

AUSTIN BUSINESS JOURNAL

IN DEPTH: INSURANCE & EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Companies find value in work-life wellness programs

Greg Gosdin
Special to the Austin Business Journal

A far cry from the three-martini lunches of yesteryear, employer-sponsored wellness programs quickly are gaining muscle among Austin companies.

From on-site running tracks to company-sponsored yoga classes and chair massages, local employers are investing in initiatives that encourage a healthy, well-balanced lifestyle for their employees.

"We believe that people who are emotionally, physically and spiritually well perform better at work and at home," says Laura Adams, benefits operations manager at Progressive Corp., which operates a call center in Austin.

When the Cleveland, Ohio-based insurance provider announced its intent in July to add 148 new positions to its call center here, the recruitment package offered more than steady wages and medical/dental benefits. Progressive employees enjoy an on-site fitness center, a quiet room with relaxation audio tapes, and access to free counseling, health screenings and educational opportunities.

Adams says that Progressive also offers free health risk appraisals and a "10k a Day" program. The company hands out pedometers to employees who are encouraged to walk at least 10,000 steps a day for raffle prizes.

Hoover's Inc., an Austin-based business information provider, brings in a masseuse every month who offers chair massages to employees, according to the company's communications and publicity director, Lisa Glass. Though employees pay for sessions with the masseuse, Glass says staff members like the convenience of having the service on site.

"Our employees are our greatest asset," she says. "The company strives to create an environment where they can do their best work. Bringing on-site massages to employees once a month is a convenience we are happy to offer, and it has proven to be a big success. The sign-up list always fills up quickly."

She adds that Hoover's also has an agreement with a local gym to provide discounted memberships for employees.

Round Rock-based Dell Inc., which employs about 16,000 in the Austin area, has incorporated several athletic programs into its employee wellness program, giving some local fitness centers a run for their money.

"We are a fitness-oriented culture, and Dell is committed to being at the forefront of that," says Colleen Ryan, a company spokesperson.

She says the company has two fitness facilities and an outdoor track at the Round Rock campus and a fitness center at the campus on Parmer Lane. Dell even offers dancing, cycling and running classes, as well as weight-loss programs.

Bill McCann of the Lower Colorado River Authority says the management team at the river authority believes that it "just makes good sense" for employers to provide wellness programs. In addition to providing a variety of fitness activities, this year LCRA is administering free flu shots for its employees.

Corporate environments that support healthy living seem to foster like-minded initiatives among the employees who work there. Running enthusiasts at both Dell and LCRA established marathon training or jogging clubs. Additionally, the employees at LCRA -- through an in-house activities committee -- rallied to purchase most of the equipment offered in the company's multipurpose center, which offers basketball, volleyball, weightlifting and other fitness activities.

Yet, corporate-sponsored wellness programs do not always dwell on physical fitness. Some companies take measures to ensure their employees have ways to manage mental stress as well.

Katie B. Smith is an Austin-area yoga instructor who stays busy these days leading on-site classes at various corporate locations.

"More and more, the pace of life is getting faster, and people need meditation to handle it all," Smith says. "I'm teaching a lot more at office buildings. The owners of an office building will hire me and offer the classes as a perk for their tenants."

"I teach at a lot of law firms," she says.

The yoga classes also have encouraged better relations among employees, according to Smith.

"One company was having trouble with communication issues at meetings," Smith says. "People weren't getting along; there was a lot of conflict. So, we just did exercises on opening the throat. Through that, we learned about the link between mind and body. It's a much healthier approach, and you empower your employees."

Some companies have other creative ways of fostering positive work environments. Austin-based Obsidian Software Inc. offers flexible work hours so that employees can avoid rush-hour traffic. It also offers company-subsidized meals and healthy foods and drinks for anyone putting in a late night.

Wellness programs and other morale and productivity-increasing "intangibles" are becoming a part of Austin's corporate culture, placing it on par with the rest of the country, according to a recent American Management Association survey.

The number of corporate-sponsored wellness programs in the United States has increased 31 percent in the past year, the survey says.

Those programs include smoking cessation initiatives, blood pressure management, stress management, nutrition, and exercise and fitness.

"Dell's culture is one where health and well-being are very much supported and encouraged," Ryan says. "Every week, hundreds of our employees attend classes or participate in activities."

Smith believes non-traditional wellness initiatives are on the rise as well.

"I think you're going to see more and more of it," Smith says.

GREG GOSDIN is an Austin-based freelance writer.

© 2003 American City Business Journals Inc.

→ [Web reprint information](#)

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.