

## Employers Supporting Healthy Lifestyle Choices... Why Bother?



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**M**aking healthy choices has become a constant topic, right along with the daily news on the growing problems of obesity and sedentary lifestyles. And recently the news is also about what some employers are doing to encourage healthy lifestyle choices among their employees.

Why are employers getting more involved with the choices employees make that impact health?

We all know that unhealthy behavior can affect an individual's health. But it can also directly impact an employer's costs. Indirect costs associated with employees' unhealthy lifestyles include:

- Decreased productivity
- Work-related injuries
- Excessive sick leave usage
- Increased absenteeism

Fortunately, evidence suggests that the right lifestyle choices, such as engaging in physical activity and not smoking, can slow and even reverse these costs. The wellness movement presents an opportunity for employers to help improve employee health and productivity, while also addressing rising health care costs.

One key is to give employees more opportunities to take personal control of their own health and an active role in health promotion activities. With the health care landscape shifting toward prevention and wellness, some employers have taken a proactive approach to engaging employees in wellness programs that focus on educating and involving employees in significant self-care efforts.

These efforts are paying off. Companies with the most effective health programs experienced improved financial outcomes: 11 percent higher revenue per employee and a 1.2 percent reduction in costs associated with medical trends. (Source: The Health and Productivity Advantage; 2009/2010 North American Staying@Work Report, Watson Wyatt Worldwide and National Business Group on Health.)

So what do worksite wellness and supporting healthy lifestyle choices look like?

Effective programs include educating employees about ways to reduce risk factors for chronic disease. Health risk assessments (HRAs) have been shown to make statistically significant correlations with productivity and can support a holistic approach to health and well-being. Generally, HRAs provide immediate and comprehensive information for employees that include custom, targeted recommendations that the employee can immediately begin using to improve overall health. Most health care plans offer HRA options, often online and securely confidential, to employer groups.

Worksite weight-loss programs and metabolic syndrome programs can be instrumental in helping overweight employees make the difficult lifestyle changes needed to reach a healthier weight. Many health plans now offer such options. Ongoing follow-up sessions can help employees with the often even more challenging goal of maintaining weight loss. When employers provide long-term support systems, the amount of long-term success increases.

Biometric screenings, also available from most health plans or other health care provider partners, can serve as early warning alerts about potential health issues that could become more chronic illnesses in the future.

Some employers have added gym facilities to their locations. For the many employers who simply don't have that kind of option, providing space for on-site exercise classes, led by well-trained instructors, can be an effective alternative and help promote a general message of good health. Employers can even promote "no-cost" exercise: launch walking clubs, provide mini workout areas, or conduct an "all healthy foods" potluck lunch.

More and more employers are providing worksite yoga classes. Yoga not only increases strength, flexibility, and balance, but also decreases stress and anxiety. A recent study by Boston University School of Medicine compared walking to yoga for impact on anxiety and depression and found that, while walking is effective, yoga is even more effective.

Just as schools are doing in response to the alarming increase in obesity among our children, some employers are reviewing the food options they support, including cafeteria and vending machine choices. An evolutionary approach can be more effective than wholesale change: gradually replace high-salt, high-sugar snacks with healthier options.

Employers supporting employees' healthy choices has another major benefit beyond potential cost savings: It's simply great to feel as healthy as we can. Stretch. Take a walk. Eat an apple. Breathe deeply. These can be simple yet powerful messages for our employees that reflect a workplace culture of supporting healthy lifestyle choices and a message of valuing their well-being.

