

Businesses Help Workers to Lose Weight

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CHICAGO — A burgeoning industry of wellness advisers, counselors and consultants is booming as corporate America tries to increase productivity and control insurance costs by helping its employees get healthy and shed pounds.

The change is fueled by well-meaning, cost-conscious executives who are looking for ways to trim bottom lines along with waist lines.

"The truth is CEOs are the ones that have to address it," said Mike Huckabee, the Republican presidential candidate and former governor of Arkansas who created a wellness program for state employees after losing more 100 pounds.

And they are.

About 53 percent of large employers offered health risk assessments for their staff last year -- up from 35 percent in 2004, according to a survey by Mercer Human Resource Consulting.

The prevalence of corporate-sponsored disease management, nurse advice lines and other health-related programs is also climbing as companies find they can no longer trim extra savings out of health insurance policies.

"Employers have spent a lot of time tweaking those, and they haven't spent a lot of time getting a consumer engaged," said Tami Collin, a Mercer consultant who focuses on health and productivity management. "You'll see plan designs that are really starting to get engaged and motivated."

The change is driven by cost.

A study published in April by a group of Duke University researchers showed obese employees had higher rates of workers' compensation claims, more lost work days and costlier medical bills than their trim co-workers.

Frustrated by health insurance costs that were growing more than 10 percent a year, Ohio State University launched a massive wellness program last year with the hope of cutting medical expenses. Organizers hope the initiative, which offers gift certificates and other prizes, will help the school save \$30 million over the next five years, program spokeswoman Kim Schuette said.

While wellness programs once offered counseling or education to only the sickest

workers, they're now preaching prevention and more cohesive services that address a range of issues.

"Educating me is one thing. Giving me something that will help me move forward is another," said Kenneth Mitchell, vice president for health and productivity at Chattanooga, Tenn.-based Unum Group, the nation's largest disability insurer. "There's a trend to become more actively engaged and more focused in helping people."

That's fueling the rapid growth of the niche industry of wellness advisers who provide everything from corporate gyms to medical risk screenings at work and healthy grocery lists that can be downloaded on an iPod.

At a workplace weight management conference in Chicago on Thursday, nearly 100 people -- including Huckabee -- debated the most effective ways to promote healthy living for employees, while helping them maintain their new lifestyle.

"What we don't have in the weight control business now is a program of maintenance," said Rebecca Reeves, an obesity researcher and associated professor at Baylor College of Medicine in Texas. "There's recidivism, and it does return."

As the field grows, businesses looking for help can find a dizzying array of methods to help employees, and very little research to back up which provide the best method.

CALL ME: Developed years ago, the tried-and-true method of telephone counseling and educational brochures continues to be an effective way to help workers manage health care. Got a question about your blood pressure? Dial a nurse. Trying to keep your diabetes in check? Counselors will call you. These companies can get permission to mine insurance claims data and do everything from remind you to take your medicine to offer over-the-phone counseling.

FEEL THE BURN: On-site gyms and fitness centers can be more than an 80s-era stationary bike stashed in a corner. Wellness companies today will design, build and manage a corporate gym. Personal trainers take note of medical histories while classes help the out-of-shape get active. Plus, the gyms can be a recruitment tool for wooing potential employees.

"Just having a facility shows the employees that the company cares about their well-being," said Brenda Loube, president of Montgomery Village, Md.-based Corporate Fitness Works Inc., which operates such facilities for dozens of companies across the country.

SAY 'AHHHH': Health risk assessments do just that: study employees' medical status to find out if they're at risk for chronic conditions. Corporations usually provide prizes and sometimes even cash to employees who undergo diagnostics and commit to getting healthy. The screenings can include cholesterol checks, blood pressure screenings and weigh-ins. More detailed versions can include bone density checks and skin cancer

screenings.

"Everyone now agrees that today's lower- and moderate-risk person is going to be tomorrow's higher-risk person," said Andrea Lazar, president and chief executive of Phoenix-based Kronos Optimal Health Co. "So much of health care costs are determined by the lifestyle choices we make."

DIGITAL DISHES: Wellness companies offer mountains of information on their Web sites, from quizzes and tips to online coaching and counseling. Some even go as far as to offer customized exercise plans and recipes, along with grocery lists that can be downloaded on an iPod for easy reference.

"Some people will read the program, and change their lifestyle, some will come back on a daily basis," said Ted Dacko, chief executive of Ann Arbor, Mich.-based HealthMedia Inc., which provides services such as online counseling for more than 30 million people. "We're trying to fundamentally deal with the issues that'll change your behavior."