



Can your company force you to be healthy?

- Story Highlights
- Opponents bristle at lifestyle choices dictated by an employer
- Medical school threatens to fire workers for smoking on campus
- More firms offer wellness programs including anti-smoking and weight-loss
- Critic: Employers shouldn't penalize people for not losing weight

By Maya Dollarhide

(LifeWire) -- Three years ago, Danilo Reyes, a test engineer for Intel, received a \$50 gift card from his employer to take a health-assessment test. Reyes figured that he'd pass the test with flying colors -- he doesn't smoke or drink -- and Intel made it easy by offering the free test at his office in Hillsboro, Oregon.

But when Reyes received the results, the diagnosis was a complete shock: His cholesterol and blood-sugar levels were abnormally high.

"It turned out I was a borderline diabetic and at high risk for a heart attack," says Reyes, 41. "I was terrified."

Motivated by his diagnosis, Reyes consulted his family doctor, who put him on medicine to lower his cholesterol. A health coach at Intel, part of the company's wellness program, helped by advising Reyes on joining a gym and eating better. Over time, Reyes says, he's seen tangible benefits and shed some excess pounds.

"Getting healthy even inspired me to start up a hobby," he says. "I take karate now, as well as going to the gym. I'm happy and healthy."

Steps toward wellness

Almost a third of companies offering [health insurance](#) benefits to their employees also provide a wellness program of some sort. Fitness, smoking cessation and weight-loss programs are provided most frequently, according to 2006 employer health benefits survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The telephone survey contacted 2,122 randomly selected public and private employers.

While most companies say they have a genuine concern for their employees' well being, the rising cost of health care is obviously part of the equation. Obesity-related health issues, for example, cost American companies approximately \$13 billion dollars per year, according to the Washington D.C.-based National Business Group on Health, a non-profit organization representing large employers on health policy issues.

"Health and wellness programs at work are a win/win situation for everybody," says Richard Taylor, vice president of human resources at Intel. "We keep our insurance costs down, and the employees are offered free health and wellness opportunities."

Alfred Sanchez, the CEO of the YMCA of Greater Miami, agrees. He started a free health and fitness program in March for his staff and their families that include weigh-ins, meetings with health counselors, nutritional guidance and exercise plans. Out of a staff of 170, all but 40 employees signed up.

"Our business is all about health and fitness," says Sanchez. "Losing weight is nice, so is lowering your cost of health insurance, but the real pay-off is helping your staff lower their cholesterol and stay healthy."

Invasion of privacy?

Some people, however, bristle at what they perceive as having lifestyle choices dictated by an employer.

This May, for example, the University of Massachusetts Medical School banned all tobacco use from their campus and hospital, including parking lots. If an employee is caught smoking, they risk being fired.

"They won't even allow people to smoke in their cars," says James LeBlanc, 45, an employee at the university and himself an ex-smoker who kicked the habit prior to the ban. "We all know smoking is bad for you, but last time I checked it was still legal in this country."

Some companies forbid their employees to light up at all -- even at home. There are at least 20 states that allow for this type of work policy, including Ohio, where the state's second-largest employer, the Cleveland Clinic, stopped hiring smokers in September.

In Massachusetts, Scott Rodrigues, was fired from Scotts Miracle-Gro Company -- which bans its workers from smoking at all -- after testing positive for nicotine. Rodrigues has sued the multibillion dollar corporation for an invasion of his privacy and civil rights. The case is still being decided in the Massachusetts courts. A spokesperson for Scotts Miracle-Gro said the company does not comment on pending litigation.

"We're really seeing a provocative attitude, like Scotts, towards smokers in the workplace, but there is concern about where employers might draw the line," says Glenn Patton, a partner in Alston & Bird's Labor & Employment Group in Atlanta, Georgia, and an authority on legal issues in the workplace.

Where companies draw that line is a particular concern for Chicago resident Paul McAleer. He runs the Web site BigFatBlog.com, which focuses on weight-related issues in the media and serves as a forum for its 2,600 members to write about and discuss "fat acceptance." He says members of his site fear companies may one day treat losing weight like they do quitting smoking, as something workers should be encouraged -- or required -- to do.

"[The term] 'health and wellness' has become a euphemism for 'not fat'," says McAleer, 30, whose site grew out of research he conducted on size-discrimination issues in the media and society while enrolled at Morton College in the mid-1990s. "When employers set up these programs, they shouldn't penalize people for not losing weight. Your weight shouldn't be anyone's business but your own."

Some commitment required

Of course, just having a wellness program in place is no guarantee that employees will become healthier -- or even that the program will succeed. When the Austin, Texas-based brokerage firm, Resource Financial Group initially offered their employees a program, it was a flop.

"No one really knew about it. It was just an online program," says Shannon Scott, 42, an account manager.

As it turns out, maintaining a successful wellness program can require the same sort of commitment from a company as working to stay healthy does from an employee.

"Now we have a program that offers us incentives like a gym pass when we sign up for the company health program online. We even have a subcommittee that organizes trips to hear nutritionists or guest lecturers," Scott says. "What we learned is that it's not enough to offer a program, you have to promote it to get people involved."

LifeWire provides original and syndicated lifestyle content to Web publishers. Maya Dollarhide is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the New York Daily News and Ms. magazine.

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