

Wellness Games Encourage a Fitter Workforce

By John Tozzi on July 19, 2012

This spring the city of Charlotte challenged its employees to log their workouts on a website that tallied points for each department. Trash talk flew over e-mail and spilled into the hallways of City Hall. If Human Resources was in the lead, “Budget would come back with a reply-all, saying ‘We’ll walk at lunch,’” recalls Christina Fath, the city’s wellness administrator. A total of 469 municipal employees took part in the six-week challenge—nearly double the number of participants in years past. This year’s group logged 8,800 hours of exercise—equal to almost half an hour per employee per day.

More employers are catching on to what Charlotte discovered: Tying workplace wellness programs to online games or social media lights a fire under workers as no number of posters in the break room can. “That social aspect creates some level of accountability,” says Brad Bell, an associate professor of HR at Cornell University. “You know that if you don’t show up, people are going to notice.”

Like many large employers, Charlotte is self-insured, so health savings accrue to the city’s bottom line. Getting staff to take care of themselves isn’t easy. In a recent survey of 512 employers by Towers Watson and the National Business Group on Health, companies called workers’ bad habits their biggest challenge to keeping health benefits affordable and cited lack of engagement as the toughest obstacle to changing employee behavior. Charlotte started working with wellness provider Provant Health Solutions in 2011 and now offers workers premium discounts to get health screenings and coaching.

A small industry has emerged to jazz up wellness programs. San Francisco startup Keas runs a website where its clients’ employees can form online teams of up to six players and compete to earn points by eating better, working out more, and managing stress. Participants are also rewarded for taking online health quizzes, an activity that proved surprisingly addictive, says Keas co-founder Adam Bosworth. “People would literally spend hours a day taking tens and tens of quizzes,” he says. Keas had to limit quiz time to 15 minutes per day, Bosworth says. “The HR people, frankly, were not thrilled to see people spending an hour a day learning about their health.”

Keas has about 30 clients, most with 1,000 to 10,000 workers, who pay \$15 per employee per year. Some employers offer money or rewards to the best players, but Bosworth says companies experience similar results when the only prize is bragging rights. “We do tell them not to overpay,” he says. “At the end of the day, it’s the social support of the game that keeps people playing.”

Fitbit, a San Francisco company that makes a pinky-size wireless gadget that helps people track their walking and other activity, didn’t target the corporate wellness market but quickly got pulled into it. In early 2010, six months after the \$99.95 Fitbit went on sale, semiconductor company Tokyo Electron bought one for each of the 1,100 employees at its U.S. subsidiary.

Since then, Fitbit has supplied hundreds of employers, including 25 Fortune 500 companies, says Amy McDonough, Fitbit's director of business development. The novelty factor draws in employees who wouldn't ordinarily participate, especially gadget-happy men, she says. A study in progress involving staff at one insurance company suggests participants take 40 percent more steps six months into the program. And the website encourages competition without forcing workers to get too personal, McDonough says: "You're not sharing your weight with all your colleagues."

At Coinstar, the Fitbits helped increase participation in its walking challenge to 57 percent of employees, up from 42 percent the previous year, says HR chief Raquel Karls. About 1,600 employees have formed teams of five to walk 2,000 miles—the distance from the company's first Redbox DVD kiosk in Bloomington, Minn., to its first Coinstar kiosk in San Francisco. That works out to some 12,000 steps, or six or seven miles, per day per employee over 60 days.

Karls says tracking the challenge online helps build team spirit among Coinstar's employees, who are spread among offices in Chicago and Bellevue, Wash., as well as field technicians across the country. "Everyone's coming up with funny names for their teams," she says. "There's one team called SpongeBob Slowpants."

On top of diet and exercise, one of the biggest drivers of health costs is people who don't take their medicine for chronic conditions like high blood pressure or cholesterol. Katrina Firlik, a neurosurgeon in Norwalk, Conn., co-founded HealthPrize Technologies to use incentives to get people to stay on their meds. Pharmaceutical companies are currently testing the program with patients being treated for hypertension and acne.

HealthPrize draws on the same psychology that gets people to play slot machines or join airline loyalty programs. Patients are rewarded with points when they refill prescriptions or log on to record taking their daily dose. A leaderboard displays screen names and point totals, with prizes such as a \$100 gift certificate to Starbucks or Amazon.com. Firlik says it's the game playing rather than the value of the reward that makes HealthPrize work. "There was a woman who was going to have major surgery the next day, and she e-mailed us that she was worried she was going to slip in her rankings," she says.

The bottom line: Companies are using games and gadgets to get employees to kick bad habits, the biggest challenge to controlling health-care costs.