

## HEALTHY LIVING

## Work force workout

Convinced that healthy employees boost the bottom line, more companies embrace nutrition and fitness programs

BY VIKKI CONWELL  
Cox News Service

When Sherry Bloomer needed help to create a healthier personal life, she turned to the people in her professional life.

The Gwinnett County, Ga., resident joined her employer's Healthy Habits program, which included an exercise program, vouchers for healthy meal choices and other health and fitness tools. In about 10 weeks, Bloomer had lost 30 pounds, lowered her blood pressure and reduced her diabetes medication.

Having everyone in the office knowing that you're working on weight loss provides a level of accountability and support, says Bloomer, a business operations coordinator at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. "It gives me the opportunity to rethink my choices."

Employers are encouraging employees to adopt healthier lifestyles by implementing work-site wellness programs that range from health and nutrition information and gym discounts to on-site health clubs with personal trainers. Such programs became increasingly popular during the 1980s as rising insurance costs led employers to seek a healthier work force. Now, with the rising cost of obesity — U.S. companies spend an estimated \$12.7 billion annually in lost and restricted workdays and physician visits — more companies are beefing up their efforts to help their employees slim down.

"Being a healthy employee is an asset to not only yourself, but your employer," says Philip Haberstro, executive director of the National Association for Health and Fitness.

"It's a concern for all of us."

According to a 2006 survey by the Society of Human Resource Management, two-thirds of companies provide wellness programs, resources and information for their employees. Almost half provide on-site health screenings, 37 percent subsidize or reimburse employees for health club memberships and 29 percent provide weight-loss programs. Twenty-two percent offer on-site fitness centers.

Employers want some type of solution for rising health premiums, says Tim Lao, director of ASN Total Wellness Services, an Atlanta company that develops work-site wellness programs. They want to educate employees to get them healthy and help them manage stress and create a great environment within the company, he says.

## HOW TO CREATE A HEALTHIER WORKPLACE

By preventing or lessening the incidence of health conditions, companies hope to save on long-term health costs. Here are some preventive-care benefits offered and the percentage of companies that do so:

- On-site vaccinations (65%)
- Health-screening programs (49%)
- Subsidies or reimbursements to fitness centers (37%)
- Weight-loss programs (29%)
- On-site fitness centers (22%)
- Smoking-cessation programs (39%)
- Stress-reduction programs (19%)
- Nutrition therapy (12%)

Source: Society of Human Resource Management 2006 Benefits Survey

The compliance rate for start-up programs can be as high as 80 percent within the first two or three months, but participation tends to dwindle to an average of just below 50 percent, he says.

At Kimberly-Clark in Roswell, Ga., about 70 percent of the company's 1,300 employees take advantage of the company's health screening and risk-assessment program, and 25 percent use the on-site fitness center. Employees, their spouses and retirees are allowed to work out before, during and after work hours.

Good health leads to better performance and higher productivity, says Tom Fariss, corporate medical director over health services, a division Kimberly-Clark began 30 years ago.

"The message [to employees] is that your health is an important aspect of your life, and keeping you healthy is good for you and for us," says Fariss, whose staff is trained in behavior-change techniques.

"Making it happen is sometimes a challenge."

Staycee Benjamin-Stone agrees.

The Covington, Ga., resident organizes programs such as health fairs, screenings, fitness assessments, healthy cooking, smoking cessation and massages for work groups with Kaiser Permanente insurance. She says that wellness programs give employees an opportunity to make behavioral changes over time, but personal responsibility is key.

"We plant seeds, and people tend to make changes," says Benjamin-Stone, program manager for Employer Consulting/Worksite Wellness. "[We] may not necessarily be around when it takes place." ■



## MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

A good wellness program should teach skills to change behavior, says Jim Annesi, director of wellness advancement at the YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta and an expert in health behavior change.

He says a wellness program should have the following characteristics:

- Attracts employees who need it most
- Positively affects all employees
- Well-supported by management
- Financially beneficial for the company
- Addresses psychological and physiological health
- Sustainable
- High focus on supporting behavioral change instead of just providing information and hoping people will use it
- Supported by state-of-the-art health-promotion research

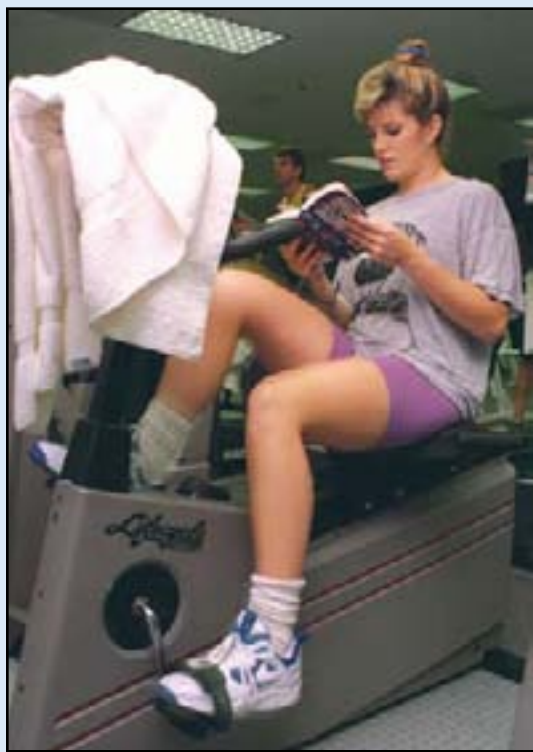


PHOTO BY JEAN SHIFRIN / COX NEWS SERVICE

A good wellness program, such as on-site health clubs or gyms, positively affects all employees.

## WORK WELLNESS INTO YOUR WORKPLACE

Even if you don't have a formal wellness program or an on-site health club, you can rally co-workers to build a healthy lifestyle. Here are some ideas:

- **Sponsor a weight-loss contest.** Everyone kicks in money, and workers who lose 5 percent of their body weight in three months split the pot.
- **Get moving.** Even if it's just 10 minutes of exercise at a time, get up and move whenever possible. Here's how:
  - Walk to a nearby park to eat your lunch.
  - Walk to a colleague's desk rather than e-mailing or calling.
  - Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
  - Include exercise breaks in your schedule and stick to them.
  - Make copies at the printer farthest from your desk to increase activity.
- **Car pool with a weight-loss buddy.** You'll save gas money and gain an opportunity to



PHOTO BY RICH ADDICKS / COX NEWS SERVICE

Taking the stairs instead of the elevator is just one of the ways you can work out while at work.

swap diet tips with a like-minded friend.

- **Build a movement.** Create a wellness committee and ask co-workers what services they would like to have. Solicit support from management, and encourage your employer to reimburse you for wellness initiatives such as joining a gym or weight-loss program.

Source: Weight Watchers, America on the Move