

WORKPLACE WELLNESS

Employers get the fitness bug

More companies are helping staff shape up in effort to cut health-care costs, boost productivity, reduce absenteeism and retain talent

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Alan McDermott had become a desk potato. Working up to 12 hours a day, his weight ballooned to 247 pounds as he let fitness fall by the wayside and did no kind of regular exercise for years.

Until this winter, that is, when his employer, Dundee Wealth Inc., gave him the incentive he needed to get back in shape.

As part of a corporate weight-loss challenge inspired by reality shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *Taking It Off*, Dundee offered him free consultations with a trainer and a nutritionist to set up a personal shape-up program he could do at his home in Pickering, east of Toronto.



Now, he's working out at home five nights a week, has already lost 10 pounds and is on his way to meeting his goal of losing 25 by the end of the year.

"When an employer commits all that time and money, it holds you to task in some way," says the director of retail compliance for the Toronto-based investment company. "It has moved me to a lifestyle change."

Mr. McDermott is one of many of Dundee's 1,800 employees who are benefiting from a new focus the company has placed on its employees' wellness and fitness in the past year - a focus that includes everything from weight-loss competitions, complete with prizes, to fitness breaks during sales meetings.

Dundee is not alone: More and more companies are putting employee fitness and wellness higher on their agendas in an effort to cut health-care costs, increase productivity, reduce absenteeism and offer more incentives to attract and retain talent. The popularity of shows such as *The Biggest Loser* have added to the zeitgeist.

Forty per cent of more than 6,200 respondents to a Globe and Mail on-line survey last week said that their employers encourage or promote wellness and fitness among employees.

And so employers are increasingly offering everything from subsidized fitness memberships to personalized training programs, gift cards, iPods and even cash as carrots to get employees to lay off the carrot cake and get into shape.

"It's the hot topic," says John Fortin, national practice leader in health-care cost management for Willis Group, a British-based global risk management and insurance intermediary company that works with Canadian clients. "For employers, it's just critical to get their arms around it."

Employees say that little extra push is all they need.

Sixty-eight per cent of 473 working adults polled by Guardian Life Insurance Co. of America last month said company-provided fitness benefits or prizes would prompt them to adopt an exercise or diet program or finally get serious about kicking a smoking habit.

"Regardless of how small it is, it really does help motivate people to fitness if they know there is an opportunity to win something at the end if they stay committed," says Veronica Marsden, principal of Oakville, Ont.-based Tri Fit Inc., which designs fitness programs for companies.

A typical prize in a fitness challenge these days is an Ipod or a \$100 gift certificate, she says. And the glory of being on the winning team can be a powerful motivator as well.

In fact, all it took was a chance to hoist a trophy to persuade 350 employees from 20 companies to participate in an intercompany "Winning at Losing" competition that Tri Fit organized in Ontario over the winter for its clients.

The participants lost a combined total of 1,796 pounds in the 10-week event, Ms. Marsden says.

There is also a trend toward companies offering personal fitness consultants who work with employees to set up individual programs, Ms. Marsden says.

This especially helps employees who have not been in fitness programs in the past get the motivation they need to stay with a program long enough to see results, she says. "Once they see benefits, they are much more likely to stay with the fitness regimen."

Cost can be a factor. As a result, companies increasingly are giving employees subsidies for gym memberships or exercise programs, such as yoga, pilates or personal training. The stipends can average about \$250 a year for entry-level employees and up to \$2,500 a year for senior executives, says Nancy Sawler, director of corporate health programs at Cambridge Group of Clubs.

Cambridge Group is fielding several inquiries a week from employers wanting to set up new or expanded employee fitness programs, twice the volume of a year ago, she says.

"I'd say a big push is coming from younger workers who are demanding the perk. They are used to being active," Ms. Sawler says.

There's a spike in memberships at the clubs during the summer as interns and articling students at law firms look to exercising or sports, such as squash, as ways to stay in shape and network at the same time, she says.

"And a big change in the past year or so is that companies are saying the [fitness club] membership is a core component of their wellness plan for employees at all levels, and not just senior executives," she adds.

That's been the case for McCarthy Tetrault LLP, which subsidizes fitness activities for all employees, but in the past two years has broadened the definition of exercise beyond the gym.

"Not all of the staff like the gym idea and so we also cover participation in yoga classes or sports programs, such as squash, tennis or skiing," says Kirby Chown, Ontario regional managing partner.

Broadening the options has seen rates of participation in fitness activities rise from under 40 per cent of 400 staff in the Toronto office to 51 per cent this year.

Surveys of staff who participate show employees are pleased with the results. "They say they sleep better and feel better and have seen an improvement in their ability to avoid getting sick. If you are at the office 10 hours a day sitting in the chair in a high stress job, it's good to have a break. Instead of having them bolt down coffee or going out for drinks, we encourage them to do something physically healthy," Ms. Chown says.

Meanwhile, Dundee's impetus for starting up its "Health is Wealth" initiative was "how do we set ourselves apart and recruit high-performing talents and make sure employees are delivering high performance," says David Doull, a chiropractor by training who was hired on by Dundee last year to become its director of wellness, health and safety.

In designing the program, Dr. Doull decided to add regular competitions and prizes to keep interest high.

To encourage participation, he set up challenges to meet weight loss or fitness goals that offer prizes to winners, such as \$125 gift cards good for purchases of sports gear or gift baskets of yoga or exercise equipment.

In addition, he realized that many employees wrestle with finding time to get to a gym, so the company started a "get fit at home" plan, which offers fitness assessments and advice on how to set up a home training program.

The program even includes making corporate junkets healthier. At Dundee's recent national sales meeting in Kelowna, B.C., conferees were urged to spend less time at the buffet tables and more at fitness classes and on walks that were scheduled through the week. For each fitness activity they participated in, participants got a ticket for a draw for a \$100 Lululemon gift certificate.

About 30 per cent of employees have participated during the first year, which is a good rate for a startup program, Dr. Doull says.

The company aimed to have healthier employees who would have less absenteeism and more productivity, he says. While results won't be tallied until the end of the year, departments are showing a reduction in sick days taken, he notes.

And employees who grab the opportunity not only can see their fitness levels rise, but their career prospects rise, suggests Jennifer Modry, a systems analyst for Alberta Blue Cross in Edmonton.

Six years ago, she considered a good lunch to be fried chicken and a smoke. But when Blue Cross offered a subsidized lunchtime exercise class for staff, "it was an opportunity and I took it."

Not only did she find the motivation to get in shape, become a distance runner and quit smoking, she approached the company to pay for her to become a certified fitness instructor.

Now it is paying her to teach lunchtime courses, and she is developing a side career as an instructor at a local fitness club.

In addition, her participation has increased her visibility at work. She has become the company spokesperson for the healthy workplace program, which has become so popular that the lunchtime exercise classes have tripled in participation and are filled to capacity most days, he says.

While she can't prove her fitness was a direct factor, Ms. Modry has received several promotions in the six years she has been in the fitness programs.

She has also become "definitely without question" more loyal to the company because of its wellness subsidies.

"I don't doubt that I could go across the street and make more money," Ms. Modry says. "But this subsidy to my fitness has made up for the difference."

Over at Dundee, Mr. McDermott can vouch for improvements in employee happiness and productivity.

"I have a lot more energy, I no longer get sleepy at work and I am thinking more clearly."

He says he's committed to stay at it and lose more weight. "Fitness becomes its own reward."

By the numbers

Some sobering data to consider from a study by New York-based Conference Board Inc.:

\$45-billion

Estimated health care expenditures (in U.S. dollars) tied to obesity for North American employers.

24

percentage of Canadian adults who are at least 20 per cent above their ideal weight

34

percentage of American adults who are at least 20 per cent above their ideal weight

40

percentage of U.S. companies that have started obesity-reduction and fitness programs (an additional 24 per cent said they plan to do so this year).

A survey by Dallas-based Buck Consultants found that more employers are investing in corporate wellness programs as a way to improve their bottom line.

The 25 Canadian employers included in the survey of 555 European and North American companies cited attracting and retaining top talent as their top reason for initiating wellness programs, followed by improved morale and productivity. Obesity was cited as the fastest-growing threat to productivity.

A survey by Guardian Life Insurance Co. of America found signs of improvement through corporate fitness initiatives.

35

percentage of 473 working adults who said they have access to a fitness program at work.

85

percentage of those who say they have seen health benefits from exercise.

Staff

A strong case for fitness

Like bodybuilding, it takes dedication to build a strong employee fitness program. Here are tips from Oakville, Ont.-based fitness consultancy Trifit Inc.:

MAKE IT RELEVANT.

Survey employees to assess their fitness priorities and what will keep their interest.

GET SUPPORT AT THE TOP.

Employees will take fitness efforts more seriously if they believe they are sanctioned by management and are part of the corporate strategy.

LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES.

A conference room may be perfect for yoga classes. Meetings can be taken outside as a group walk around the neighbourhood.

BENEFIT FROM EXPERIENCE.

Get advice from a consultant or trainer on what programs have succeeded in other workplaces.

MAKE IT PART OF THE BUDGET.

Employers who provide ongoing support for fitness efforts will see more long-term employee participation.

PROVIDE INCENTIVES.

Create departmental or regional challenges and offer prizes that reward participation.

CREATE A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN.

An internal website, bulletin board and calendar of events can provide reminders to participate.

ADD PLAY TO WORK.

Organize fitness breaks at meetings or conferences.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS.

Employees and departments who make fitness a priority should be honoured in company newsletters and promotions.

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