

A good person to ask

HR exec shows how firm got moving on wellness program

BY TIERNEY PLUMB
STAFF INTERN

Knowing that a big portion of their health care costs are directly related to unhealthy habits, employers are looking for ways to shed some of those expenses.

June Stacey, associate vice president of human resources at United Educators, an insurance company in Chevy Chase, has done just that, with help from Fiona Gathright's Wellness Corporate Solutions LLC in Montgomery County.

Through a wellness program, the approximately 100-employee insurance company collectively lost 270 pounds. Stacey kept momentum going with a Walking Challenge at work.

With pedometers reading 10,000 miles after the challenge last fall, United Educators is on the right track to continue getting a return on investment from its wellness program, Stacey believes.

Below are the key points in Stacey's program to get her company up and running.

WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS: We ran the Weight Watchers at Work program for about two years, and in that time that group of 15 to 20 people lost 273 pounds. It's amazing how it impacted the rest of staff because as people started to lose weight, people got interested. When we didn't have a large enough core group to do the at-work program, we were desperate and didn't know what to do. So we started our own healthy living group.

WORK WITH WHAT YOU'VE GOT: I looked at the staff for any specific skill sets. One had a wife who was nutritionist, and an ex-employee was trained as a massage therapist. You need to send e-mails out to encourage people to get going. For our walking challenge from June to August, Fiona found us a trainer who took us on walks around the area every Wednesday. We had a board on our [information technology] central page where we would plot

steps taken. Everyone got free pedometers.

ON THE ROAD TO TRACKING ROI: We did a full health fair in November through Fiona's company. We had free flu shots, cholesterol and blood pressure screenings, body composition, DermalScan, dieticians and education. We have a healthy population here, but a lot of problems with blood pressure. Diet and exercise can help that. They told us where the triggers were, and as we go from year to year it will give us an idea of ROI and improvement of general health.

PROGRAM INCENTIVE: Monthly prizes included \$25 American Express cards, and at the end we had given away a couple of iPod shuffles. We also did quizzes on health, and people who got good marks got smoothie tokens. To keep interest going, we encouraged others to write on the blog board and ask questions. The newsletter is sent out every Monday and includes healthy recipes, suggestions for stretching and, if it happens to be a breast cancer month, information on that.

EXTRA BENEFITS: One of the positive side impacts is what it does to bring together people from all different departments. Senior managers took walks and were in the Weight Watchers club. Our CEO is very healthy herself. Since we represent and underwrite insurance and risk management for schools in the U.S., she walks all over the campuses. She's an amazing example for all of us and is very concerned about staff health.

CONSTANTLY REBOOTING PROGRAMS: We look every three to four months to see, does this work? It can be reviewing the meeting and seminar times or trainers we use. Did we choose to do the stress seminars when people were so stressed out and were busy and angry that they had work to do? Typically, the walks are around lunchtime, and stress seminars are on days we have staff meetings so that a lot of people are here.

WHY HR? I manage all benefit programs. I don't see private health information but do see on a higher-level scale what it is that impacted our renewal quotes — such as catastrophic events or staff that's creating an issue. I joined in October 2003 and was blown away by how much food we received around the holidays. Last holiday season we started an eight-week "Maintain, Don't Gain" challenge, with healthy cooking demos and nutrition talks.

IF YOU BUILD IT, ROI WILL COME: I have a very supportive CEO who knows it's going to take several years to pull together the information we need to say how well this is working. In a small company, there are no spare people around. This sort of thing often gets low priority. It requires someone like her to say, "This is important for the company."

TAKING BABY STEPS: First, pull together a small group of really interested employees. Work with the IT department. They can make it so much easier to set up a system. If you do a walking challenge, you can log onto the site and put in your steps, and it calculates everything for you. If you don't have buy-in from senior management, HR can do that very well because we have the cost of the benefits. Look at your general population and see what the big issue is. It could be weight, or it might be diabetes. If you take it seriously, you need data to go down the road and an outside consultant to survey the staff.

ALREADY SHOWING: Since 2004, turnover has decreased from 25 to 12 percent, and an overall increase of only 5 percent in health insurance rates. Even though the majority of our employees are in their 30s to mid-50s, we've been lucky, with something between 3 and 8 percent over the last five years. Some companies are dealing with double digits, and the national average is 23 percent.

■ **E-MAIL:** tplumb@bizjournals.com **PHONE:** 703/258-0830