

MAGGIE JACKSON | BALANCING ACTS

The Boston Globe

Firms get innovative with wellness

By Maggie Jackson | November 18, 2007

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This grandmotherly wisdom is increasingly becoming corporate lore, as more employers develop ways to help workers adopt healthy living habits.

Moving beyond fitness centers and annual wellness fairs, companies are offering innovations from year-round weight loss campaigns to cash rewards for exercising or health screenings. The emphasis is on customized, workable ways to get healthy, both to bolster productivity and to combat rising healthcare costs.

Will it all work? Corporate efforts alone won't change a national culture entrenched in poor eating and exercise habits. Yet these new efforts are on target for changing life patterns, and some are showing exciting, early results. Wellness could be a yet-undiscovered asset for a country uncertain of its future role in the global marketplace.

Consider Sonia Malik, a Walpole-based customer support manager for IBM and a devotee of the company's 3-year-old "Healthy Living" incentive program.

At IBM, US employees can participate in nutrition, exercise, and health screening programs that offer cash rebates of \$150 apiece. (In addition, a one-time smoking cessation or nonsmoker rebate is available to new employees.) Workers can pick two rebate programs annually, and earn up to \$300 a year if they attain goals such as participating in three months of exercise or lose a desired amount of weight. Half of the company's US employees earned rebates last year.

Malik was already a fit runner, although she likes the advice and encouragement offered online. What she appreciates most, as a full-time teleworker, is the program's virtual community, and the message that IBM is sending to employees by encouraging good health.

"It just makes me feel that they care," says Malik, a mother of two who is married to a local bank manager. "Programs like this make me feel that IBM cares about my well-being."

Certainly, the latest wave of corporate wellness programs isn't about sheer altruism. Perhaps practical benevolence is a better term. Companies do care - because they realize that poor health is bad business. Annual corporate healthcare costs are rising 8 to 10 percent nationwide, and an average 12 percent in New England, according to Watson Wyatt, a human resources consulting firm. More than one-third of these costs stem from conditions related to lifestyle - from diet and exercise to smoking and a lack of simple screenings, such as mammograms.

"The growing recognition is that if you keep people healthier, you'll reduce your claims," says Randall Abbott, a Boston senior healthcare consultant with Watson Wyatt.

Currently, 47 percent of companies offer health screening programs, up from 40 percent in 2003, according to surveys by the Society for Human Resource Management. Forty percent of employers offer smoking cessation programs, up from 32 percent four years ago. And 32 percent of companies offer weight loss programs, up from one-quarter in 2003. One-quarter offer onsite fitness centers, up from about one-fifth in 2003.

Monetary incentives are integral to many new corporate wellness efforts, yet they are also inspiring debate. About 46 percent of employers with 1,000 workers or more now reward improved health with economic incentives or plan to do so in 2008, according to a Watson Wyatt survey of 355 companies released last week. Abbott, however, personally agrees with employers that oppose the rebate strategy.

"The incentive is your better health," says Abbott. "I would hate to see us create a generation that thinks it ought to be paid to take care of themselves."

Others applaud the idea of a monetary carrot, saying it gives employees the motivational prod that many need. Such incentives are a core strategy of Tangerine Wellness Inc., a Boston firm that manages voluntary corporate weight management programs nationwide.

"Everyone can use cash. Who's going to turn down a check for \$75?" asks Cathie Holmgaard, director of human

resources at Wesley Willows Corp., a Rockford, Ill. continuing care retirement community that adopted the Tangerine program in March for its 285 employees.

Before adopting the Tangerine program, staff wellness programs at Wesley Willows were periodic and often short lived. Now Tangerine - which offers online self-monitoring and weight loss competitions - seems to be slowly changing company culture, says Holmgaard.

Half the staff is participating, and the health push is boosting morale, she says. Turnover from March to August fell 34 percent compared with the same period a year ago. For a \$12,000 investment, the company saved \$186,000 in healthcare claims in the first two quarters that it used Tangerine. "We've introduced a new language here," says Holmgaard. "People are talking about wellness."

Maggie Jackson, author of [What's Happening to Home: Balancing Work, Life and Refuge in the Information Age](#), can be reached at maggie.jackson@att.net. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2007 The New York Times Company