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## Exercise good business sense

BY GERRY WEBER

For businesses looking to reduce rising employee health costs and boost productivity while promoting an all-around better way of life -- health and wellness programs are the answer.

Research conducted by a wide variety of organizations makes one point very clear: America is gaining weight fast, and as the prevalence of obesity grows, the occurrence of expensive chronic health problems is growing in lock step. At the same time, businesses are paying more and more for employee health coverage, and in an increasingly competitive economy, they are paying dearly when employees miss work.

Today, large corporations have already begun to focus on employee fitness and diet, offering in-house gym equipment, subsidized or fully paid fitness club memberships, new cafeteria menus and preventive care primers and seminars. But small businesses can embrace health and wellness programs as well, and even with a limited budget, these programs can have a big impact on employee health -- and the bottom line.

The fact is, as America's waistline expands, it adds further strain to our individual health -- and our economy. The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health reports that the incidence of obesity in American adults will rise precipitously in the next eight years, with about 75 percent of all Americans falling into the "overweight" category by 2015. The financial implications of these developments are real. According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control, obese employees miss work almost twice as often as other workers, costing employers about \$4 billion annually in lost productivity.

This disheartening news should certainly spur us all to action -- literally. Regular exercise, an active lifestyle and a healthy diet are proven remedies to battling obesity and helping to prevent the many chronic conditions associated with it. Most Americans spend the bulk of their time at work, where they eat one or more meals and many snacks, and where they are often sedentary. Employers are in a unique position to change behavior for the better. Small businesses, which often have a closer personal tie to employees, can be particularly influential.

A number of health and wellness elements can be put in place at a reasonable cost.

First, many fitness centers will work with businesses to design a wellness program that fits within their budget. These programs allow employers to provide access to fitness facilities and classes at a reduced cost to employees, providing a direct pathway to better health.

Second, companies on any budget should consider low-cost methods of making their office environment conducive to healthy living. By offering healthy food in office vending machines, promoting regular physician visits for employees, and implementing regular office breaks that encourage employees to be active, companies can make important inroads.

Finally, companies should consider organizing annual or semi-annual weekend events that highlight the importance of an active lifestyle.

In the end, employers know how critical it is to train their staff to be good at their jobs. It's time to think

about how important it is -- socially and financially -- to train them to be good at living a healthy life.

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