

# More Micro, Less Soft

The software giant is leading the private sector in doing something about obese employees

Business Week - November 27, 2006

By Michelle Conlin

---

‘Steve Ballmer hates it when Microsoft loses. But for the screamingly competitive CEO, there is one single, glaring exception: the 61,100 pounds that have vanished from the bodies of 2,152 Microsoft Corp. (MSFT ) employees since 2002.

Alas, the eating season is upon us. And with the recent news that mouse jockeys are more supersized than ever, Microsoft and a growing number of companies are on the attack against fat. Two-thirds of Americans are overweight, with the problem adding an average 20% more in costs to company medical claims. Indeed, more than ever before, Cubicle Land is becoming a place of McMansion bodies and big backyards.

To fight back, employers are doing everything from ripping out elevators and installing stairs to building parking lots a five-minute walk away, as Sprint Nextel Corp. (S ) did at its Overland Park (Kan.) headquarters. But with Microsoft the biggest loser in Corporate America, the company’s pioneering on this front offers lessons in managing excess worker waistage.

Rather than simply adding tips on the low-cal life to in-house newsletter MicroNews, or popping for some Jenny Craig, Microsoft created a weight management benefit (employees already get free medical coverage). The software giant picks up 80% of the tab--up to \$6,000--for a comprehensive, clinical weight-loss program. Expensive, yes. But Cecily Hall, Microsoft’s director of U.S. benefits, says the company has already realized a one-to-one return on investment since the program began in 2002. “These people are coming off of prescription drugs, they’re seeing their primary care physician less, and not having as much hospitalization,” says Hall.

Microsoft’s weight management benefit includes up to a year’s worth of sessions with a personal trainer, behavioral and nutritional counseling, support groups, and medical supervision. Its war against weight started in 2002, about the same time Ballmer, then all puff and jowl, lost a fast 50 and turned taut and lean. His newly restructured physique was the inspiration of Redmond, and soon 800 Microsofties were

forgoing the logger-man portions in the cafeteria and subbing diet sodas for the free pop.

Today, the program is open to all employees who are obese, or who are clinically overweight and have at least two other diseases, such as hypertension and depression. A little over a year ago, Strohm Armstrong, 44, weighed 295 pounds, suffered from high blood pressure, and was on his way to Type 2 diabetes. He thought he’d never see a day past 70. But after worsening back problems in the fall of 2005, the 5-foot, 7-inch technical writer signed on and soon found himself in a special workout facility with private changing rooms to avoid locker room embarrassment.

Now, after a year of eating 2,000 calories a day, Armstrong has lost 116 pounds and is down to a hardbody 179. The back pain, high blood pressure, and threat of diabetes are gone. He runs 5K races, exercises at least five times a week, has a few chicken wings at the bar instead of a few dozen, and knows eating is often more about emotions than hunger.

For all the benefits Armstrong and others have gotten, some critics fear the creation of a new nanny corporation, where employers increasingly monitor personal issues that cost them money. But as long as companies are on the hook for health-care coverage, don’t expect their mothering to change anytime soon.’

---

Excerpted from Business Week – November 27, 2006, “*More Micro, Less Soft* The software giant is leading the private sector in doing something about obese employees” by Michelle Conlin. No affiliation or endorsement exists or is implied between Business Week and Weiser Choices.