



could run the program because she had “always been very passionate about health, exercise and nutrition”. They obtained senior management support because the program fit well with one of the company’s three core values and also because the MD had always taken an interest in the health of his employees.

Shephard explains that in the first year, they used a provider to run an education program that was “entertaining, but very hard-hitting” on the psychology of lifestyle, nutrition and exercise. Following this, about 50 per cent of the company actively participated in a pedometer-measured walking challenge.

**Degustation menu**

After surveying participants about what they liked about the program, it became clear to Shephard that changes were needed. Using a panel review process, Russell Investments appointed Good Health Solutions to provide a much broader offering to its employees in 2008. Shephard christened it a “degustation menu to give people a whole range of activities to choose from”.

Starting with three days of 20-minute health checks, the menu included a day of 15-minute massages, ten weeks each of Pilates and boxercise, three hour-long

**Biggest loser**

When Peter Acheson, COO of Peoplebank, Australia’s largest IT&T recruitment company, was approached by some of his head office staff to join an ad hoc Biggest Loser challenge, he felt his 113kg-frame should say yes. “I used to be a fit phys ed teacher, but, thanks to a career change, my appetite and my sweet tooth, I started putting on weight in 1995,” he says.

A group of his employees wanted to lose weight and felt they needed an extra incentive, so 15 people paid \$50 into a kitty and had public weigh-ins at the beginning, then at four and eight weeks. Peoplebank bought the scales. The person who lost the greatest percentage of his body weight was a 53-year-old man who shed 11kgs.

Acheson has continued to lose weight and is about to buy a new belt. “I am fitter and healthier and much more focussed at work. I’m less likely to suffer 3pm drowsiness now,” he says, adding that the sense of camaraderie and teamwork within the branch greatly improved as a result of the challenge.

## Weighing up the worth of wellbeing

When employers are looking to cut costs as revenue declines, how do you justify continuing corporate wellness programs? **Teresa Russell** reports

In the end, it always comes down to money when the economy slows. Are the health seminars you were planning for your overweight workforce going to be cut from your budget? Will it really matter if employees don’t get their flu shots this winter? Shouldn’t people take responsibility and get their own health checks done?

As an HR professional, you can’t counter this sort of scrutiny without knowing your facts. Since mid 2007, Good Health Solutions (GHS) has analysed survey data from more than 5500 Australian employees and has determined the degree to which work-related and non-work-related factors impair employee productivity.

GHS’s *Health, Absence and Productivity Survey* estimates that the total loss of productivity due to lifestyle-related risk factors only is 2.84 per cent (or 56.8 hours/employee/year) and that due to chronic conditions is 2.6 per cent, which is 52 hours per employee per year. That’s a cost of \$28.4 billion to Australian business each year, excluding productivity lost due to absence or workers’ compensation claims.

**Employee engagement**

Scott Ide, director of HR, Asia Pacific for Russell Investments, believes its extensive corporate wellness program has contributed to the “quite remarkable improvement in all the results” of its employee satisfaction surveys conducted first in 2005 and then in 2008. “A program like this is not going to attract or retain a portfolio manager. It’s a hygiene factor for us, contributing to our culture and having a positive effect on employee engagement,” says Ide.

Russell Investments is a global asset management firm that employs more than 180 people in Australia, having down-scaled its global workforce by 20 per cent just last month. In 2007, it introduced its first corporate wellness program “We were motivated by a desire to help and support our associates (employees) to build resilience. We knew our organisation was going to have to deal with and manage change,” says Ide, referencing studies that show that people with high wellbeing are able to cope with change far more effectively than others.

Jean Shephard, the company’s facilities manager for Australia, asked Ide if she

cooking demonstrations, roving ergonomic assessments, a stress management workshop and seminars on work/life balance and nutrition.

All except the stress management workshop were very popular, so that was replaced by relaxation and breathing classes. The company also reimbursed employees as much as \$1000 for a lifestyle allowance, which associates put towards gym membership, the purchase of exercise gear, new golf clubs, dancing lessons, etc.

Participation was encouraged through a points award system. The two highest points earners in the company won a free night's accommodation at a five-star hotel in Sydney or Melbourne. All the seminars and exercise classes were held on site, which Shephard says made it easier for associates to attend.

**2009 plans**

This year, as with most companies, Russell Investments has decreased its expenditure. Rather than cancelling the program, it has cut back on some of the days, but retained a variety of initiatives including flu vaccinations, health checks, massage, yoga, 1:1 health coaching, a nutrition seminar and workshops on resilience and relaxation.

Ide has no problem justifying the expenditure. He says that Russell's corporate culture contributes to its lower than industry average staff turnover and that the well-being program contributes to the positive culture. "It's the anecdotal things that lead me to the value of this program. When people make changes to their diet, it improves their wellbeing and their ability to do their job. That's when you can see the real value of the program," he concludes.

**"When people make changes to their diet, it improves their wellbeing and their ability to do their job"**

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