



## Wellness Works

FOR MANY AREA EMPLOYERS, WELLNESS PROGRAMS PRODUCE A HEALTHY RETURN ON INVESTMENT.

BY LAUREN SABLE

**H**ealth insurance expenses are the fastest-growing cost component for employers in the U.S., prompting many companies to implement wellness programs to create healthier employees and bottom lines.

"From a marketplace perspective, wellness is getting a lot of attention because it's viewed as something [companies] can do to control costs," says Paula Sauer, vice president of care management for Medical Mutual of Ohio.

At Hyland Software, wellness initiatives are a way to encourage a healthy work/life balance, says Kathleen Flanagan, who, as Hyland's minister of culture, is responsible for creating an enjoyable workplace for the more-than 600 employees in its Cleveland office.

"If we create incentives to get to the gym, eat healthy and lose weight with the support of peers, they can be successful," Flanagan says. "We can help minimize risk of disease."

For the past few years, the company has offered a \$300 reimbursement for employees who join the West-

lake Recreation Center. This year, based on feedback from employees who preferred to go to a gym close to their homes, Hyland now offers \$300 toward a membership at the fitness center of the employee's choice. Participation in the program doubled – now nearly 60 percent of employees take advantage of the incentive.

To alleviate stress, yoga classes are offered twice a week for employees, as well as 15-minute chair massages for a small fee.

This year, Hyland is also holding the Healthiest Hylander competition, modeled after the television show "The Biggest Loser," to encourage employees to support one another as they work toward their weight loss and fitness goals.

And there's no excuse for not eating well, either. Hyland's on-site nutritionist is available for free 15- to 30-minute sessions, and "lunch and learns" are held regularly on topics such as nutrition and balancing responsibilities — even

health screenings.

Hyland's wellness initiatives have become a key retention and recruitment tool. "Our employees are like family, and they stick because of the environment we've created," Flanagan says. "We have quality people here who also associate with other quality people — and that will help us have the best pickings for employees when we go to hire in 2009."

But more important than the health initiatives is the support from senior management. "It shows employees that the company has made health a priority," Flanagan says. "It makes it easy to get participation when you have buy-in from everyone in the company."

With backgrounds in health care, Michelle Tomallo and Micki Tubbs, co-founders of FIT Technologies, know how challenging it can be to quit smoking and eat right. The company has offered weight loss and smoking cessation programs for the past four years,



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but they stepped up their wellness initiatives in early 2008.

"Wellness initiatives can languish unless you get excitement going around them," Tomallo says. "With employees working eight to 10 hours a day, we wanted to up the focus on making good food choices and exercising."

One of the easiest changes was reducing the amount of candy and sugar around the office. Although the cost of soft drinks and vending machine snacks are subsidized, Tomallo and Tubbs lowered the amount the company subsidizes and encouraged employees to enjoy the fresh fruit that is delivered to the office twice a week.

About 40 percent of the staff participates in the company's GetFit program, which encourages fitness goal-setting with monetary incentives. Employees set a weight loss goal, are weighed in quarterly and receive recognition on their progress in internal newsletters and on a board in the kitchen, where employees can leave notes of encouragement, chart their accomplishments and follow others through their journey.

"The response from employees has been excellent," Tomallo says. "It's much easier when we're all in the same boat and have people supporting us [in our weight loss goals]."

From a business perspective, the monetary commitment to wellness initiatives is small compared to the impact of a healthier, more productive team of employees. Tomallo and Tubbs encourage preventative doctor visits

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FIT Technologies**

for employees and their families, which benefits the entire organization.

"We want our employees to show up for work, and we want their kids to be healthy so the employees do not have to take time off to care for them," Tomallo says.

In 2008, FIT Technologies employees lost an average of 7.5 percent of their body weight. What's more, five employees quit smoking — some used

company-subsidized nicotine patches, others worked with counselors, and one employee even sought help from a hypnotherapist for guided imagery.

Sauer predicts wellness programs will continue to rise in popularity. The key to their success, however, is addressing the risks of the employee population. "The biggest risks for employers we work with in Ohio are obesity, hypertension and high cholesterol," she says. "If you create a program that works to reduce these risks, you'll be successful."