



Opinion

The ROI Of Wellness

Tony Zook 04.24.06, 6:00 AM ET
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It should come as no surprise that healthy employees boost a company's bottom line. They experience less sick time, take fewer disability days and suffer lesser risk of premature deaths. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than 75% of employers' health care costs and productivity losses are related to employee lifestyle choices. And a \$1 investment in wellness programs saves \$3 in health care costs, according to the Wellness Council of America.

It is good business for companies to help provide employees with the information and tools that will empower them to adopt healthy behaviors. However, according to a 2006 study published in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*, less than 20% of U.S. employers offer lifestyle modification services. Even more surprisingly, just four percent offer tobacco cessation services.

AstraZeneca's wellness program is built around the Gold Standards for Cancer Prevention developed by the CEO Roundtable on Cancer, a nonprofit group that evolved from the National Dialogue on Cancer established by former President George H.W. Bush. The *CEO Cancer Gold Standard* is a result of this collaboration, and marks the first-ever accreditation process established for employers to take action in five key areas of health: diet and nutrition, physical activity, tobacco cessation, screening for early detection of cancer and access to quality medical treatment and clinical trials.

AstraZeneca is one of six groups--Johnson & Johnson, GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis Pharmaceuticals, OSI Pharmaceuticals and the American Cancer Society--achieving *Gold Standard* accreditation.

They range from Johnson & Johnson's stop-smoking program to the American Cancer Society's colon cancer screening campaign.

AstraZeneca offers on-site screening programs for breast, prostate and colon cancer, as well as blood pressure and cholesterol measurement. Through the breast cancer screening program, more than 30 malignancies--most of them in their early stages--have been detected. The company also provides smoking cessation courses, and health benefits cover the cost of prescription and *non-prescription medications* that help smokers break the habit. All AstraZeneca's facilities are smoke-free zones.

AstraZeneca employees save \$50 a month on their health benefits payments if they participate in an annual health risk assessment, which surveys health habits and then provides a written appraisal and recommendations based on the identified risks.

In 2004 alone, over 6,000 active and retired AstraZeneca employees who were identified as high-risk for chronic diseases received free condition-management telephone consultations. This group of employees comprises only about 20% of the workforce, but is responsible for 80% of the lost productivity and total health care costs. Employees in the condition management program had fewer emergency room visits and hospital admissions.

AstraZeneca is by no means unique in appreciating the "ROI of wellness." Here are some examples of what other *Gold Standard* accredited companies have done to promote healthy behaviors to their employees:

The American Cancer Society has an online employee volunteer community, where employees can sign up to drive fellow employees to colon cancer screenings. It also gives employees postcards to send to their loved ones to remind them to get screened too.

Novartis Pharmaceuticals offers a "buy-four-get-one-free" card that gives all employees incentive to choose the healthier option in the cafeteria, as well as an on-site nutritionist who consults with employees one-on-one at no cost.

Smoking cessation initiatives have helped Johnson & Johnson reduce its percentage of smokers from 12 percent in 1999 to 5 percent in 2005, well below the national average of 20 percent.

GlaxoSmithKline offers an on-site fitness center, walking trails, fitness-focused lunch-and-learns and recreation programs for children.

At OSI pharmaceuticals, an online *Cancer Access Network* program helps employees with cancer choose a physician, access resources and participate in clinical trials.

Together, the six *Gold Standard* accredited organizations reach approximately 270,000 people.

However, there are more than 130 million working Americans, many of whom would benefit greatly from increased corporate efforts to improve employee health.

The six *Gold Standard* accredited organizations have created solid examples of what employee health programs can look like. We are now challenging other companies to do the same for their employees.

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