

Work without stress?

Clif Bar offers classes and services to help employees relax

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by Marie-Anne Hogarth

Working at Clif Bar & Co., the Berkeley energy bar and drink company, may be the closest thing to corporate utopia.

Employees can bring their dogs and babies to work, get a haircut or a massage or have their car detailed at work, and they can even throw a load of laundry in the employee washing machine.

At Clif Bar, the 194 workers can exercise 30 minutes a day in the company gym, have a personal training session or take one of a suite of classes - from boot camp to swing dancing - offered on site. How about a life coaching session or a spin on one of the company's shiny red Schwinn bicycles?

"What we strive for is to reduce stress in the lives of our employees," says Janet Minix, the company's wellness manager. "So when I am out looking for concierge services, I am thinking, 'I am older now, and my children are grown, but I remember the struggles that I had, and I know what would make an employee or parent enjoy the weekend.'"

Clif says it spends an estimated \$1,000 per employee per year on its wellness program - more than the \$125 to \$300 per worker that various health promotion researchers recommend. Not all have the same features, but companies are offering more elaborate - and expensive - wellness programs. A survey of 3,000 employers by Mercer Health & Benefits, for example, found upticks between 2004 and 2006 in the use of health risk assessments, disease management and nurse advice lines among businesses with 10 to 4,999 employees.

"We know all the vendors are growing at double-digit rates," said Seth Serxner, principal with Mercer Human Resource Consulting. "We see more companies not just offering a health risk assessment, but also lifestyle management and other campaigns, screenings and services, such as health advocacy."

According to David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America, a nonprofit offering wellness resources to companies and cities, between 80 percent and 85 percent of businesses offer at least one health-promoting activity

during the year, and 10 percent to 15 percent offer more-sophisticated result-orientated programs, in which employees are classified into different groups based on their risks.

"Just because you've got the Great American Smoke-out or a fun run doesn't mean you are a healthy company," said Hunnicutt. "For the last 10 years people have offered programs, but now they are offering population health management, keeping people healthy from hire to retire."

Hunnicutt says companies offer three levels of incentives to encourage workers. Trinkets and T-shirts in the first year can elicit a 10 percent to 20 percent response and usually attract the already healthy.

Merchandise, such as movie tickets or \$25-\$50 gift certificates or tax-advantaged donations to health savings accounts, can achieve a 25 percent to 40 percent rate. The third level of incentive links wellness programs to health plan designs, offering employees a discount if they participate in a health risk assessment.

"Companies will announce health care premiums are going up \$250," he explains. "Then the company will say if you participate and complete a health risk assessment, we will wave the \$250 fee." This technique elicits a 90 percent to 95 percent participation rate.

Clif Bar doesn't measure the outcome of its program, which evolved over time because the company's work force of people in their 20s and 30s love mountain biking, hiking and other active sports.

"We had a gym and we had a trainer," says Minix, who joined Clif as an executive assistant to the founder. "I would ask for things. I would call different gyms and say, 'we want a yoga class, we want somebody to come two or three times a week for an hour-long class.'"

The company's profile contrasts with larger companies, such as Chevron Corp., which has a worker population that is 70

percent male, with an average age of 47. Older employees, forced to work longer as Social Security benefits diminish and health care costs rise, are among the drivers for corporate wellness programs.

Chevron offers many of the same amenities as Clif, including an option to work a nine-day, 80-hour schedule and on-site gym facilities, but the San Ramon company rolls out its program to 56,000 employees worldwide.

Chevron relies on technology, including a program that freezes computers periodically reminding employees to take breaks to avoid repetitive-stress injuries. "Safety moments" at the start of meetings urge workers to drink lots of water, avoid driving while using a mobile phone and not to walk while using their BlackBerry mobile devices.

Not that employees at smaller companies are immune to gentle prodding. Clif's two full-time and four contract trainers visit with employees who haven't been going to the gym or attending classes.

Clif trainer Joe Phillips says persistence pays off. He visited one employee for two years before that person began going to the gym and making life changes that led to a loss of 50 pounds in a year.

Although the company has its share of ultra-marathon runners and tri-athletes, it adapts events for the less intense. An annual "epiphany ride," based on the 175-mile bike ride founder Gary Erickson went on before starting the company, was developed into a company event with 150-, 100-, 60- and 30-mile versions. Between 80 and 90 people, including relatives and friends, took part in the last one.

"You have to invest in the infrastructure for these programs," said Dr. David Sobel, medical director for regional health education at The Permanente Medical Group. Although he adds that sometimes "the investment in the program is emblematic of a change in the work culture, and it is the set of expectations and the values that may be having the biggest impact, more than the actual program. It creates among peers an expectation that we are going to be healthier."

In general, companies can expect to see at least a \$3 return after three years for every \$1 they spend on workplace wellness, says health promotion guru Dr. Ron Goetzel,

director of the Institute for Health and Productivity Studies at Cornell University. This is the median when reviewing published studies, he adds, although these generally report positive results.

Clif sees benefits in recruiting and retaining employees. Turnover was at 8 percent in 2006, during a year it added 60 employees, a large amount of growth for a small company.

"I waited for this job for seven years," said Patrick Bush, a sales representative who raced mountain bikes professionally under the Clif name before joining the company last year. "I identified Clif as my ideal job after I moved from Southern California to the Bay Area seven years ago, but they were posturing to sell the company. I started racing to fill the gap. I kept getting better and turned pro. I started working at Clif in 2006."

Bush, who grew up in Santa Cruz, continues to race mountain bikes, although he's now on Clif Bar's amateur road cycling team.'

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