

Keep healthy from 9 to 5

Employers are becoming more creative at helping staff improve their lifestyles, and workers are relishing the opportunity to shape up, writes **Rachel Leblhan**.

Emloyees who used to look forward to a cheap meat pie at a Boral staff canteen have been forced to go for a healthier option if they want to get a subsidised meal.

Workers increasingly expect health services as part of their benefits package, but few organisations go beyond the run-of-the-mill gym membership deals, free health checks, and subsidised yoga classes.

Now the more proactive employers are looking at other cash incentives to promote health and wellbeing in the workplace, working on the theory that a healthy worker is a happy worker and therefore more productive.

At the Boral plasterboard site in the Sydney suburb of Camellia, the company is trialling a canteen initiative where it promotes and subsidises healthy food options.

John Lang, the managing director of Good Health Solutions, which runs health and wellbeing programs for corporate clients including Boral, says it's almost standard practice for firms to pay for, or subsidise, health services for staff. But other kinds of cash incentives are "a bit of a rarity".

"In one staff canteen Boral subsidised food equally. We asked 'why subsidise meat pies and hot chips when you have a program where you're trying to promote wellbeing?' It withdrew the subsidy on non-healthy food as an incentive to be healthy," Lang says.

Accor Services, part of the worldwide Accor Group, has rolled out an employee benefit program that promotes wellbeing by helping staff to eat well and not skip meals during work hours.

Through the organisation's

wholly owned subsidiary EzyBite, employees at firms that participate in the program can use salary sacrificing to cover the cost of meals that are delivered to the workplace or purchased from the staff canteen and consumed on site.

By using pretax dollars, employees can save as much as 46.5 per cent (depending on their income bracket) on their daily lunches and snacks.

Julia Logan, a payroll and benefits manager at a health-care company that uses the service, says her average work food bill has been cut even more than that — from \$10 a day, or \$200 a month, to \$80 a month.

Under the program staff only have access to healthy food from organic outfit Aboutlife, so afternoon productivity is optimised by cutting out stodgy foods.

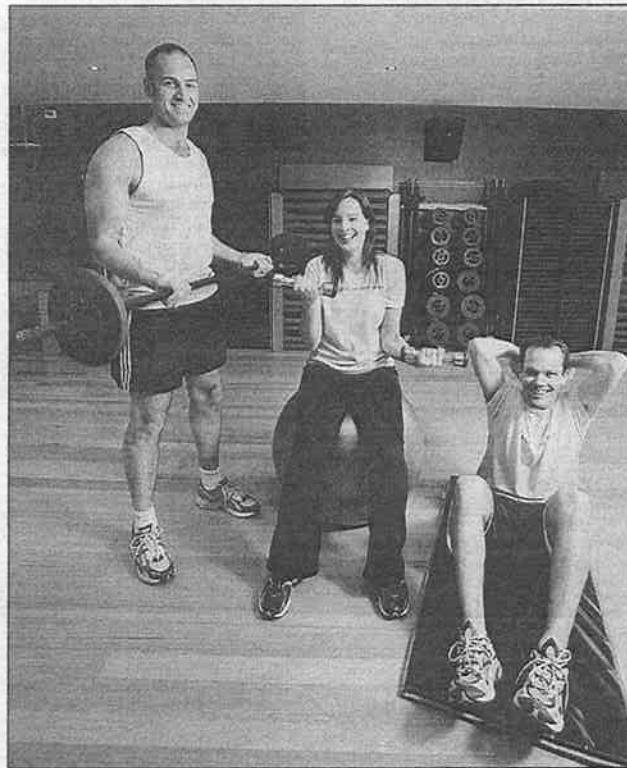
Logan also finds the healthier food much more filling so she is spending less overall throughout the course of the day.

"Previously, when three o'clock hit I'd have to have a chocolate fix; now I find I can't even eat my whole sandwich," she says.

The delivery service also means staff do not skip meals, and it frees up the lunch period so they can maximise personal time, such as using the on-site gym and personal trainers.

However, organisations in the US are still leading the way in offering cash incentive health schemes to staff.

A few years ago IBM started offering a healthy living rebate program where employees who certified that they didn't smoke (or if they did, willingly participated in an IBM-sponsored smoking cessation program) received a \$US150 cash rebate. Another \$US150 rebate was available for employees who



Mallesons Stephen Jaques staff Joe Lemin, left, Kate Jackson and Andrew Maynes have taken up their employer's fitness challenge.

Photo: ESTELLE JUDAH

tries to make initiatives fun so staff participate "out of the sake of competition".

"We don't run a centralised, highly driven incentive system," Milliner says.

Under the "90-day challenges" staff must exercise three times a week for 30 minutes for the chance to win dinner or sports store vouchers. The grand prize at the end of 90 days is a day off work.

For Kate Jackson, a senior associate in Mallesons' financial services group in Melbourne who won a shopping voucher, the biggest incentive was not the prize but the team spirit it promoted.

"The challenge encouraged more of us to exercise together, say, at the gym... there was an even greater sense of camaraderie as a result," she says. "And it is so much easier to exercise with someone else; there's a shared commitment."

"We had to record our regime in a spreadsheet, which was circulated. This transparency made it possible for us all to note how others were squeezing exercise into their busy lives. In this way, I think we became role models for each other."

EzyBite national sales and marketing manager Louise Carmody says the service is not only cost-effective for staff, but employers too. While they are charged a percentage of the EzyBite customer service fee, this can be recuperated through a 10 per cent tax input credit claim from the federal government.

In addition, it also reduces their exposure to payroll tax on the amount staff are spending.

Staff are charged an annual \$30 fee, though this is often waived during promotional periods.

participated in a regular routine of physical activity and logged their performance online.

Last year car manufacturer DaimlerChrysler began offering its 18,000 employees up to \$US240 a year off health insurance deductibles to participate in a health evaluation that included blood pressure and cholesterol checks.

"Why subsidise hot chips when you're trying to promote wellbeing?"

DTE Energy also offered its 11,000 employees \$US50 gift certificates to take a health-risk assessment.

A further \$US50 to \$US75 is available to staff who participate in a program that includes over-the-phone coaching from a nurse.

Lang says US companies have a much better track record of offering

incentives. "In Australia, on the other hand, what we've done is try to educate the client that the best reward is the reward of feeling good by improving health," he says.

"That's the basis on how these programs tend to be marketed or sold."

That notion plays a large role in law firm Mallesons Stephen Jaques's extensive health and wellbeing program called Making Work Work, Together.

It incorporates health seminars, gym membership, subsidised on-site yoga and Pilates classes, and health expos — where medical practitioners and health consultants provide free assessments in areas such as skin cancer and heart health checks.

While the firm has latched more firmly on to the carrot-and-stick approach by running fitness competitions where staff are eligible to win prizes, chief executive Robert Milliner says Mallesons typically