

Success Story - Large Employer

Bell Helicopter

Since the Bell 47 became the world's first helicopter certified for commercial use in 1946, Bell Helicopter Textron, located in Fort Worth, has built more than 35,000 helicopters. The company's success and reputation for excellence was built with a workforce of dedicated employees, many of whom had worked at Bell their entire career. The downside was that, as they entered the new century, the workforce of 5,700 was older than average, mostly male, and their health-care costs were rising significantly.

So in 2000, Bell decided to explore worksite wellness options.

"We knew that people approach wellness from different perspectives," says Mark Simeroth, who was Bell's manager of benefit plans at that time. "We conducted focus groups to find out what people want. Some of our employees weren't thinking about it. Some were thinking about it but not doing it. Some had started making an effort to become more fit, and some were true believers."

Simeroth realized that the key was to develop a program that impacts all four groups. "Our goal was to move people to the next level," he says.

Bell partnered with a provider of online-based corporate wellness programs to design a points-based program, Well@Bell, to help employees exercise more and eat right.

"The big positive for us was that the focus groups showed high interest," says Simeroth. "We developed committees to get constant feedback. The committees have been real champions of the program."

Five years into Well@Bell, 5,300 of the 5,700 Bell employees have participated in the program. The employees at risk from physical inactivity has been reduced from 83 percent to 30 percent, and those with five or more risk factors (high blood pressure, smoking, obesity, etc.) has decreased from 62 percent to 22 percent, and the number of smokers has been cut almost in half. Worker's comp claims and insurance costs are down.



Lessons learned

Adapt your program to your workforce

Have groups of employees who advocate for the program

Ensure your program stays fresh and lively

“Some people here feel the program has literally saved their lives,” says Simeroth.

“Certainly, we’re a more productive organization. My observation is that fit people are always at work and more enthusiastic about what the company is doing. Very few of our best employees are not touched in some way by our wellness program.”

Simeroth believes the level of employee participation and employee commitment is the real determinate of success. “Your program needs to be adapted to your workforce so there’s something for everyone,” he says. “The goal is to stimulate behavior change. I learned how important it is to have groups of employees who advocate for the program. That’s a real strength for us. Well@Bell is an employee-owned program. Management didn’t impose it, and I don’t think our employees would let management take it away.”

Simeroth would encourage other employers to embark on a similar journey. “Get a program going, establish a baseline, and see what happens,” says Simeroth. “Just make sure you keep your program fresh and lively.”



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