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Eat better, get a bonus from your employer

Veggie wraps are a bargain and pizza costs more as companies push smarter eating to fight costs of obesity

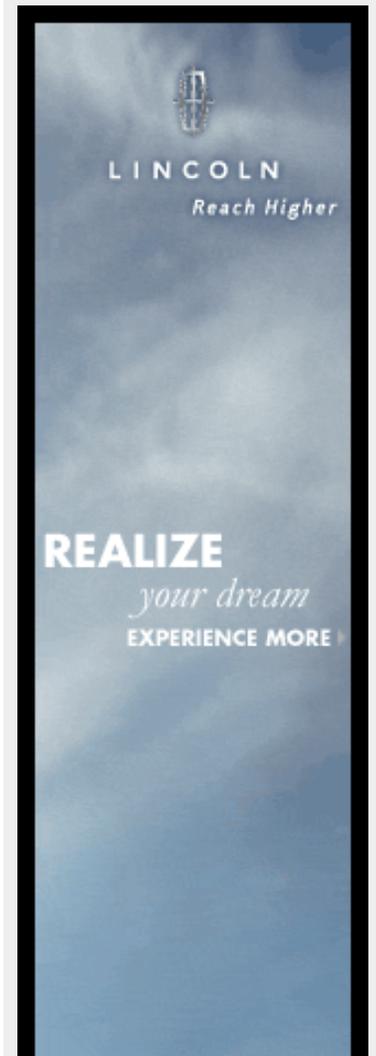
By Barbara Rose
Tribune staff reporter
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In a culture riddled with conflicting messages about food, where nearly two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese, employers desperate to control soaring health costs are trying to change America's eating habits.

Companies that served doughnuts at meetings are setting out bowls of apples instead. They're discounting veggie wraps at the cafeteria while charging extra for pizza, and stocking vending machines with fruits and nuts.

Armed with data linking excess weight to increased health risks, they're transforming traditional wellness programs into branded campaigns with cash incentives for good nutrition and weight control.

Healthy eating no longer is promoted by a lone advocate "who maybe had an office somewhere or a cubicle down the hall," said LuAnn Heinen, director of a Washington, D.C.-based obesity



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"This is coming from the top, and there's an endorsement as a business objective," said Heinen of the Institute on the Costs and Health Effects of Obesity. "It's not a 'nice to have' but a 'need to have.'"

A government estimate pegs obesity's cost to companies at more than \$13 billion annually in health, life and disability insurance payments and sick days.

Some liken the shift in attitudes about weight to the smoking cessation campaigns that swept workplaces in the 1980s, eventually making the habit unacceptable and forcing smokers onto sidewalks.

Changing eating habits is no less challenging.

Seventy-four percent of U.S. workers say cake, cookies or candy are served sometimes, if not always, for special occasions, according to a recent survey by Harris Interactive for The Marlin Co., an employee communications firm. Last year, 63 percent said office vending machines feature mostly junk food, such as potato chips and candy bars.

Even at health-conscious companies, sugary snacks are within reach. But employers are beginning to lead with a carrot rather than a stick.

In the cafeteria at Pitney Bowes headquarters in Stamford, Conn., sandwiches come with carrots and celery. "They can still get chips if they ask, but carrots and celery is the default choice," said associate medical director Dr. Brent Pawlecki. "We try to make it easy to do the right thing."

A registered dietitian works with the cafeteria vendor developing recipes and pricing schemes. A veggie wrap costs \$2.49, while a pizza goes for \$4.48.

"What I'd like to see is that my salmon would be much less expensive than my cheeseburger and fries," Pawlecki said.

Corporate health advocates say it's too early to assess the health impact of such programs. But based on longer running initiatives at Pitney Bowes, the company estimates that every \$1 spent on wellness programs returns \$3 in lower medical costs and more productive workers.

Helping fuel the focus on nutrition and exercise are computer programs that allow employers to correlate medical claims data with lifestyle information collected from workers.

Companies got serious "when we really started to gather enough data to look at the increased expenditure from people who are overweight," said Bob Carpenter, a vice president at employee assistance provider ComPsych Corp.

Food service vendors also got a wakeup call.

For years when businesses asked for more healthy selections, "we'd put more of it out and none



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of it would get purchased," said Chris Malone, a senior vice president at food service vendor Aramark.

But when Aramark introduced a line of low-fat sandwiches in 2003, they "blew off the shelves," he recalled. "We said, 'Something is changing.' There really seemed to be a tipping point."

That same year, the Washington, D.C.-based National Business Group on Health launched the obesity institute, which recently partnered with food service vendor Sodexo USA to introduce materials to help employers revamp food services.

The idea is to avoid "trapping employees in unhealthy food environments," Heinen said.

Drugmaker AstraZeneca recently swapped out items in its vending machines. The result: 70 percent healthy offerings such as nuts and yogurt-covered raisins; 30 percent candy and chips.

Salads replaced pizzas at lunch meetings. Cookies and brownies are available on request but the main choice for dessert is yogurt parfait with fruit.

In cafeterias, "heart happy lunches," such as lime-marinated grilled chicken breast with cilantro dressing, a salad and fruit go for \$3.50, which is \$1.50 off the \$5 market price.

"Instead of telling people what to do, we're trying to influence their behavior," said Dr. Joe Henry, executive director for safety, health and environment. Healthy offerings are supported by wellness campaigns linked to employers' brands and business objectives: "HealthTrack" at Union Pacific, and "Total You" at cereal-maker General Mills.

"What's different now is these big companies have put their 'oomph' behind it, their brand power," Heinen said.

Cash and other incentives are common.

As part of computer-maker Dell Inc.'s "Well at Dell" program, employees earn dollars in "health rewards accounts" for joining and completing programs such as weight-loss challenges. The money can be used to reimburse co-payments for drugs and doctor visits.

AstraZeneca offered employees who filled out health risk assessments \$600 each off health insurance premiums--a sweetener that netted 97 percent participation last year. The confidential surveys allow employers to track health trends and offer coaches to workers most likely to get sick.

Next year, the drugmaker plans to rebate \$20 monthly fitness center fees at its Wilmington, Del., headquarters to employees who average twice-weekly workouts.

The trend extends to smaller companies as well.

At Rockford Acromatic Products, a maker of auto parts based in Loves Park, Ill., 65 of the company's 80 employees joined a program that pays cash for losing or maintaining weight.

Employees got \$5 simply for signing up. Everyone got \$10 when the group exceeded their combined 250-pound weight loss goal for the first three months; winners got more.

"Even though the dollar amounts are nominal it's a little bit like penny poker," said risk manager Jim Knutson. "There's something about playing the game."

The company hired Tangerine Wellness to introduce the program in May after discovering that more than 70 percent of its workers were overweight. The number dropped to 62 percent by August.

Employees chart their team's progress by weighing in and logging on to a computer.

"Being on a team, it really boosts everybody's desire," said Nicole Pierce, who won \$97 after losing nearly 15 pounds. Her formula? The five-foot, 123-pound supervisor switched to water instead of soda and started walking every day.

At Rockford and elsewhere, office traditions are changing.

Informal garden stands pop up in summer months at Elkay Manufacturing Co.'s Oak Brook headquarters, where employees set out home-grown produce with signs, "Help yourself."

"It used to be when we had a `treat' day, everybody would bring in their sweets and their dips, the real heavy things," said customer service supervisor Cathy Cullens.

Now, partly in response to an office Weight Watchers program, "we're seeing the fresh vegetables, the fruit trays, granola bars," she said. "You still have your cheesecake, but people reach now for the more healthy snacks. If it's there, they'll pick it."

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