

# Wellness at Work



What are you doing to promote your employees' mental and physical health? Forward-thinking law offices are pursuing **workplace wellness initiatives** to encourage positive behaviors that benefit individuals and their firms.

BY CHRIS MITTELSTAEDT

Delivering fresh fruit to offices as a wellness benefit seemed like a good idea back in 1998 when I started The FruitGuys. But we struggled when it came to choosing a name that would capture the essence of our business. On the first day of deliveries we walked into a company in San Francisco's Embarcadero Center, and an employee yelled down the hall, "The fruit guys are here!" People came running, and we had our name. In retrospect, finding a name like The FruitGuys to describe fruit delivery is much easier than finding the words that quickly describe to employees what the growing trend of worksite wellness really means for them.

Wellness can mean different things – on mental and physical levels – to different people. Leah Cox, Executive Director of the California Task Force on Youth and Workplace Wellness, believes that when looking at worksite wellness, the first place to start is with chronic disease prevention.

"Physical inactivity and preventable diseases can lead to chronic conditions such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes that cost U.S. companies billions of dollars each year in lost productivity and medical expenses," she said. "Since adults spend the majority of their waking time at work, offices are a natural place to encourage positive behavior changes such as exercise and healthy food choices."

The concept of workplace wellness in corporate America dates to the 1950s, when large companies such as Johnson & Johnson and PepsiCo started what were then called "executive fitness programs." In the past, it was difficult to equate these programs with cost savings. Today, however, with rising health care and staffing costs, plus the unprecedented increase of chronic diseases related to behavior-based choices, the economic benefits of implementing worksite wellness programs are much more apparent. Companies realize that the healthier their employees are, the healthier their organizations will be. Many law firm clients of The FruitGuys are pioneers in reshaping what modern workplace wellness looks like.

## SHORTCUT

Workplace wellness programs are gaining in popularity as employees look for new and innovative ways to stay healthy. Savvy legal administrators may consider wellness initiatives for their worksites, knowing that the healthier their employees are, the healthier their firms will be.

### A WAKE-UP CALL

Miriam Ben-Natan, Director of Administration for the San Francisco office of Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP, and her colleague Kathie Pieri, who fills a similar role at the firm's Silicon Valley office, vividly recall attending a human resources and administrators meeting in Houston, where a human capital consultant discussed how to create healthier environments at worksites. During the trip home, as they talked about what they could do for the 515 employees at their two offices, Pieri flipped through a magazine.

"She started counting ads for drugs that helped people manage diseases like acid reflux, heart disease, blood pressure, and others," Ben-Natan said. "We got up to eight or nine advertisements – all for things that are, in some cases, considered preventable. We realized that we needed to think about expanding our worksite wellness program to help our employees avoid lives that might require these kinds of drugs."

Earlier this year, Ben-Natan organized an extensive expansion of the wellness program for Pillsbury's Northern California offices. The program focused on getting as many employees as possible to participate in healthier behaviors. A reward-based point system and team-building wellness exercises were used to allow access to healthier food, informational workshops, and physical activity choices.

"We put water in the vending machines, distributed granola bars, ordered FruitGuys fruit, and began putting out veggies every week," said Ben-Natan. "We have developed and are promoting healthier evening meals for those who need to work late, and we have formed a partnership with a multi-location fitness center."

The point system awarded employees credits for achievement in everything from increased physical activity to better nutrition.

"The key was focusing on either starting to be physically active and eating well or taking good habits to the next level," said Ben-Natan. "We call the program 'continuing life care commitment.' "

Teams that earned 50 points or more received special gifts; everyone who participated received a Jamba Juice gift card. The team with the most points from each office received spa gift certificates for each team member.

### THE BIGGER PICTURE

Creating a healthy office culture has spread into the firm's philanthropic efforts as well. Employees put together a cookbook, entitled "To Your Health," with all proceeds from sales going to the United Way Bay Area.

"It's a great way to support a good cause and promote wellness from within," said Ben-Natan. "Plus, it gets the wellness message out to those who buy the cookbooks,"

For a multi-office firm like Pillsbury, understanding its organizational structure was key to successfully implementing a company-wide program. "The firm respects that each region has its own unique Pillsbury culture," Ben-Natan said. Although local offices apply their own wellness initiatives, the program is designed to promote and support firm-wide good health.

Ben-Natan says Pillsbury has seen several tangible benefits from its wellness program, including higher morale. Participating employees say they like the program and believe it helps them to meet and engage with others, feel better, and accomplish health-related goals.

Hanson Bridgett – a Northern California law firm with 278 employees in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Larkspur – has also seen its wellness program expand. Eva Guy, the firm's Director of Administrative Services, noticed that its weekly FruitGuys subscription had inspired people there to think differently about wellness.

"When we moved into new offices, we asked our employees what they wanted to see in addition to the fruit," said Guy. "More light and a fitness center were at the top of the list." After one pregnant

continued on page 84

# Employee Benefits: Creating a Culture of Success

BY GARRY L. JOHNSON AND SONJA SANCHEZ

According to research by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the cost of family health care coverage has risen 87 percent since 2000. The research also found that despite a slower pace of health care cost increases, coverage still rose 7.7 percent in 2006 – more than double the overall inflation rate *and* the increase in workers' incomes.

Meanwhile, funding alternatives and consumer-driven health plans are experiencing lower increases than average, rising by only 4.8 percent. In the face of increasing costs, law firms can benefit from exploring these coverage alternatives.

## CONSUMER-DRIVEN PLANS

Consumer-driven health plans are a savings option for firms facing consistently higher-than-average coverage renewals on traditional, fully insured plans. By promoting preventive care and higher engagement in health care decisions, consumer-driven care encourages individuals to have regular check-ups and educate themselves before making health care decisions. Coupling a consumer-driven health plan with wellness and disease management programs and self-funding can add to the savings.

## WELLNESS INITIATIVES

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 25 percent of U.S. health care spending is attributable to modifiable behaviors, including stress management, tobacco use, obesity, and inactivity. Research has shown that employee health has a big impact on company performance. Consider these facts:

- According to the American Physiological Association, health care costs are 50 percent greater for workers with high stress.
- Vieliforte reports that 40 percent of the U.S. population suffers from insomnia, and poor sleep can reduce individual productivity by 30 percent.
- An inactive employee costs an employer \$650 to \$1,125 more per year, the CDC reports.
- An obese employee who becomes physically active lowers health care costs by \$400 to \$500 per year, according to the *Journal for Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

Wellness programs promote a healthy lifestyle by addressing the four pillars of health: nutrition, fitness, stress, and sleep. More than 20 years of data have shown that corporate wellness programs yield a positive return on investment by reducing health care costs and improving employees' quality of life. By implementing a wellness program at your firm, you are likely to not only reduce your overall claims, but also to create a healthier, happier work environment.

## DISEASE MANAGEMENT

Services rendered to employees with chronic conditions are the biggest contributor to higher health care costs. Effectively managing these conditions through disease management is an efficient way to help employers reduce costs and deliver better clinical results to employees. Chronic disease figures are staggering, according to the Disease Management Association of America, with \$500 billion in direct costs to employers annually, including:

- \$234 billion per year in absenteeism and lost productivity,
- \$38 billion from asthma conditions,
- \$47 billion from smoking-related complications, and
- \$54 billion from diabetes.

Disease management programs help employers alleviate the burden of these costs by providing members with chronic conditions the ability to improve their quality of life. When employees start to become the healthiest they can be, employers experience increased productivity, lower absenteeism and hospitalization costs, and an overall healthier work environment.

## SELF-FUNDING

According to the Kaiser survey, premiums in fully insured plans grew by 8.7 percent in 2006, more quickly than equivalents in self-funded plans, which rose by only 6.8 percent. Self-funded plans with stop-loss protection may not only give your firm the potential to profit from a good claims history, but also provide a long-term solution to rising health care costs.

## A CULTURE OF SUCCESS

How you design your benefits program and interact with your employees can drive a culture focused on health instead of health costs, making your organization more successful. Human assets are the engine that drives competitive advantage, and employee benefits should be positioned and designed to create a culture of health within your organization.

### *about the authors*

**Garry L. Johnson** is the Founder of Garry L. Johnson & Associates, which offers self-funded health care options that facilitate wellness and disease management in law firms.

**Sonja Sanchez** represents Great-West Healthcare, which has partnered with Garry L. Johnson & Associates (a member of ALA's Value In Partnership<sup>SM</sup> program) to provide a unique combination of benefits for ALA members. Learn more at [www.gljinsurance.net](http://www.gljinsurance.net).



With rising health care and staffing costs, plus the unprecedented increase of chronic diseases related to behavior-based choices, the economic benefits of implementing worksite wellness programs are much more apparent. ... Many law firm clients of The FruitGuys are pioneers in reshaping what modern workplace wellness looks like.

employee suggested prenatal yoga, Guy was inspired to offer yoga to the whole firm. "Now we have a fitness center, showers, seminars, and regular yoga classes in our lunch room once a week."

#### GETTING STARTED

So, do you have to have a gym in order to have a wellness program? No, and companies shouldn't perceive starting a wellness program as a daunting process.

"Worksite wellness can seem overwhelming for organizations at first," said Christina Carpenter, Senior Health Program Planner for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. "We think it is easier to start and manage a wellness program if you break it down into definable categories."

Carpenter takes part in Mayor Gavin Newsom's Shape Up San Francisco initiative, a citywide program aimed at helping residents and workers become more physically active and healthier. For worksites, the initiative looks mainly at three areas: increasing physical activity, motivating people for better nutrition, and smoking cessation. With these goals in mind, Shape Up San Francisco's wellness

program then helps companies understand how to move forward with a plan. The program calls for:

- getting top management to support the wellness program;
- creating awareness and educating employees about what unhealthy and healthy habits are; and
- offering work-related opportunities for employees to switch from unhealthy to healthy habits through access to programs related to physical activity, nutrition, and smoking cessation.

Carpenter agrees with Ben-Natan that assessing a company's organizational structure is the key to understanding how best to implement a wellness program.

"You need accountability and consistency, and that generally starts with some kind of top-level approval. Selling managers and 'C-level' executives on why worksite wellness programs are important is a key phase," said Carpenter. "Then finding a champion to lead the initiative is also very important. It should really be a no-brainer for organizations – we know this stuff inherently. 'You are what you eat, an apple a day keeps the doctor a way, walking keeps you fit.' It's all there, but we need to find a way to implement it at offices."

Ultimately, many options exist to start or enhance your organization's wellness program. Don't hesitate to contact me for additional information and ideas on how to get started.

#### *about the author*

**Chris Mittelstaedt** is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The FruitGuys ([www.fruitguys.com](http://www.fruitguys.com)), a company that delivers fresh fruit weekly to offices nationwide as a worksite wellness benefit. Contact him at [chris@fruitguys.com](mailto:chris@fruitguys.com).

