 10 of those studies reported an average of an almost \$4 return for every dollar invested in the program. A comprehensive program can bring as much as a \$6 return for every dollar spent, noticeable in reduced health claims, reduced pharmacy claims and fewer sick days used, according to the 1998 Worksite Health Promotion Survey conducted by the Utah State Council on Health and Physical Activity, which surveyed 500 businesses across the state.

Officials from Salt Lake-based ARUP Laboratories say they've received a return on their investment many times over from the company's wellness program.

"The program can have an impact on the health care costs of the company and it helps with recruitment and retention of employees, which is a real problem these days," says Carl Kjeldsberg, president and CEO of ARUP. "But it also matters to me personally to have people who are physically and mentally fit. I need to have employees who are really smart and awake and can work hard for long hours."

The company contracts with a wellness staff to hold one-on-one consultations with interested employees, targeting issues such as nutrition, stress and weight management. Monthly wellness promotions educate employees about healthy living while onsite massage services and relaxation classes help staff stay focused. A company gym is open 24/7 to employees and spouses. Each week, wellness director Rebecca Fietkau and her staff teach 27 onsite fitness classes designed to fit into an employee's 15-minute break or lunch hour.

To cut down on costly health care, ARUP opened a free onsite clinic staffed by a physician and three physician's assistants. Officials say it's much more cost effective to pay the salaries of four health care professionals than to juggle costs of doctor's visits, prescriptions, treatments and missed work time for more than 2,000 employees.

Because the company has devoted considerable resources to wellness, results are constantly evident, says Fietkau. Almost a third of ARUP's employees participated in this year's Run For Your Life health promotion, a jogging campaign centered on the Boston Marathon, and nearly 80 percent of employees use the gym, she says.

Though the numbers are encouraging, it's the employee feedback that helps Kjeldsberg remember the importance of keeping his workers healthy. One grateful employee stopped Kjeldsberg in the company fitness facility after a workout, he says. She explained she used to weigh 270 pounds, suffered from diabetes and hypertension and was taking several medications. By utilizing ARUP's wellness services, her weight and blood pressure have dropped to a healthy level, her diabetes is under control and she no longer takes any medication.

"It's all about trying to shift health care spending away from treatment to prevention," Kjeldsberg says. "If you can keep employees healthy, they will contribute more to the company."