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Fitness programs produce healthy benefits

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Establishing a healthy lifestyle is a habit that is here to stay, and such Bay Area corporations as **Safeway Inc.** and **Hewlett-Packard Co.** are finding that having on-site fitness centers may not only improve the well-being of their employees but possibly their bottom line as well.

In a recent poll by the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, 99 percent of Americans believe that exercise helps preserve good health, but most feel they have to battle current culture to exercise regularly.

At the same time, many companies are taking action to combat rising health care costs and create an environment in which employees can enhance their own health.

"Ten years ago, companies were (building on-site health clubs) to attract and retain employees and remain competitive," said Robyn Vanderluit, director of work site health and fitness at San Francisco-based Club One, which operates private health clubs as well as corporate fitness and wellness programs. "Now they are doing it to reduce health care costs and create a culture of health."

According to Carla Bentley, occupational health nurse at San Jose-based **BD Biosciences**, companies are realizing the problems a sedentary work force may pose. "Many of our health conditions are related to a sedentary lifestyle, and in the interest of health and productivity, (companies) are now allowing people to get some exercise," she said.

Berkeley-based Clif Bar & Co. was a pioneer in creating on-site health clubs as a way of underscoring a healthy lifestyle, and a growing number of companies are following. "Our founder, Gary Erickson, came up with the idea of Clif Bar while on 175-mile bike ride," said Sue Hearn, public relations director.

Clif Bar started with a small gym 10 years ago, which has steadily expanded.

"We are a privately held company, and our owners really believe in sustaining their people," said Janet Minix, the company's wellness manager.

"They wanted to find a way to make exercise possible for employees, while at work, so they had a better opportunity to take care of themselves." Clif Bar has 206 employees.

"We have four full-time personal trainers and five contractors who come in and teach classes," said Minix. "We offer yoga, circuit training, dance and cardio boxing, so there is something for everyone."

Safeway opened a health club at its Pleasanton headquarters in June 2007. The 17,000-square-foot facility contains exercise machines, an aerobics area, women's workout space, showers and lockers.

"Our CEO has been at the forefront of health care reform," said Teena Massingill, manager of corporate public affairs for Safeway. "We believe that health care itself starts with taking good care of you, so we wanted to give our employees the opportunity to exercise and learn about health and fitness at work."

In addition to providing access to the facility for 1,800 corporate employees and their families, Safeway provides its 200,000 employees with online health information, handouts and access to other commercial gyms.

BD Biosciences created its health club in 1990 and charges its 750 employees a nominal fee for using it. "We offer child-care service, toiletries, lockers and changing rooms," said Bentley. The company also provides group exercise classes and individualized fitness assessments.

Employees at Hewlett-Packard Co. have been working out in their corporate health club for more than 12 years. HP's 10,000 employees currently use a fitness center at headquarters in Palo Alto and centers at sites throughout the United States.

"This is something we thought about before it became a trend," said Terrie Dixon, wellness and fitness center program manager. "It's free to our employees, but we do have an additional cost for some classes."

A professional staff is on-site to answer questions and help create personalized fitness plans. "We wanted to make sure it was easy and accessible for employees, so they wouldn't have to go outside HP to work out," she said. "Convenience was key."

All the companies stressed that participation is voluntary. "Employees are encouraged, not pushed, to come," said Minix.

Challenges and costs

Finding locations for these clubs can be difficult. "Space can be a challenge," said Club One's Vanderluit. "But we find when the health of the company is a priority, they find a space."

The cost of creating a facility can vary considerably, depending on the amenities desired. Having an outside vendor manage the facility can also add to overhead costs. Other cost variables include charging for membership and programming.

"Participation is higher when employees are charged a nominal fee, because they attach a value to it," said Vanderluit. A typical fee is \$15 to \$20 a month. "It's just enough to get them to commit, but it's not enough to be cost-prohibitive."

To make the club a success, Vanderluit emphasizes the critical importance of corporate permission. "If there isn't a culture of permission, employees are not going to use it," she said. "Companies can go to great lengths to create something, but if (management's) true motivation is reducing health care costs, they have to create a culture of health. If it doesn't start at the top, it's not going to be very effective."

Providing good returns

The return on investment for these clubs seems to be substantial, although quantifiable results are hard to pin down. For example, Motorola Inc. saw a \$3.93 return for every dollar it spent on health care support, according to Club One.

"They reduced lifestyle health care-related costs by 2.5 percent for fitness center participants, while nonparticipants increased costs by 18 percent during the same period," said Vanderluit. **Chevron Corp.** saw a 54 percent decrease in lost work days for fitness center participants during 2004 compared with 2003.

"We believe it is a very good return on our money," said Safeway's Massingill. "It's good for employee morale and motivation, and we find people perform better in all aspects of their life when they feel better."

Overall, organizations that have created health clubs find them beneficial. "Especially today, with health care costs rising and companies struggling to provide health care benefits to their employees, it just makes good business sense to incorporate something that says you value that employee, which is your biggest asset," HP's Dixon said.