Employers make worker wellness a priority – now, to get employees to follow suit

By Lisa Gable

Our physical and economic health are linked, and that represents a competitive problem for the American economy. Half of an individual’s health status results from their lifestyle – more than genetics and environment combined. But too many Americans lead lifestyles that undermine our health, increasing employer costs and decreasing productivity. A study released this month by the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation shows that large employers are investing in a solution – workplace wellness programs.

Aside from the impact on individuals and their families, how much does it cost an employer when their employees do not lead a healthy, physically active lifestyle? When you take into account higher insurance and worker compensation premiums as well as reduced productivity and efficiency, the pricetag represent a significant competitive disadvantage. For a company with 30,000 employees, the cost comes to almost $10 million a year. For 100,000 employees, it’s $25 million – often enough to build a state-of-the-art plant capable of employing over 100 people.

A big chunk of these health-related costs are a consequence of our nation’s growing level of obesity – responsible for nearly 40 million lost workdays, 239 million restricted activity days, and 63 million doctors’ visits by employees annually. Not only is the economic cost of obesity high, it’s getting higher all the time. In fact, its cost to the U.S. economy has doubled over the past 10 years – four times the inflation rate. For companies suffering these kinds of costs, wellness programs represent a potential bonanza. And where better to encourage wellness than at the workplace – where workers spend about 25 percent of their time?

The good news is that employers are demonstrating a serious commitment to improving the health of their workforce. The Workplace Wellness Evaluation 2010 (prepared for the Foundation by the National Business Group on Health) found that a majority of the Foundation’s corporate members evaluated have comprehensive wellness strategies in place, with the vast majority having the support and endorsement of top-level executives. Among the companies evaluated, on average at least 90 percent of
employees have access to a weight management program and nutrition education classes, and over 80 percent have access to physical fitness programs. Eighty-four percent of these large employers offer health assessments to their employees, and 74 percent also offer health assessments to employees’ spouses and dependents.

The even better news is that we are already seeing progress as a result of workplace wellness initiatives. Employers tracking year-to-year results saw an average 3.4 percentage point increase in employees having a healthy weight. What’s more, they reported a 4.4 percentage point increase in employees engaging in physical activity, and a 7.9 point increase in the percentage of employees who eat nutritiously.

The bad news? At this point, employers are still struggling to engage employees in corporate wellness programs. It was a challenge for every employer in the study. While participation rates were fairly high in health assessments (44 percent), on-site fitness facilities (28 percent) and company-sponsored weight-loss contests (26 percent), no other programs – including nutrition education classes, coaching for physical activity, weight management programs and gym membership subsidies – attracted the participation of as much as a quarter of employees.

You can provide employees with wellness programs, but can you get them to make full use of them? A lot of employers are certainly trying. Fifty-eight percent offer cash rewards to employees who achieve a healthy weight or make progress toward it. Almost 80 percent offer nutritious food choices and smaller portions in the cafeteria. More than 80 percent reported they have environments that encourage physical activity in the workplace. That includes walking paths, open and attractive stairwells, and signage to encourage activity.

Employers in the study don’t seem to be shy about promoting wellness, including print materials and visible promotions at the worksite. And the encouragement starts at the top; in most companies, senior corporate leadership communicates with employees about the benefits of a healthy weight.

While improving the health of Americans and reducing obesity is an urgent matter, positive results cannot be expected overnight. Companies engaged in wellness programs are participating in a marathon, not a sprint. The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation will be repeating this workplace wellness evaluation annually for the next two years. When companies are measuring progress over time, they can expect to see improvements that will have positive impact on the health of the workforce.

Employers are investing resources in workplace wellness. Senior executives are investing their time. They are already seeing some results – and can expect to see more.

Lisa Gable is executive director of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, a first-of-its kind coalition that brings together more than 130 retailers, food and beverage manufacturers, restaurants, sporting goods and insurance companies, a professional sports organization, NGOs, trade associations, and the U.S. Army.