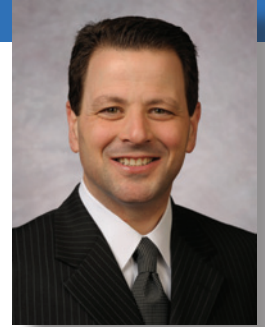


ADDRESSING A WEIGHTY ISSUE

How Your Business Can Trim Pounds and Healthcare Costs

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Can businesses put a price tag on obesity? They already have and it tips the scales at \$13 billion annually. Combating obesity isn't just a health and wellness consideration – it's a business issue that directly impacts your bottom line.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) more than two-thirds of all Americans are now considered obese or overweight. And, according to the latest research, the percentage of obese Americans appears to be increasing, particularly among young adults aged 18 to 29 for whom obesity rates have tripled over the past three decades.

Before we look at the complications of obesity – both individually and organizationally – let's take a minute to understand what it means. Being 'overweight' or 'obese' means an individual fits within a specific range on the body mass index (BMI). The BMI scale applies to both men and women. See the following table for an example of how BMI applies:

HEIGHT	WEIGHT RANGE	BMI	CONSIDERED
5' 9"	<124 lbs.	<18.5	Underweight
	125 – 168	18.5 – 24.9	Healthy weight
	169 – 202	25.0 – 29.9	Overweight
	>203	>30	Obese

**The Body Mass Index applies to both adult men and women.*

As indicated in the chart above, an individual who is five feet nine inches tall is at a healthy weight between 125 – 168 pounds. Their BMI would fit within

the 18.5 – 24.9 range. An individual measuring that height is considered obese if they weigh more than 203 pounds. While not a fool-proof system, the BMI scale remains, to date, the most commonly used metric for determining healthy levels of weight.

The health risks and costs attributed to obesity are well documented. Studies by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have associated obesity with health conditions that include hypertension, type 2 diabetes, stroke, coronary heart disease, some forms of cancer, and sexual dysfunction and infertility among men and reproductive complications among women.

A recent study from the United Health Foundation, Partnership for Prevention and American Public Health



Association found that, if obesity trends continue, by 2018 more than 100 million American adults will qualify as obese. That would represent 43 percent of the population – compared to less than one-third (31 percent) in 2008. The same study found that if the predictions are accurate, the cost of obesity will amount to nearly \$350 billion in 2018 – approximately 20 percent of the total spent on healthcare. However, if today's rate of obesity were maintained, the U.S. would save nearly \$200 billion a year in healthcare costs by 2018.

Obesity doesn't just impact the health of an individual or a family; it can impact the health of your business. Studies have found that medical expenses for obese employees can be more than double that for employees with a healthy weight. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that obese persons spend 77 percent more money for necessary medications than non-obese persons. Chronic diseases caused or further complicated by obesity have a significant impact on an individual and a business. In addition to costing employers more through medical expenses,



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these individuals are often less productive due to high rates of absenteeism and higher turnover rates.

As a response to this increasing challenge, businesses are increasingly implementing obesity prevention and control programs to improve employee fitness and health in a structured and supportive environment. Because many adults spend the majority of their day in a workplace – often consuming one or two meals a day there – this environment is an ideal setting to have a substantial impact. The most effective programs enhance access to physical activity and nutritional foods for employees, provide health education and healthy lifestyle strategies, and influence changes in behaviors that contribute to obesity.

When implementing a workplace obesity prevention program, it is important to get the full participation and support from senior management and to involve employees in the planning and implementation. The program is best run by a committee of key stakeholders who develop the mission, goals, and objectives; oversee allocation of the program budget; solicit employee feedback and participation; and determine program components and activities. While planning the program, it is helpful to conduct a needs assessment through employee health risk appraisals (HRAs), a health culture and environment audit as well as an employee interest survey. These various tools enable the key stakeholders to create a program that aligns with the goals of the business and workforce, and, ultimately, creates a lasting value for everyone involved.

Remember that even small efforts to promote a healthy lifestyle at your organization can have an incremental, positive impact. While building a state-of-the-art,



full-service fitness center within the business' offices is ideal, it may not be feasible. In fact, sweeping changes like this and others – offering a range of fitness activities and programs or overhauling food served in the cafeteria – are challenging to execute. However, there are a number of effective tactics that offer a strong return-on-investment. Here are a few best practices that are suitable for organizations of all sizes:

- > **Annual Health Screenings.** Arrange for annual onsite health screenings for your employees. At the screening, offer one-on-one meetings with health educators for employees to complete HRAs and set short- and long-term wellness goals.
- > **Employee Walking Club.** Instead of a coffee break, consider heading outside for a brisk walk. Organizing a walking club at work is a great way for employees to both exercise and bond – and will help keep you energized and engaged at work.
- > **Healthier Snack Options.** All too often candy or junk food is just an arm's length away at meetings. Try invigorating the next meeting with a healthy snack and bring enough for the whole room to enjoy.

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- > **Fitness Incentives.** Increased physical activity is a cornerstone of all wellness programs. You can empower your employees by offering free or discounted gym memberships or by incentivizing program participation through rewards and recognition.
- > **'Biggest Loser' Contest.** Invite your office to participate in a weight loss contest, modeled after the hit NBC television show 'Biggest Loser.' Consider a 10-week contest that features communal workouts, weekly weigh-ins, and mentoring and support services. To help defray the costs, consider partnering with a local fitness club and offer a reward for the employee who loses the most weight during the contest.

Implementing an employee wellness program to combat obesity can have tremendously positive benefits for your workforce and your bottom line. Through simple steps to educate employees, provide more access to fitness programs, and serve healthier food options, companies can greatly increase employee morale, retention, and productivity. Now is the time to reinvigorate your employees and implement programs in your workplace to combat obesity and promote a healthy lifestyle.

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Conner Strong & Buckelew works with clients every day to design effective health and wellness programs.

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