

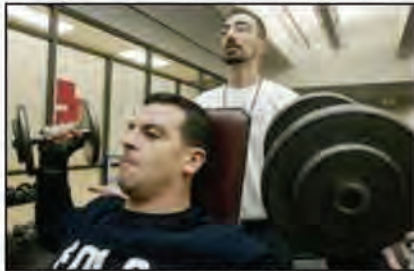


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In-house fitness programs are workouts in progress **Companies' wellness initiatives can cut their health-care costs.**



Kerri Holt, an employee in Ford Motor Credit Co.'s customer service department, works out at the company's wellness center with encouragement from wellness program manager Jamie Waggoner. MANDY LUNN / STAFF

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When
Brentwood-
based

Comdata Corp. President Gary Krow started working out with the trainers at Franklin's D1 Sports, he had no idea the effect it would have on his company.

What started as Krow's throwing some curveballs into his own workout routine evolved into several members of upper management training together at the D1 Facility. That team-building experience lasted several months and eventually led to a remodel of the Comdata fitness facility and bringing D1 in to run it, spearheading some serious involvement from other employees.

D1 owner Will Bartholomew says, "If you don't show up for your workout, we come to your office and get you.

"The hand's-on approach, the accountability, making sure you get the people fired up and excited about their health is really what we stress," Bartholomew said.

Krow knows first-hand the importance of getting daily physical activity. He saw the positive results that came from managers' training together, so he decided to provide that opportunity to all his employees — free of charge.

"It needed to be cost-effective, so I started talking to the guys at D1," Krow said. "We have special assistance programs, classes, personal training, yoga, weight lifting and programs for everybody. I get a lot of positive feedback from the employees."

Krow isn't alone in the corporate push to keep employees healthier, physically and mentally. Statistics show that rising health-care costs are driven to a large extent by obesity — one health issue that, unlike many diseases, can be prevented.

According to Wellness Councils of America, for every \$1 a company spends on a wellness program, it saves as much as \$3 in health-care expenses.

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Bartholomew says that creating a healthy lifestyle can lower an employee's health-care costs by as much as 10% over a three-year period.

"A company spends \$5,000 on an average employee's benefits," Bartholomew said. "You are looking at saving \$500 to \$600 per employee. For bigger companies, that's a lot of money. But it takes a while because there are habits you have to start breaking. People quit smoking. We've had people lose 30 pounds. That can really change a person's lifestyle and they feel better and are able to perform better at work."

LuAnn Heinen, the director of the Institute on the Cost and Health Effects of Obesity at the National Business Group on Health, agrees that there is a relationship between employee fitness and health-care costs, but she says it goes beyond just health and costs. There also is research showing that employees who have access to some sort of wellness program or facility at work perform better on the job.

"The more health risks you have, the higher the cost," she said. "There's been an increasing amount of work done on the productivity impact of risk factors such as obesity, low levels of cardio fitness and other factors. Studies have looked at impacts on job performance, and even with moderate physical activity, your job performance improves."

Employees who don't participate in workplace fitness programs have higher rates of absenteeism, she said.

Shawn McGoldrick, who works at Ford Motor Credit Co. in Franklin, said if it weren't for his company's on-site fitness facility, he never would have time to work out. "I have two little kids at home, so I can't do anything before or after work," he said. "I start at 6 a.m., and when I get home the little ones are all about daddy, so I can't ever find the time to work out at home."

Thanks to his company's program, he is training for the upcoming Music City Marathon in April. "(If I couldn't) run on my lunch break, I wouldn't be able to do it," he said.

Kerri Holt, who works in Ford Motor Credit's customer service department, said daily workouts at work had helped her shed 22 pounds since August.

"Once you leave work, you have so many other things to do," she said while walking on a treadmill. "I couldn't do it without this place."

Other companies help employees pay for YMCA memberships to stay fit.

Vail Ross, director of sales at Smith Travel Research in Hendersonville, said she jumped at the chance to join when her firm agreed to pay half the membership fee.

"A lot of our upper management goes to the Y on their lunch breaks, and we have a group of women who go to spin classes (a type of workout) together," she said. "You'll get an (instant message) that says: 'Are you going to be in class tonight?' And that gives you an extra incentive to go. It creates a second community within the office."

Despite the trend of more corporations' promoting fitness, participation remains relatively low. About 12% to 15% of Comdata's employees work out in-house, whereas Ford Credit, which charges a nominal fee to use its facility, has about 10% participation. Heinen said that's where additional incentives come into play.

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"In-house facilities are wonderful, but there are people who will just never use them," she said. "It's asking a lot of the employer to implement all of this, but in order for it to be successful, you have to offer the gamut."

Among Fortune 500 companies, Heinen said, more than half offer some kind of wellness incentives, and that number has increased significantly over the last five years. Many of those companies, she said, go beyond just offering workout facilities. IBM, for example, pays employees \$250 in cash for meeting wellness goals, and participation rates top 70%.

Krow at Comdata said he would like to see his company's participation numbers go up, but that the program was already meeting its original goals and paying off financially.

"We started the wellness programs late in 2004 and ... 2005 was the best year in the history of our company. I am not saying this is directly responsible for that, but I think it's just a given that if our employees feel like we care about them and are doing everything we can to help them, they are going to work better.

"I know I am that way," Krow said. •

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