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getting fit

As more weight-loss success stories come to light, employee wellness programs grow increasingly popular

By KATE DAVIDSON Monitor staff

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Bruce Wyatt loved his candy and donut diet. The 59-year-old customer service representative at Concord Litho spent most of his work day at a desk and wasn't much for exercise. By last year, after 23 years with the company, his weight had topped 270 pounds.

When Concord Litho began offering a wellness program for employees, Wyatt decided to join up. Nutrition and fitness representatives from Workforce Wellness - a division of the Scott Lawson Group, a worksite safety consulting firm - visited the plant each week, took Wyatt's blood pressure and weight, and held group sessions on eating right and exercising.

After tossing the candy and donuts and taking daily walks with his wife, Wyatt shed more than 75 pounds in a little more than a year.

"I feel so much different," he said last week. "I'm like two sizes smaller in shirts. I've taken 6 inches off my waist."

"I feel like Jared," he added, comparing himself to Subway spokesman Jared Fogle, who lost 335 pounds eating the restaurant's low-calorie sandwiches.

Wyatt was one of several people recognized for his progress last week by Workforce Wellness, which contracts with local businesses to offer fitness and nutrition programs. It's been three years since the Scott Lawson Group began offering the wellness services, and the company has

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grown its roster to more than 25 businesses.

Improving and promoting employee wellness boosts productivity by making people happier and healthier, and it can push down insurance premiums for companies if healthier employees are making fewer major claims, said Lori Havener, the program's administrator. Support from the bosses is crucial for employees to make changes, and Havener said many companies are starting to see the benefits.

"For a wellness program to be successful . . . you have to have management really buying and endorsing and embracing it," she said.

The Scott Lawson Group has partnered with Comp-SIGMA insurance for years to offer worker's compensation insurance for member companies. The members came to Lawson three years ago and told him they liked what he had done to lower their worker's compensation insurance through workplace safety training, Havener said, but wanted to know how he could help with health insurance.

Lawson decided to partner with Patriot Insurance Company - now being taken over by MVP Health Insurance Company - to offer the wellness programs. Workforce Wellness now contracts directly with companies and insurance brokers to bring the program to more employees.

Workers first fill out an online health risk assessment, which reviews medical history, blood pressure, weight and body fat percentage. Companies that used Patriot Health Insurance also offered a financial incentive for employees, who got \$100 extra in their paychecks just for completing the health risk assessment.

Based on personal wellness goals, employees are referred to wellness coaches who provide tips on healthy eating or exercise options. The coaches also visit the companies, usually once a week, to take blood pressures or track weight loss and sometimes hold group sessions.

"We've done stir-fry cooking demos, physio ball classes," Havener said. "We had a lecture on Lyme disease by a nurse."

They also hold cholesterol and diabetes screening, flu clinics, wellness fairs, walking programs with pedometers, and weight loss challenges. The programs are all tested on Scott Lawson Group employees first, Havener said.

Havener and Lawson said they hope the award winners will attract more attention and encourage other employees to join up with companies that already offer the program. The change in attitude has been noticeable even in the last three years, Havener said.

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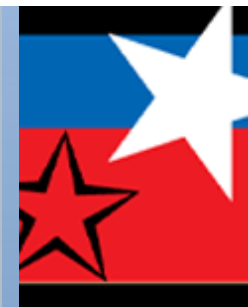
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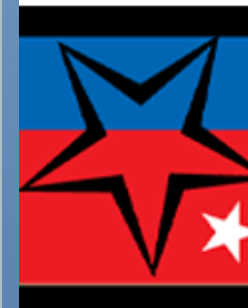
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