Health is the bottom line:
Kentucky employers make good nutrition and exercise a priority at the office

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February 29, 2012

Lexington, KY - Chronic disease is on the rise, as are associated health-care costs. In this same climate, schedules and budgets are tight, and both individuals and organizations confront the pressures of doing more with less. Most of us know that eating better and exercising would improve our health, but when? Where? How?

What if the answers were "at work," "at work," and "with your boss's blessing"?

In the face of budget cuts, many employers have reassessed how organizational goals work together and are embracing practices that improve not only employee health but also work-life balance (which conveniently can reduce stress and improve health). To find out more about how such practices were being implemented, in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 Kentucky organizations by the Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin) as part of the Creating Healthy Organizations: Promising Practices in Kentucky report.

Exercise and work-life fit

Some companies have made strategic investments to encourage employees to exercise. In fact, 17 of the 23 companies interviewed offered access to an onsite workout facility, walking paths at or near the worksite, or another aspect of the environment that facilitated exercise. Norton Healthcare assessed its indoor and outdoor facilities and created American Heart Association-approved walking maps. WellPoint offers an onsite wellness center at its Louisville office where employees can exercise before, during or after work. It also offers a fitness-center reimbursement to employees who work more than five miles from a workplace facility.

Not all organizations have the resources to build onsite exercise facilities. Many companies, however, have staircases that are often underutilized. Most staircases are in the wings of buildings, dimly lit, drably painted and prominently labeled "emergency exit." Several companies interviewed have reclaimed their stairwells by making them more attractive (e.g., repainting, enhancing the lighting and hanging art on the walls). A few organizations engaged local students in creating the art; others have marked calories burned or miles walked on each step. WellPoint created a challenge out of using the stairs by adding incentives. Sign-up sheets were hung in stairwells in revolving locations, and employees that signed their names to them were entered into a prize drawing.

But what if you want to implement healthy practices today and have no budget? Several companies offer flexible work arrangements or long lunch breaks to improve employees' work-life fit and ability to exercise when it's convenient for them. Some engage workers in weight-loss, exercise, or walking/cycling commuter challenges to encourage healthy behaviors while fostering coworker support. "Walk and talk" meetings can accomplish the dual goals of spurring creativity and logging miles. At iwin,
exercise is incorporated into sporadic games of hangman.

**Healthy eating and work-life fit**

At first glance, providing healthy food at the workplace may not seem like an issue of work-life fit. However, providing healthy food options in cafeterias, vending machines and during meetings enables employees to be healthy at work — so healthy eating is not just something they do in their home lives. It also sends the message that the organization supports employee health. Ninety-one percent of employers interviewed ensured that healthy food options were available at work. Some, including Norton Healthcare, have branded healthy items in cafeterias and vending machines so they are easily identifiable. WellPoint subsidizes healthy food at onsite cafeterias and, in collaboration with its café vendor, has hosted taste tests during lunch to introduce employees to healthier food options.

The University of Kentucky plans to reduce the burden of grocery shopping and improve employees’ access to fresh, local produce by hosting a farmers market during the growing season. Although this plan is still in the works, UK has offered buses to students, faculty and staff to the downtown farmers market during work hours for several years. UK also offers dietitian-led grocery tours to educate employees on reading nutrition labels and navigating grocery stores.

**Why are employee health and work-life fit organizational issues?**

Not every organization subscribes to the idea that the employer should promote employee health or work-life fit. After all, why should the company pay for an employee to exercise or grocery shop? Evidence supports that these are good business strategies for the following reasons:

1) Health-care costs depress the bottom line, so alleviating these costs makes good business sense.

2) These practices provide a valued but low-cost benefit when resources are scarce, thus improving retention and job satisfaction while reducing turnover.

3) Active workers often report feeling more engaged in their work, thus enhancing productivity.

4) When employees can exercise or access healthy foods onsite, work-life balance is improved, thus alleviating stress, a major risk factor for chronic disease.

5) Because employees spend a significant portion of their waking lives at work, the workplace has a huge influence on health behavior.

Some of the practices featured above take planning and resources. Some could start tomorrow with a shoestring budget. Regardless of scale, successful initiatives minimize barriers to healthy behavior and demonstrate genuine leadership support.

If you are interested in a more detailed description of these and other health-related practices, check out the Creating Healthy Organizations report, available for free on iwin’s website: iwin.uky.edu.

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