

Being Well at Work

Employers, Experts Offer Tips, Success Stories

By Charlee Beasor

Long gone are the workdays portrayed in AMC's "Mad Men," in which smoke-filled offices contain stressed out employees who suffer through the day with "liquid lunches" and an afternoon scotch break. Most worksites have banned smoking (and drinking, obviously) long ago in a push to be healthier and more productive. But workers coping with stress, difficulty with tobacco cessation, lack of exercise and unhealthy eating habits are still problematic for employer and employee insurance costs.

Some employers have attacked bits and pieces of those challenges through company-wide health initiatives. There are companies that have gone above and beyond with all-encompassing wellness programs, including on-site workout facilities, nutrition counseling and regular health screenings. Others are simply turning a blind eye to the need for focusing on wellness in the workplace.

They're making it work

Two of the companies successfully embracing the wellness concept: ASA Electronics in Elkhart and Indianapolis-based Angie's List.

"It takes everybody to initiate and motivate people," says Michelle Fioritto, human resources manager for ASA. "Total well-being is what we're looking for. From a business sense, you've got to do it."

At ASA, employees have access to an on-site gym with personal instructors and classes such as Pilates, boot camp and aerobics. Initiating the change to a full-fledged wellness program was CEO Tom Irions investigating health savings accounts (HSAs), in which each employee would have an account with money to spend on their health costs.

"It's had a real big impact because people didn't know how much their drugs were costing. Once you put money into an account, it might have been the same amount of benefit money, but you're more judicious about spending it than when it was 'Uncle Tom's' money or a third party's money," Irions asserts.

He observes that the company had "two substantial years of dropping our major medical expenses based off the HSA change and also the wellness program, because we had people that went off of medications. The first year, we had five people who each lost over 70 pounds."

Irions admits he is one of the most frequent users of the wellness program. Fioritto adds that seeing the CEO in the gym on the treadmill next to her adds an element of solidarity for the company of about 100 employees.

"Talk about starting from the top. He spearheaded this, and to this day he is probably the No. 1 user of the fitness facility. We walk the walk. Camaraderie is a big thing," she stresses. She also credits CFO Julia Willis and president Brent Barrow for making the program what it is today. Irions shares a success story.

"As a businessman, I'm always looking for quantifiable, measurable results," he observes. "We had our wellness manager, who is an RN (registered nurse), and we had two years where we did the blood tests – about 60 or 70 of the same people. She compared the year-over-year blood results and the improvements to all the different categories. She said she'd never seen anything like it before. We know that it's made a significant impact, measuring it every year with these blood tests."

Dedicated to wellness

When Kelsey Taylor came on board at Angie's List, the wellness director and on-site personal trainer kicked the company's wellness program into full gear.



A team from Angie's List, shown with company co-founder Angie Hicks, prepares for the Bike to Work Day challenge.

“When I came here, (the gym) was ... very tiny and we had five treadmills. You could only run three at a time because it would trip the breaker. You couldn't leg press if somebody was on the squat rack and you couldn't squat if somebody was benching, but we made it work,” Taylor says with a laugh.

She said once CEO Bill Oesterle saw how limited the space was, the company moved the gym to a larger area. She runs various programs on the company's campus, such as Weight Watchers, “Biggest Loser” competitions, lunch 'n learn programs, cooking club, gardening club (the company has a green space dedicated to a community garden each year) and much more.

One tactic that has worked well for Angie's List employees – there are about 600 of them – is to incentivize the program by adding “FitPoints” to every wellness initiative. At the end of each quarter, employees earn gift cards with their FitPoints.

“I could get them to do anything for a FitPoint because it all adds up to the big reward at the end of the quarter,” Taylor adds. “We gave out 118 gift cards for a total of \$5,875 for the first quarter of this year.”

Taylor mentions that all the initiatives and points also improve the company's financial health.

“It goes back to our bottom line and return on investment. Now that we're having healthier employees, we don't have as many high claims and things like that. We also teach them to be smart consumers of their health insurance, teach them to shop around a bit. They get a prescription and say, ‘Okay, I want to get this filled.’ I'm teaching them to say ‘generic please.’ ”

Cheryl Reed, communications director at Angie's List, relates a story about when Taylor first began working for the company.

“One day, I'm in the office working away and Angie Hicks (the company's co-founder and namesake) is near me. In comes Kelsey Taylor, who doesn't know who anybody is. She looks at



Employees from ASA Electronics in Elkhart have access to an on-site fitness facility as part of the company's wellness program.

Angie and says, ‘Why are you drinking the evil Satan drink?’ and tried to take her Coke away from her,” recalls Reed. “She has since switched to Diet (Coke), but it took years. It was hilarious.”

Since the Angie's List campus is spread out over a number of buildings, Reed admits that it can be hard to meet many co-workers.

“One of the things that both the gym and the garden club (provide) is that I have met people that I would not see. It's difficult to get to know somebody. You get to know a different aspect. It helps when people know that you're a real person rather than an e-mail. It's a sense of community,” Reed offers.

Other wellness initiatives include a smoking cessation program that offers smokers \$1,000 in cash on the one-year anniversary of their quitting. Last year, the company paid 11 former smokers and is on track to reward 10 this year. Also, Taylor says employees in the Weight Watchers program have lost 993 pounds from Dec. 15, 2010 through March 9.

To each their own

Employers wishing to start a wellness program need to determine what kind of culture they want to foster in the workplace, says Bethany Garrity, director of fitness management for the National Institute for Fitness and Sport.

“I think the workplace culture, honestly, has to precede everything, by establishing an environment where it's okay for people to make a healthy choice, and beyond where it's okay, but where they're excited about it,” she explains.

Garrity offers several ideas for how to initiate and maintain a workplace wellness program.

“It starts with the culture, which is dictated from the top. CEO-level support often goes in with that. Where we've seen success is we've really seen the top line leaders, as well as middle management, actively engaged in the opportunity. If there's a walking



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challenge, they're out there walking," she asserts.

"You have to have the right people on the ground. They can't be the overzealous and can't be the people that don't want to do it. You have to find your sweet spot. You have to know your people. ... If this is not a competitive group, you're not going to want to do it as a competition. Tying in the right incentives is still an important piece and that usually comes back to money, or it's tied to health premiums."

She also observes that the most effective wellness programs center on healthy eating and exercise, but another important piece is stress management.

"The truth is that stress kind of precedes it all," Garrity affirms. She offers that regular on-site chair massages, yoga classes or even converting an unused office into a meditation room with relaxation and meditation CDs can go a long way in reducing stress.

She also notes that becoming a healthier state would mean financial gain for everyone.

"We have a massive opportunity to get better. I think we're largely challenged by environment. We have not created an environment in the state that is bicycle friendly, pedestrian friendly; we're in a (healthy) food desert; there is still a significant amount of tobacco use. From an environment and policy standpoint, we are behind," she claims.

"It can be a financial boon for the state if we can get it in order. When employees are not as costly as they are in neighboring states, companies will come here. Right now we cost an awful lot. Looking at other states, we are really expensive; we are not healthy. From a financial perspective, it really matters."

Health threats linger

Indianapolis-based Spectrum Health Systems provides workplace health screenings for a variety of key indicators such as blood pressure, glucose, height, weight, body mass index and comprehensive metabolic panels.

Jamie Curts, vice president of business development for Spectrum, acknowledges that one of the biggest threats the company has seen is the obesity "epidemic."

"As a nation, our obesity risk has doubled in the last 30 years. Thirty-four percent of adults are obese, and that's one of the biggest risks we're seeing," she says. "The one thing that continues to creep up is the weight, which in turn increases other conditions such as diabetes."

Curts also notes that many times, when stress is high, tobacco use is also high.

"There's a very high amount of stress right now, a lot because of the economic factors that we're going through. A lot of times, people use tobacco for stress management. We are seeing an increase in using health improvement programs, but the employer has to provide the intervention too and not just nicotine replacement therapies," she explains.

The workplace screenings can help uncover potentially dangerous health conditions.

"They have employees walking around that don't go to their physicians. They don't get annual screenings done, don't know what their cholesterol, blood pressure is. We have people as young as 21 years old that we're helping uncover that they have diabetes," she affirms. "We had a situation in January where we had a middle-aged gentleman with an emergency level of blood pressure reading. He went to the emergency room and they concurred he probably wouldn't have made it to the end of the month."

Ideally, some workplace health threats also will be thwarted by employees who are interested in being healthier on their own – without the intervention of the employer.

"There are a lot of resources out there, especially through the Indiana Healthy Weight Initiative. There are definitely resources out there that they can access," Curts concludes.



Workplace screenings can, and do, lead to identification of serious health conditions.

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Tom Irions and Michelle Fioritto, ASA Electronics, at www.asaelectronics.com

Kelsey Taylor and Cheryl Reed, Angie's List, at www.angieslist.com

Bethany Garrity, National Institute for Fitness and Sport, at www.nifs.org

Jamie Curts, Spectrum Health Systems, at www.spectrumhs.com