

# Wellness Programs: Good Fiscal Sense, Good Physical Health

By Lindsey McFarren

**M**ost aviation-related businesses are looking for creative ways to save money and slash spending in these difficult economic times. Some companies have reluctantly cut or reduced employee benefits. These cuts have come in the form of decreased employer contributions to health insurance premiums, less-robust insurance programs with higher co-pays and coinsurance rates, and other health program reductions. But with a little work, your company can actually *increase* the overall health and well-being of your employees while spending *less* money! Read on to learn more about workplace wellness programs and discover how one National Air Transportation Association member company is implementing a wellness program for its employees.

## Goal: Preventative Maintenance

Let's look at a wellness program in terms we all understand: aviation lingo. Establishing a wellness program at your company is like offering each employee free or subsidized preventative maintenance (health screening and weight loss measures) in order to avoid a premature engine overhaul or other expensive maintenance procedure (heart bypass surgery or adult onset diabetes). Wellness programs vary from one company to another, but they share the same ultimate goal: to lower the incidence (and therefore costs) of significant healthcare services

through promotion of healthy living and preventative services.

## Potential Benefits

The estimates of financial savings from wellness programs vary from one company to another. Admittedly, many of the benefits are "soft" and difficult to quantify. However, most companies with wellness programs report the following benefits:

- Reduction in sick leave/absenteeism
- Reduction in health care claims (more than one-third of emergency room visits may be unnecessary, according to a report by the American Heart Association)
- Reduction in worker's compensation and disability claims

Tim Sullivan, COO and director of operations for Chantilly Air, an aviation services company providing aircraft maintenance, charter, management, sales, storage, and fueling in Manassas, Va., makes another important observation: "Individuals in the aviation industry, including pilots, salespersons, mechanics, and other employees, have fairly specialized knowledge. Most aviation companies are small businesses. One specialized employee calling off sick has a much bigger impact on my organization—and probably most aviation businesses—than a single sick employee at a larger or less-specialized company. Decreasing absenteeism is one benefit we hope to see as our program matures."

If you prefer hard figures, the same American Heart Association report claims companies with a

wellness program can see a return on investment of \$3 to \$15 on every dollar invested, with savings realized within 12 to 18 months of program implementation.

## Program Targets

Not surprisingly, many wellness programs focus on eliminating obesity, smoking cessation, and stress management. The American Heart Association says obesity-related diseases account for almost 10 percent of all medical spending in the United States. That means as a nation we spend about \$147 billion a year on obesity-related diseases. Three chronic conditions caused or worsened by obesity—asthma, diabetes, and hypertension—create 164 million lost work days per year. The heart association believes these lost work days cost employers \$30 billion or more per year.

## Program Menu

The distance a company goes to implement a wellness program varies widely from one business to another. There's no fixed definition of "wellness program" where you can look at aspects of a wellness program like a menu—one of the healthiest menus you'll ever see! Here are just a few items on a wellness program menu, ranging from very simple and inexpensive activities to items requiring a little more commitment:

- Draft and distribute a newsletter with health-related tips, details on available fitness activities, and low-calorie or low-fat recipes. There's no need to recreate

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the wheel; you can find good resources at the Wellness Council of America ([www.welcoa.org](http://www.welcoa.org)) or similar websites with free content. Personalize these newsletters with success stories from your own company!

- Clear the vending machine of all but a few “bad-for-you” items. Instead offer 100-calorie pack snacks, low-fat cereal bars, and other reasonable snack options. (I don’t recommend touching the soda machine. Although most people won’t complain about missing a Snickers bar, you will almost certainly have a mutiny if you remove all soda.)
- Consider a smoke-free workplace, including all or most outdoor areas. Take a look at the demographics of your organization. Do you have more non-smokers than smokers? This step can be very easy or quite painful depending on the makeup of your organization.
- Organize on-site fitness classes. Look for a personal trainer, yoga instructor, or other fitness expert and set up a class in your lunchroom, storage room, hangar, or wherever you have space.
- Sponsor an on-site weight loss program. Weight Watchers (my healthy-living promotion organization of choice) has a Weight Watchers at Work program, where a company rep visits your location once a week to hold a regular meeting for your employees.
- Subsidize gym memberships or recognized weight-loss programs. The Gold’s Gym Corporate Wellness Program is a customizable wellness solution. Gold’s offers a range of options, including company full payment of employee memberships, payroll deductions, or group rate plans. Other gyms have similar programs.

### Program Case Study

NATA member Chantilly Air began implementing a wellness program in early 2009. The organization started by researching other wellness programs and surveying employees. Chantilly Air found employees shared two main concerns: privacy of personal health information and fears of being told how to live their lives. Sullivan continues to work to allay these fears by communicating with employees and educating them on health-related issues.

Chantilly Air has implemented the following aspects of a wellness program in the past year:

- Distributed medical desk references to all employees to help them and their families determine when medical assistance is needed. (An estimated 60 percent of all primary care visits may be inappropriate, as individuals seek medical assistance for minor illnesses that would resolve themselves quickly without medical intervention.)
- Started a monthly health newsletter.
- Provided confidential health screenings of basic information like blood pressure, weight, blood sugar, bone density, and cholesterol levels.

Sullivan offered this advice: “The key to a successful wellness program is to provide incentives to employees who choose to participate, not penalize those who choose not to.” In fact, employment laws may even prohibit penalizing employees who choose not to participate in a wellness program as it can be viewed as a form of discrimination based on health status.

Instead, Chantilly Air rewards employees who participate in the confidential screenings, which the company pays for annually for employees and household family

members. Chantilly Air’s policy is to pay for 50 percent of the employee’s health care premium; however, employees who participate in the screenings receive an additional incentive of the company paying 75 percent of their health care premium. “By offering this incentive we achieved a 95 percent participation rate in the health screenings,” Sullivan said.”

Chantilly Air will conduct the screenings again in 2010 and ask each employee to choose one unhealthy parameter or “wellness objective” and develop a plan to correct or improve the condition. The company will use a third-party healthcare provider to help employees develop individualized plans to improve and track their progress. Chantilly Air will not know which employees chose to lower their weight versus quit smoking, but it will know how many employees are working on each parameter and how they are progressing. Not only is this useful for developing and tracking metrics related to their wellness program, but it can help Chantilly Air tailor its program to its employees. If a considerable number of individuals are focusing on weight loss, the company could consider a Weight Watchers at Work program or a weight-loss challenge. If smoking cessation is the focus of most employees, it could consider subsidizing prescription smoking-cessation medications or other smoking-cessation aids.

### Ten Steps to Establishing a Wellness Program

The Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA), at [www.welcoa.org](http://www.welcoa.org), outlines ten steps small businesses should take to implement a wellness program. However, WELCOA is quick to point out that a one-size-fits-all wellness program does not fit all businesses. You

should customize these steps to fit your own organization.

### **Step One:** **Top Management Buy-In**

If you are the president or chief executive officer of your company and you agree with what you have read in the article, congratulations! This step is easy. Write a letter to your staff introducing the wellness program concept, announce that your organization will be pursuing such a program, and demonstrate your commitment to the company's program as well as your personal commitment to health and wellness.

But what if you aren't in a management position and your leadership thinks a wellness program is a feel-good, warm-and-fuzzy concept that there just isn't time or resources to implement? WELCOA prescribes several strategies for dealing with reluctant management, including making a business case for a wellness program, getting your leadership together with other managers who have implemented programs, or asking employees to share their own health-related success stories. In fact, WELCOA has found employee testimonials to be one of the most powerful arguments for a wellness program.

### **Step Two:** **Establish a Wellness Team**

Every company needs a wellness leader, an individual or group of individuals to be cheerleaders, researchers, writers, and more. Here's where customization comes in. A large company might have an entire wellness team of several individuals, assigning a few to the health newsletter, some to organizing company fitness events, and others to tracking employee progress in the program. A small company (the majority of NATA member companies) might

have just one individual to fill these roles. I suggest finding an individual that is already passionate about health and wellness. Do you have an employee who has found success in quitting smoking or significant weight loss? How about a runner who has recently achieved a new distance goal—a 10K, half marathon, full marathon, or just around the block? Find someone who is excited about healthy living and ask him or her to lead the charge. I can tell you from personal experience—that type of excitement is infectious!

### **Step Three:** **Assessing Employee Interest**

WELCOA suggests conducting an employee survey early in the implementation process. Even as adults, we all dislike being told what to do, especially with something as personal as our own health and lifestyle. Asking your employees to share their concerns with a wellness program or general health topics can help you address their fears early on and also give your wellness program direction.

### **Step Four:** **Health Screening**

Next in the ten-step process is offering employees free health screening. This will help the individuals realize their own health status while helping you develop the details of your wellness program. Chantilly Air offers free health screenings not only to their employees, but also to employees' spouses or family members. You don't need ultra-sophisticated (read: expensive) screening for this step to be productive. WELCOA says basic screening can cost as little as \$25 per individual.

### **Step Five:** **Physical Activity Campaign**

We all know that to get or stay healthy, we need to get or stay

moving. Organize physical activity challenges for your company, and I'm not talking about a once-a-year "corporate cup" event. I'm suggesting regular, frequent competitions. For large companies, pass out inexpensive pedometers and pit one department against another for a "most steps in a month" contest. For smaller companies, establish individual competitions like number of days at the gym in a month or perfect attendance at on-site fitness classes. Have small but meaningful prizes for each winner, such as sporting goods store gift cards, company water bottles, or T-shirts.

### **Step Six:** **Hold "Lunch and Learns"**

WELCOA says hosting an employee seminar with a healthy lunch prepared before their eyes by a local chef is a guaranteed home run! Look for local resources for your lunch and learns: running or biking club representatives, fitness center employees, or dieticians. My former employer held a lunch program with a local biking club representative who described safe road-sharing guidelines, passed out local bike route maps, and provided tips for biking to work.

### **Step Seven:** **Establish an In-House Health Library**

Chantilly Air took this step literally by providing each employee with a healthcare desk reference manual. Your company might opt for a bookshelf in your facility dedicated to healthcare resources, healthy recipe books, fitness DVDs, and more. Consider allowing employees to check out these resources to use at home. Do you have a company website or intranet for your operations manuals, human resources policies, and so on? Include health, nutrition, and fitness resources on your website

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so off-site employees can benefit from your library.

### Step Eight: Publish a Quarterly Health Newsletter

We've discussed this step a bit above, but WELCOA adds that including a short quiz about the information in each newsletter can help ensure absorption of the details. WELCOA suggests collecting quiz results and awarding a prize to a randomly selected employee with correct answers.

### Step Nine: Implement Health-Promoting Policies


WELCOA includes non-smoking policies, drug and alcohol-free workplace, and other mandates in

this step. As aviation businesses, we are typically drug and alcohol-free already. But consider other health-promoting policies such as required seat belt use in company vehicles (or company-rented vehicles), taxi or shuttle service home from company social events where alcohol is served, and winter-weather hours if you live in a harsh climate.

### Step Ten: Promote Community Health Efforts

Have your wellness team keep an eye out for community health events, such as races, health fairs, and more. Include a listing of local events in your newsletters or on your company website. Encourage

employees to participate by forming training teams for races or car-pools for health fairs or seminars.

A wellness program doesn't have to be complicated to be effective. Look for creative but inexpensive incentives for healthy living among your employees. In this economy, maintaining a healthy workforce is a very effective way to reduce costs. Wellness programs make good fiscal sense through good physical health! 


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*Rhona Sacks, an attorney and business coach, is the founder and president of Legal Life Settlements, a mergers and acquisitions advisory company specializing in helping retiring business owners extract maximum value from their hidden business assets. More information is available at (650) 226-3324 or [www.legallifeselements.com](http://www.legallifeselements.com).*

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