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WORKING ON WELLNESS

ORGANIZATIONS ARE FINDING CREATIVE WAYS TO BUILD
NUTRITION AND FITNESS INTO THE CORPORATE CULTURE

BY STEPHANIE R. CONNER + ILLUSTRATIONS BY CRAIG FRAZIER

Manisha Priyadarshan loves her company. But there's one downside: If the business development and marketing coordinator wants to leave for lunch, the restaurants closest to her office serve Philly cheese steaks and fast food. During a busy workday (or when it's snowing in Philadelphia), a lunch-time commute is not appealing.

Good thing Priyadarshan's employer—marketing agency Sparks—subsidizes healthy lunches in the company cafeteria. For \$5, employees can dive into a salad bar or choose a healthy, freshly prepared entree. You'll find the Sparks Philadelphia cafeteria pretty darn full during lunchtime: About 70 percent of employees take advantage of the healthy options. >

Wellness programs like the one at Sparks, which also encompasses fitness and mental health, are no longer a perk but a business-as-usual offering at companies nationwide. Of employers that provide health benefits, 74 percent offer at least one wellness option, such as a weight-loss program, health coaching or on-site exercise facility, according to a 2014 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation/Health Research & Educational Trust.

Finding time to take care of our health doesn't always happen—even though we know it's important. But more and more employers are finding creative ways to break down those barriers.

THE REASONS FOR WELLNESS

For some employers, the allure of wellness programs is reducing healthcare costs.

"Healthcare costs are the No. 2 cost of American employers today," says Josh Stevens, CEO of Keas, a health engagement company whose clients include Pfizer and Target. Much of employers' healthcare costs are preventable, he suggests: When people are healthier, they tend to have fewer health insurance and workers' compensation claims.

Studies on the financial benefits of wellness programs are mixed. One study published in the journal *Health Affairs* found that for every dollar invested in wellness programs, companies saved an average of \$3.27. A 2014 report by the nonprofit research organization RAND Corporation suggested that, taking into account disease management and lifestyle programs, the return is closer to \$1.50 for every dollar invested—yet if you consider only lifestyle programs, the return appears to be 50 cents on the dollar.

But there's more to wellness programs than healthcare premiums. Companies are also evaluating the success of programs based on employee engagement, productivity, absenteeism and retention.

"Devoting time and resources to a wellness program is a strategic investment in both an employer's present and future workforce," says Kimberly Eberbach, vice president of wellness and community health for Independence Blue Cross in Pennsylvania.

Job seekers used to routinely ask about salary and retirement benefits. But the younger generation also asks about

health and wellness, and volunteerism, says Kristen Brown, director of benefits for JetBlue in Long Island City, N.Y.

So it stands to reason that companies wanting to recruit and retain the best employees must think about the place of wellness in corporate culture.

EMPLOYEES LEAD THE CHARGE

In a survey conducted by employee communications company GuideSpark, 63 percent of respondents said they'd

participate in their company's wellness program more often if it were better suited to their lifestyle.

That's why Maryland-based Medifast, a provider of weight-loss programs, takes input from employees seriously. An internal wellness committee, comprising a cross-section of employees, helps steer the program. An on-site gym as well as nutrition offerings are at the program's core.

"We really think it increases morale," says Jeanne Uphouse, the executive vice

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president of human resources at Medifast. "Plus, it's helpful with recruiting and with retention. Employees realize it's an investment in them."

At Otter Products, one element of the phone case manufacturer's wellness program is bicycling. Based in bike-friendly Fort Collins, Colo., Otter has many biking enthusiasts on staff.

As a result, Otter has a large bike storage facility and a bike workshop, where employees can do their own maintenance. Embracing the idea that employees help drive wellness, Otter employees also organize clubs for biking, hiking, yoga and other activities.

INCENTIVIZING WELLNESS

When JetBlue surveyed employees about its wellness program, the company received a common request: Show us the money.

"We were in alignment with that, and we took it one step further," Brown says, explaining that the company connected wellness rewards back to healthcare.

Through its Healthy Rewards program, employees can earn cash rewards for health-related tasks. For example, a routine vision exam or participating in a healthy-cooking class earns you \$25. Run a 5K? Pick up \$100. Completing an Ironman triathlon will net you \$400.

When the company first offered monetary rewards in 2008, the maximum reward was \$150 per employee—which at the time seemed like a lot of money, Brown says. With about 16,000 employees today, the company has increased its investment. Full-time individual employees can earn up to \$400 in wellness rewards, while employees plus their families can earn up to \$800. The cash rewards are deposited into the employee's health reimbursement, health savings or flexible spending account.

About 70 percent of JetBlue employees participate in Healthy Rewards, Brown says, and participation numbers increase year after year.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Sparks isn't alone in making it easy for employees to eat well. At Pro Athlete Inc., an e-commerce company in Kansas City, Mo., that specializes in bat and glove sales, team members get a free, healthy breakfast and lunch daily. The in-house chef prepares meals, sharing the ingredients and calorie counts.

In addition to providing a free, healthy

catered lunch every day, the New York office of the healthcare communications firm Chandler Chicco Companies periodically brings in nutritionists to share insights. Employees walk away with recipes and cooking tips.

Meanwhile, convenience store retailer Wawa encourages store employees to eat better on breaks by offering a 50 percent discount on healthy food, says Stephanie Capaccio, director of associate relations and benefits for Wawa.

GET MOVING

It makes sense that the Pro Athlete office has a gym, but cardio equipment is just the beginning for the facility. A racquetball court, sport court, pool, sauna and steam showers are part of the world-class operation, which is open from 5 a.m. to midnight.

The company's wellness coordinator/personal trainer is also available for personal training sessions and helps employees develop plans to achieve their goals.

But this might be the best part: After your workout, toss your sweaty clothes in the laundry loop, and they'll be washed and folded—and ready for you the next day.

"We try to take away barriers for people," says wellness coordinator Chris Hawkins.

Bringing fitness classes to employees is another way to remove barriers: Chandler Chicco, Otter and Pro Athlete invite yoga instructors into the office.

While free laundry service and on-site yoga are great perks, there are simpler ways to get people moving. At Sparks, a 1.5-mile walking trail around the building invites people to walk at lunchtime or to engage in walking meetings.

In addition to the benefits of walking, getting some lunchtime sun and nature time is good for mental health, Priyadarshan says. "You get back to work feeling more refreshed."

And heeding the new health mantra that "sitting is the new smoking," Sparks makes standing desks available to employees who want them.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

Organizations often go beyond physical fitness and nutrition. At Pro Athlete, for example, employees can sign up for a 20-minute massage appointment every Monday.

In addition to their fitness-related clubs, Otter Products pushes work-life balance through wine and beer clubs, a new parents group and a book club.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

THINKING ABOUT IMPLEMENTING AN EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAM? **HERE ARE SIX TIPS TO HELP IT SUCCEED.**

1 TALK TO YOUR EMPLOYEES.

"Get feedback from employees on the program," advises Linda Itskovitz, vice president of marketing for GuideSpark. "If employees aren't excited about it, they aren't going to participate."

2 INVOLVE THE WHOLE C-SUITE.

"Wellness is not an HR initiative," says Stephanie Capaccio, director of associate relations and benefits for Wawa. "Wellness is an organizational opportunity and is tied directly to business results."

3 MAKE SURE MANAGERS ARE ON BOARD.

"When employees see senior managers participating, they feel more allowed to participate," Itskovitz says.

4 OFFER VARIETY.

"There needs to be a variety of activities," advises Jeanne Uphouse, executive vice president of HR at Medifast. "The gym isn't for everyone."

5 CONSIDER ACCESSIBILITY.

"If it's something they have to drive a distance to get to, that tends to be a hurdle," Uphouse adds.

6 MAKE IT SOCIAL.

"If it isn't fun and it isn't social, people won't participate," says Keas CEO Josh Stevens.

In addition, health fairs provide employees easy access to basic health screenings. And at Chandler Chicco, health fairs are a chance to meet local health professionals, including chiropractors, trainers and massage therapists.

With all of these options, there are clearly many ways to instill a corporate wellness culture—and many reasons to do it. But Wawa's Capaccio says it boils down to valuing people.

"It makes business sense," she says, "and it's the right thing to do." 🍃