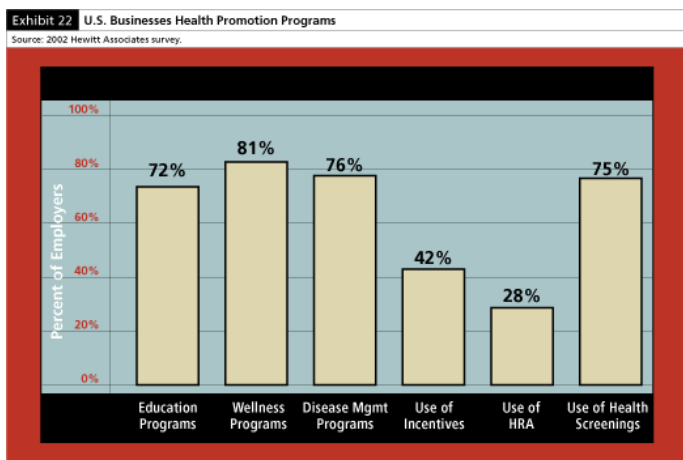


## The Increasing Girth of our Labor Market...What is the Solution?

In my last column, I discussed the epidemic of obesity in this country and the subsequent negative health consequences afflicting the members of the U.S. labor market. Since our population continues to “grow”, businesses have no choice but to hire obese individuals who are likely to be in sub-optimal health. However, negative economic growth tends to serve as an impetus for change, and many businesses nationwide have initiated corporate changes to make employee health a priority.

A 2002 Hewitt Associates Survey found that 81% of U.S. companies had adopted employee wellness programs (see figure 1).



Clearly, it makes business sense to invest in employee health. A 2001 *American Journal of Health Promotion* reported healthier workers have less absenteeism and reduced insurance costs. For every dollar spent on employee health promotion programs, a savings on health care and absenteeism of \$3.48 and \$5.82 respectively was saved...a total average of \$4.30. In fact, such programs can be beneficial even if less than one percent of employees participate. 75% of all companies offering employee health programs are reporting financial gains from doing so, although it may take three to five years for these gains to be realized.

And who should be in the driver seat of the change bus? The CEO, president, and members of the board of the directors according to an extensive literature review. The American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine accurately points out that employers have the leverage to affect lifestyle and behavior changes even more so than doctors because of the amount of time employees spend at work. Patients often only see their doctors once a year. By harboring an environment of health and wellness, employers are in a much better position to affect change.

There are a variety of programs a company can implement which have been shown to be beneficial in optimizing employee health. These include health education programs, wellness programs, health risk appraisals, and individualized counseling with respected and well trained health coaches. In addition, disease management programs are an option for employees who already

suffer from health problems. Employees are educated by a nurse or other paramedical professional on how to best manage current health conditions. Eos Airlines, a boutique luxury airline, has implemented annual health savings accounts for their employees. The fund incorporates a substantial match program and offers significant financial rewards for employees who improve their health or remain healthy. Other companies have incorporated incentive programs but have also implemented penalties for their obese employees. Such penalties have included levying healthcare cover surcharges and payroll deductions for obese employees who do not successfully implement healthy lifestyle changes and lose weight.

Although it seems logical that individuals would want to become and stay healthy to avoid disease and early morbidity, the most reproducible factor in the success of any employer based health and wellness program is....you guessed it, *money*. Studies have shown that money incentivizes employees to lose with more than any other incentive health programs offered. In fact, overweight employees who are paid a small amount of money over a given time period lose more weight than those who are not compensated. This tactic may be even more efficacious given the current U.S. economy.

For companies either looking to institute a corporate wellness program and for those who have one in place and are looking for ways in which to improve, Jonathon Wong, a Singapore personal trainer and wellness expert gives the following suggestions echoed by many others in the field of corporate wellness. Develop a company health “culture” and align this culture with strategic goals. The CEO, members of the Board, and managers need to serve as role models and implement for themselves the strategies they are proposing to their employees. The health goal for the company needs to be clearly outlined, encouraged, and communicated to all employees, even those who are not obese. Additionally, models must be developed for the desired action and behavior, and methods for monitoring employees must be in place to ensure programs are followed. Only healthy food choices should be offered when applicable, and a specified amount of work time should be allocated during the employee work day to allow time for fitness, health education, and breaks.

So the next obvious question is “what about the legal ramifications of employer scrutiny of obese employees”? There is currently a move under way to give obese Americans federal protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act. If obesity is reclassified as a disease, employer sponsored health plans could be forced to cover treatments and make reasonable accommodations for obese employees. It is in the best interest of employers to provide comprehensive health and wellness programs and financial incentives for *all* employees to minimize legal scrutiny and optimize employee health.