

Columns

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Getting (and Staying) Fit

Jennifer Zuri

When you think of corporate wellness, do you envision an agonizing maze of health insurance premiums and options? Health and wellness extends beyond just insurance coverage and more companies are taking notice of the benefits that fitness extends not only to their employees, but to their company's bottom line.

The company I work for, Aquascape Inc. in St. Charles, Illinois, offers a variety of fitness options for employees. According to our company owner and CEO Greg Wittstock, "The best investment you can make is in your people's well-being. Our facilities allow us to do just that."

When he first envisioned a new building for his company, he dreamt of multiple fitness areas. His goal was to create a workplace utopia that balances work with fun. He assembled an employee visionary committee and drew up plans based on their feedback. Today, our headquarters, also known as Aqualand, boasts a 5,000 sq.-ft. workout area, indoor soccer and sports courts, a spa area, and an outdoor putting green for golf enthusiasts.

Employees utilize the facilities throughout the day; not just before or after work. "People always ask me if filling a building with amenities like a gym, basketball court, a sports arena and even a spa takes away from people's productivity," Greg says. "I've actually found the contrary. If you feel good, it's easier to perform your best. Teammates who utilize our amenities are more engaged with their job and each other."

I recently read a *Forbes* article that said a company's wellness culture starts at the top. Greg agrees, and he told me, "As a corporate leader, you need to practice what you preach and live the lifestyle that you promote within your business." Sports were an integral part of his life education and he learned early on that "those who sweat together stick together."

Recreational activities for employees not only provide a means to improve wellness, but also create team-building opportunities. In addition to Aqualand's sports and exercise facilities, our company provides other resources for enhancing fitness. Company canoe trips, group walks on trails near the building, outings to Top Golf, all play a role in getting people active together. It's also a great way for employees to get to know others outside their respective departments.

Combining fitness with local events is another effective way to boost morale and fitness. Greg loves running

and encouraged more than 40 employees to participate in the town's annual Scarecrow Shuffle 5K that raises funds for the St. Charles Mother's Club. This was the beginning of weekly group training runs for interested employees. Ultimately, it led to Aquascape hosting its own 5K races to raise funds for the Aquascape Foundation.

Granted, not every company has the opportunity to provide workout areas in their building, but fitness doesn't have to be relegated to on-site facilities. Aquascape introduced its "Miles Across America" program where employees tracked mileage from walking, running and cycling. They could perform the activities on-site, or at home with friends or family. Prizes were awarded to all participants during a close-out celebration.

When planning opportunities for employees to improve their all-around health and well-being, be creative with ideas like the following:

- * Organize group walks during the lunch hour
- * Explore community activities and organize employee groups to participate
- * Create fun events to combat stress, like a three-legged race or wheelbarrow contest
- * Institute an employee "Fit Crew" who organizes events and opportunities for participation at all levels
- Negotiate discounts with a local gym on membership dues for employees or help subsidize the cost

A company wellness program proves to benefit the bottom line, in addition to enhancing the health and morale of employees. According to Dr. Roger Sahoury, author of "Gladiator's Guide to Corporate Health & Wealth," studies show that wellness programs result in a 50% reduction of high blood pressure among employees, along with \$250 million in savings in lowered health care costs. To break this down further, Aflac reports that medical costs decrease approximately \$3.27 for each dollar a business spends on wellness programs (Aflac Workforces Report.) Likewise, the Institute for Healthcare Consumerism cites a 28% reduction in employees calling in sick.

Along with fitness and team-building activities, Aquascape provides optional, annual wellness screenings through Interactive Health. Employees receive lab results that can alert them of potential problems. The screenings have proven hugely effective for improved health of employees, which resulted in Aquascape being named "One of the Healthiest Companies in America" by Interactive Health. Aquascape was one of 154 companies across the country being recognized for helping employees make significant and sometimes life-saving changes to improve their health. **GP**

Jennifer Zuri is the marketing communications manager at Aquascape Inc. and a former ACE-certified fitness instructor. She can be reached at jzuri@aquascapeinc.com.