

Small businesses embrace wellness to help retain staffers

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG February 19, 2020



NEW YORK (AP) — Every month, the 30 staffers at Chris Boehlke’s public relations firm each get \$100 to pay for anything that contributes to their wellness. And not just for typical expenditures like gym memberships or yoga classes.

“You can get nails done, anything you feel is helping your overall well being,” says Boehlke, co-owner of San Francisco-based Bospar. The company also has flex time and a generous time off policy including 17 paid holidays each year.

As a result, Boehlke says, the 5-year-old company has lost only two staffers.

Many small business owners are starting wellness programs to help employees be healthier, happier and more likely to stay. Wellness efforts encompass a wide range of benefits and services, including gym subsidies, stipends for classes and activities and apps that help motivate staffers to exercise and take care of themselves. Owners are

aware that many big companies have wellness programs, an advantage when it comes to recruiting and retaining staffers.

Rob Wilson sees interest in wellness programs growing among his small business clients, and his company, human resources provider Employco, is focusing more on these programs.

“A lot of it so far has been online classes and health coaching, also a lot of online tools right now that employees can access anywhere to help them keep track of what they’re doing,” says Wilson, whose company is based in Westmont, Illinois.

“The companies doing it are really interested in keeping their employees,” he says.

They also want to care for staffers who can be sacrificing good health habits by working long and hard hours. At MonetizeMore, an advertising technology company, CEO Kean Graham has sensed that the sedentary lifestyle of his more than 100 staffers has taken a toll. He’s seen extended absences and depression, and staffers have said that they’ve gained weight.

“We came up with a steps program that measures everybody’s number of steps per month via their smart watches or apps on their phones,” says Graham, whose company is based in Victoria, British Columbia. After several months, he saw an improvement in absenteeism and spirits.

The 100 employees at Birch Coffee get stipends toward a variety of wellness activities, and the company pays for monthly massages at its 14 New York stores. Birch is trying to offset the physical and mental stress staffers encounter, co-founder Jeremy Lyman says.

“Each barista engages with hundreds of people every day,” Lyman says. “Mentally, it can take its toll, and you’re standing on your feet for seven hours.”

Some owners sign up with companies that run structured wellness programs. These can include encouraging staffers to take care of their health with weight-loss and smoking cessation aids, health screening and coaching and apps to track steps, calories and other metrics. Some businesses have point systems and competitions to reward staffers.

Nearly all the 86 employees at Connor & Gallagher OneSource take part in its program created by a wellness software company, says Kayla Roeske, the director of client wellness at the Lisle, Illinois-based human resources and employee benefits

firm. She finds that staffers are more likely to participate fully when the program is presented to them in a positive way, rather than the company coming across as “Big Brother” trying to control them. The company doesn’t get individual data but instead “we can see aggregate data from an organizational standpoint that tells us where we are year to year,” she says.

Owners need to steer clear of being overbearing and negative about employees’ health. While a boss might be happier if staffers didn’t smoke or if they lost weight, if the company comes across as intrusive, it could lose good employees.

“If you start to push decision-making and judgment on these things, that’s where you may begin to cross the line,” says David Lewis, CEO of OperationsInc, an HR provider based in Norwalk, Connecticut. He advises that owners offer education and make tools available, but avoid too much cheerleading.

“If you say, ‘we want you to live a better life,’ to some extent employees are going to take that, but they’ll be skeptical if it’s syrupy,” Lewis says. He suggests owners speak to staffers about realities, like the need to lower health insurance costs.

Owners may need to be creative about funding their wellness efforts, especially when they include health insurance, a benefit many small businesses can’t afford. Brent Frederick, founder of Jester Concepts, a Minneapolis restaurant operator, includes a voluntary 3% surcharge on guest checks to pay for health and mental health insurance. Frederick has 250 employees among his four establishments, which include restaurants, a food truck and a sports arena concession. Even the part-timers get coverage.

That has made Jester Concepts a more competitive employer.

“We’ve been able to retain employees and be a better business in the community,” Frederick says.

The majority of Jester Concepts’ customers are willing to pay the 3% surcharge, which amounts to \$3 on a \$100 check. Some question it, but Frederick estimates that no more than once a month at each location does a guest ask to have it taken off their bill. Customers can look at the surcharge as proof that the company is concerned about its staffers’ well-being.

Owners who want healthier employees may have to set a good example, and even make some changes to office routine and policies. A boss who likes to keep cola and

other highly sugared beverages in the break room fridge may need to stop stocking it. And at companies where the culture is for everyone to work through lunch at their desks, there may need to be a new normal — staffers have to break away.

At Hoppier, an Ottawa, Ontario-based company that delivers snacks and supplies to businesses, “we don’t let anyone eat behind their computer screens. We think that everyone deserves a proper break, so we ask them to eat somewhere that doesn’t require any work,” CEO Cassy Aite says.

Aite used to work at a consulting firm and eat at his desk; it’s what people did. His next job was at a German company, where he learned a very different approach — talking 90 minutes away from the office each day for lunch.

“It’s an amazing way to break up the day,” says Aite.

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