

wellness initiatives ignite healthy agent performance

<< INCENTIVES & MOTIVATION >>

BY GREG LEVIN

►► **TO TRULY REACH THE UPPER** echelons of contact center achievement, today's top companies provide agents with solid training, enticing development opportunities, effective desktop tools, and, of course ... treadmills?

Healthier agents make for happier agents, and happier agents stick around — prompting customers to do the same. The importance of wellness at work is nothing new; however, the increased focus on and implementation of formal wellness initiatives in the workplace is.

According to the American Management Association (AMA), more companies than ever offer employee wellness programs. In a recent AMA study, 40% of responding companies reported having a formal program in place; another 47% stated that they intend to implement one within the next couple of years.

"Many companies have come to see the value of wellness initiatives in their organizations, and have taken steps to provide employees with access to wellness programs or components," write the authors of the AMA study report. "Even if they are not measuring ROI for these initiatives, there is an underlying

belief that the health and wellness of an employee population is good for business."

And contact centers are right in the thick of things. Historically plagued with high staff turnover, absenteeism, burnout and work-related injuries, contact centers are fighting back with flair — offering and strongly encouraging agents to take advantage of a host of resources aimed at enhancing their physical and mental health (and, ultimately, the center's performance) — including everything from free gym memberships to free smoking cessation programs. This sharper focus on keeping agents in tip-top shape has even impacted the way many contact centers are physically designed.

"The focus on wellness promotes an environment that is less stressful and one of higher morale," says Bill Mann, contact center manager for Duke Energy, which has had a formal employee wellness initiative in place for years. "Employee opinion survey feedback supports an environment focused on increasing wellness. It has become a way of life for our entire company."

Wellness Components that Work Wonders

A formal wellness initiative features far more than just free flu shots for agents. Here are some of the key components that — collectively — comprise the most successful programs:

Fitness memberships/facilities. Many contact centers are finding that things work out well when agents work out well. Higher energy levels and morale, better conditioning and fewer injuries and illnesses are among the key benefits centers have seen in agents who exercise regularly.

Some centers provide agents with free memberships to local gyms. For example, at Canadian credit union service provider CUETS's call center in Winnipeg, Manitoba, agents are eligible for a company-paid YMCA membership — provided the agent makes the commitment to use the fitness facilities a minimum of four times per month. CUETS also provides agents with individual fitness assessments, and funds various company sports teams and events.

Other centers have full-fledged onsite fitness facilities that agents can use at no charge. At GE Capital Solutions Customer Support Center, agents not only have full access to the company's onsite fitness center; they are treated

to free sessions with certified fitness instructors who are regularly invited to the facility.

At Duke Energy in Charlotte, NC, agents have a couple of gym options: They can exercise at the company's huge onsite fitness facility, The Quality of Life Center (which is actually owned and operated by the employees who are members); or they can take advantage of ample corporate discounts at some of the fitness centers in the area.

"Chill" zones. As important as working out is for keeping endorphin levels high enough to handle high contact volumes, agents also need a place to veg out and decompress during and after demanding shifts. Realizing this, many progressive centers have created comfort zones for beleaguered staff. Duke Energy provides several areas in or around the building where agents can chill out, including a community seating area with two large water fountains, a Relaxation/Recovery area furnished with comfortable recliners and equipped with controlled lighting and an outside patio.

Wisconsin Power and Light (WP&L) offers similar amenities to help agents de-stress and recuperate. The call center's "quiet rooms" are filled with books, a CD-player and cozy couches.

At Verizon Wireless' call center in Rancho Cordova, CA, agents can relax and recharge in one of the many "huddle areas" distributed throughout the center. These are each open, colorful spaces equipped with oversized, comfortable furniture. Verizon's staff can also catch a breather and some healthy grub at the center's ultra clean and spacious cafeteria.

And at Starbucks' call center in Seattle, WA, agents enjoy break-time amenities that are both practical and hip. Scattered throughout the funky and fully renovated warehouse are — surprise — mini-cafe stations each featuring ample counter space, reading material and top-of-the-line Italian

coffee makers (okay, so perhaps the espresso isn't exactly in line with wellness). The center also has several open lounge areas where agents can regroup.

Wellness courses and information. Health-conscious — and performance-conscious — call centers do more than just provide amenities to help agents feel fit and balanced; they also educate agents on common health risks and provide them with the assistance and inspiration they need to improve their lifestyle and to overcome adversity.

Agents at CUETS, for example, can participate in company-paid smoking cessation programs, weight loss/nutritional counseling, and crisis counseling. Such dedication to employee wellness is a big reason why CUETS has been named one of "Canada's Top 100 Employers" for several consecutive years.

At Duke Energy, there is a strong focus on stress management and prevention. It isn't at all uncommon for meetings in the call center to commence with a five-minute discussion on this topic, including how to identify stress and ways to reduce it. In addition, the center's intranet Web site provides tips and links to assist with stress-related issues. Agents can also receive personal assistance with stress from supervisor specialists and HR.

Numerous other contact centers have embraced stress management, too. And it's a good thing; The National Safety Council estimates that one million employees are absent each workday due to stress, and 60-90% of all doctor visits are for illnesses or injuries caused by stress.

Healthful food options onsite. It's no secret that, when the going gets too tough in the typical call center, the typical call center orders pizza. Fast food and candy machines have long vexed agent waistlines, energy and performance.

While the nutritional counseling that some centers provide is certainly helpful, such courses lose value if agents (who are confined to the call center for eight to 10 hours or more each day) don't have access to anything other than cheesy treats and Baby Ruths.

The folks at WP&L are well aware of this fact, which is why the call center started filling its vending machines with healthful snack options years ago. And many centers, like Duke Energy, feature a full-fledged cafeteria onsite that provides nutritious food all day long. "Our cafeteria is focused on the health of our employees," says manager Mann. "[Agents are provided with] nutritional information on food items such as certain types of fish and vegetables."

Flu shots and health screening checks. Many call centers are really sticking it to agents to keep them healthy and productive. Each autumn, these centers partner with local hospitals, medical clinics and insurance companies to provide staff with free flu shots on company premises. This is probably the most common component of employee wellness programs, according to the AMA; in the study alluded to earlier, 82% of respondents reported offering onsite flu shots.

Numerous organizations do more than just needle agents; they also offer health screenings like blood pressure checks, cholesterol checks and mammograms to help employees prevent or at least control potentially debilitating health issues.

Ergonomics training. Nearly all call centers today have invested in

ergonomically sound furniture and equipment, but not all have taken the time to show agents how to get the most out of their fully adjustable workstations. That is a potentially costly oversight, according to experts at call center furniture provider **Interior Concepts**, who have found poor ergonomics to lead to high agent turnover, absenteeism, medical treatments and insurance premiums, as well as OSHA fines, legal fees and the costs of rehiring and retraining.

To avoid such financial devastation (and the negative impact on agent morale and the customer experience), the best centers have an ergonomics specialist (either in-house or third-party) work with each new training class. The specialist demonstrates how agents should adjust their chair, keyboard, wrist rests, headset and PC monitor, and how to position their own body, to ensure the utmost comfort and performance over an entire shift — day in, and day out.

To ensure that poor posture or other problems don't develop among agents after initial ergonomics training, some centers have an occupational therapist conduct regular (once a year, or so) site assessments, then make modifications or provide training as necessary.

In addition to having direct access to an occupational/ergonomic specialist, some centers, including Duke Energy, use their corporate intranet sites to edu-

cate agents on ideal ergonomics. Duke Energy also hangs illustrated ergonomics posters in high traffic areas of the center to remind agents of proper workstation set up.

More centers need to embrace such a comprehensive approach to ergonomics improvement and training, write the experts at Interior Concepts in a recent white paper: "Whether it is an inbound, outbound or blended center, without healthy, able-bodied employees, you might as well close your call center's doors. In fact, it is estimated that ergonomically healthy employees are 20-40% more productive."

Enhanced contact center design and aesthetics. Just because each agent is sitting pretty at their customized workstation doesn't mean the overall call center environment doesn't make them sick. Spatial design, acoustics, lighting, temperature, and aesthetics all have a big impact on agent energy levels, concentration, performance and morale. (See the sidebar on Environmental Quality Optimization.)

Just ask the folks at Bell ExpressVu's (a division of Bell Canada) call center in Toronto, Ontario. A few years ago, the center experienced explosive growth and had to move to a larger facility several miles down the road. Concerned that the extra 20-30 minutes added to most existing agents' commute time would lead to high attrition, Bell ExpressVu focused on innovative and alluring facility design to entice agents to stick around.

The company contracted with a local architectural design firm, which transformed the new call center facility from a drab and rigid office space into a modern, high-tech space that also emitted a sense of belonging and community. The center's workstations are arranged in "grape clusters," which is more conducive to team-building (and requires less space) than the traditional "egg crate grid" design typical in many call centers. In addition, workstations are opened up to 120-degree angles (as opposed to traditional 90-degree angles), thus creating more of a sense of space for agents. A beautiful stained concrete walkway serpentine through the center to help create a soothing sense of flow, and plenty of greenery — including vine-covered trellises that mask overhead cables — is featured throughout.

The result of Bell ExpressVu's emphasis on interior design and aesthetics? Agent attrition (around 16-18%) has not gone up despite the longer commute; morale in the center is high; and the creative design has become "the envy of other people in the building," says Mark Knaption, vice president of call center sales and customer service at Bell ExpressVu. ◀◀