

Charting a Successful Course

Financial Education a Critical Part of Wellness

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Most of us wouldn't dare embark on a long trip without a destination in mind. The less adventurous may know where they want to go but aren't sure how to get there, so they bring their trusty road map or GPS. Why should planning for one's financial future – with more than its share of unexpected twists, turns and unknowns along the way – be any different?

Businesses are helping to pave the way by promoting financial wellness. It's a win-win: Individuals develop healthy habits, which can reduce stress and boost on-the-job performance.

Eli Lilly Federal Credit Union (ELFCU), headquartered in Indianapolis, partnered with personal finance expert Peter "Pete the Planner" Dunn to launch a financial literacy initiative based on his *60 Days to Change* book.

"Financial wellness is absolutely critical," asserts ELFCU senior vice president Rich Jones. "The No. 1 stressor employees face every day is around their finances and financial well-being. Companies that don't include some element of financial wellness in their wellness programs are probably only addressing half the problem."

Many companies avoid the financial wellness route due to a fear of "overstepping."

Lafayette-based Bison Financial Group (an independent affiliate of Wells Fargo Advisors Financial Network) assists organizations in educating their workers on financial matters.

"It's really strange," remarks Bison president and CEO Dave Vorbeck. "When it comes to financial planning (in the workplace), there's a cultural resistance to talking about money."

Dunn agrees.

"I think it's because they're afraid to get too personal in the lives of their employees," he surmises. "It's that fear of, 'If I ask (about) the problem, then I may have to be part of the solution,' and that's kind of uncomfortable."

But putting apprehension aside can make the road to success – personally and professionally – a much smoother ride.

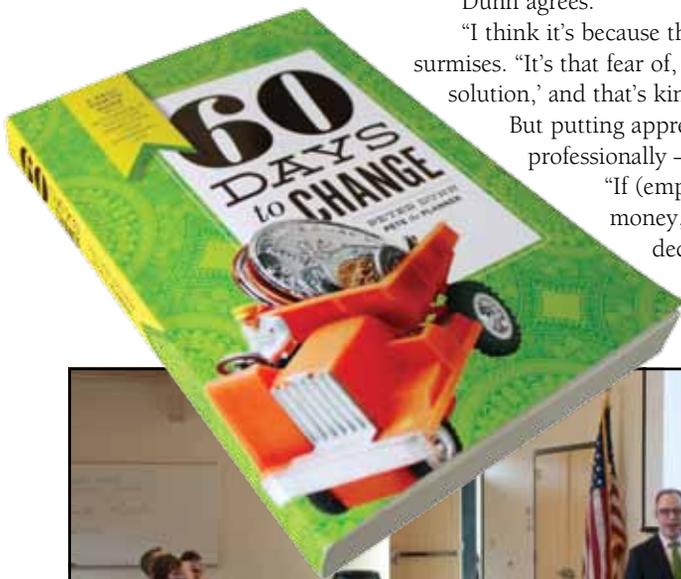
"If (employers) look at the resources they lose by people worrying about money, being sick, taking time off to deal with financial issues," Jones declares, "and look at the resources they send in, (they will see) that one of the key things they can do that will benefit employee wellness more than anything is to help their employees become better money managers."

What a difference 60 days can make

Dunn's *60 Days to Change* is a compass of sorts designed to encourage healthy financial habits. It contains checklists, worksheets, questionnaires and tips, as well as a variety of financial topics. Each week is dedicated to a specific theme such as getting organized, dealing with credit and debt, controlling monthly spending, budgeting, risk management, employee benefits and more.

"What we do is get them to count their transactions," Dunn reveals. "Forget *how much* money you spend, but let's worry about *how many times* you spend money. We found that the average American household spends money 22 times every week. We found that the more times you spend money, the less you care about (the cost of) what you're buying."

Peter "Pete the Planner" Dunn injects humor into financial advising to motivate employees (Joe Shoemaker photo).



Another pointer? Diversify and maintain a low checking balance. “When you have an artificially high checking account balance, it gives you a false sense of security. Sometimes scarcity is a better financial tool than abundance,” Dunn comments.

ELFCU kicked off its *60 Days to Change* program in April. More than 30% of its approximately 120 associates took part.

Online chats with Dunn via ELFCU’s Facebook and Twitter outlets allowed participants to ask questions and receive immediate answers. Initial prizes (\$1,000 each) were awarded in three categories: saving money, paying off debt and reducing spending.

“It’s a way to plan financial wellness around your daily lifestyle and not your bank account,” Jones observes. “It’s about making smarter, better-educated decisions when you pull out that debit card or that checkbook. That circles around to everything we do in our life whether it’s major – (buying a) house or car – or making the decision whether to stop in for that \$5 cup of coffee.”

The initiative, Dunn emphasizes, helps create a culture of financial wellness.

“Employees start encouraging each other; they become accountability partners. When you can actually broach the topic of financial wellness, and employees start talking to each other, that’s when you know something really cool is happening.”



“It takes an employer who has a keen and absolute interest in their workers to embrace financial wellness in a meaningful way,” says Bison Financial Group’s Dave Vorbeck.

Personal touch

Established in 1970, Monticello Spring Corporation is one of Bison’s longtime clients. The manufacturer of mechanical springs for automotive uses and home appliances has 75 workers at its main facility in Northern Indiana, with an additional plant in Central Mexico.

“MENTOR (a Bison initiative) helps employees gather, synthesize and analyze their current financial situation in a way that helps them make decisions about the future,” Vorbeck explains. “The real meat of that for the employee is the ability to see the pathway to their goals and objectives laid out in black and white.”

Advising blends small group meetings (typically 15 to 20 people) and one-on-one training.

“Financial stress is a tough one,” reflects Monticello Spring co-owner and plan administrator Jennifer Pimmler. “When employees are stressed about things at home financial-wise, it’s hard for them to focus here at work. Whenever someone might come to me with a concern, that’s one of the questions I ask them – if they’ve talked with their financial planner to see if they have suggestions to work out of a situation.”

She considers a strong financial wellness program “one of the benefits that is critical to offer these days to entice quality employees.”

Vorbeck points out that companies legally are limited from an advising standpoint on information they share about defined contribution plans such as 401(k)s. This can be a challenge in helping employees select the plan that’s right for them, especially coupled with a resistance to get involved in personal finances.

“What ends up happening is you have your employees picking and choosing and making decisions based on inaccurate or insufficient information,” he states.

Bison meets that need, and it is one reason Pimmler considers the firm an invaluable resource.

“When Bison came knocking, it was just a great fit from the beginning and it helped to alleviate the unknown, both for me and the employees.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Rich Jones, Eli Lilly Federal Credit Union, at www.elfcu.org

Peter Dunn at www.petetheplanner.com

Dave Vorbeck, Bison Financial Group, at www.bisonfinancialgroup.wfadv.com

Jennifer Pimmler, Monticello Spring Corporation, at www.monticellospring.com