

Well-Being

Pilates Of The Caribbean?

Matthew Kirdahy 05.29.07, 12:00 PM ET

You accept a new job, and at your orientation a human resources representative rattles off a list of perks for your new position.

Expense account. Check. Full medical benefits. Check. Complimentary tai chi sessions--wait, huh?

Personal fitness for all employees, not just top executives, has become a priority among companies small and large in recent years, and it goes beyond just offering discounted memberships at the gym, though it still involves that too.

Companies of all sizes are now offering alternative and unconventional methods of exercise for employees through their health insurer. Maybe yours does and you're unaware.

Guardian Insurance, in conjunction with Healthways, is among those providers offering methods that include complimentary nutrition coaches, tai chi, yoga and pilates, among other activities, administered by specialists in each area. Guardian also covers membership fees at gyms such as Bally's Total Fitness, a major gym chain with locations throughout the U.S., in addition to discounts for weight-loss programs Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers.

It's official. There's something for everyone.

"It's about engaging people and encouraging them to think about it," says Susan O'Connor, a registered nurse and assistant vice president of group medical at Guardian. "As humans we all don't respond the same way, so we wanted different ways to encourage people to live a healthier lifestyle."

That's where Healthways' Whole Health Networks comes in.

Through this Whole Health Networks program, Healthways helps insurance carriers such as Guardian make fitness professionals available to employees.

"People need to have choices," says Dr. John Reed, a specialist in family care. "Not everybody wants to go out and work in a gym. Some people need the yoga studio."

Reed, who is also an expert in acupuncture, osteopathy and homeopathy, says smaller companies are teaming up with second and third parties to purchase and provide this service as a cooperative.

And if your employer is willing to foot the bill with whatever it deducts from your paycheck every two weeks, you may as well vent those work frustrations with some qigong or tai chi.

Believe or not, your employer gets something out of it as well.

According to a survey of 300 health benefits decision makers polled by Guardian, though employers strongly believe that wellness programs save them money, they also say that they implement them because such benefits are highly valued by employees. In addition, the healthier you are, the less likely it is that you'll get sick and need to spend money on a high-cost prescription drug down the road.

The survey also showed that 82% of small employers (25 to 100 employees), 90% of midsize employers (101 to 1,000 employees) and 99% of large employers (1,000 employees or more) see value in implementing these programs.

Yet, only 57% of small businesses have implemented some type of wellness program, while 79% of midsize businesses and 90% of large businesses have wellness programs in place.

O'Connor says it's not about companies doubting if these alternative exercise methods work. It's more about cost because insurers have to keep their premiums at a level all employees can continue to afford.

"In the past 15 to 20 years, there have been enough studies whether these type of exercises complement traditional medicines or are just an alternative to them in order to return to full physical health," O'Connor says. "These are methods that work."