

VIEWPOINT

A healthy and productive workforce is essential to business success. Many businesses are nearly on life support because of skyrocketing medical costs.

The price of poor health has traditionally been measured in terms of health care costs. The solution has been to reduce benefits and raise deductibles.

That approach has failed, and research has shown there is an even more significant cost to businesses because of unhealthy employees: the cost of lost productivity from absenteeism as well as present workers who cannot perform because of health-related impairments (presenteeism). A report in the Harvard Business Review finds that the cost of low productivity is double that of direct medical expenses.

The problem is not just illnesses like heart disease, diabetes or hypertension. W. N. Burton, studying the relationship between employees' health risk and corporate pharmaceutical expenditures, found the productivity loss from poor emotional health averaged nearly \$1,400 per employee, and the cost was three times the productivity per employee compared with those not at risk.

The workplace is, for most workers, sedentary. Fewer than 20 percent of workers expend a significant amount of energy. Researchers estimate that caloric expenditure is 140 calories per day less for men and 120 calories a day less for women than it was 50 years ago. Researchers believe the epidemic of obesity in workers is related to this situation, because the amount of leisure exercise people do has not changed in 50 years.

The workplace offers a unique opportunity to improve the health of employees.



BARRY RAMO
GUEST OPINION

Employers have a captive audience and the opportunity to provide strong incentives for them to participate in wellness programs. In Albuquerque, we have a number of businesses that believe creating a healthy workplace is paying off — not just in healthier workers, but in improved productivity, lower absenteeism and presenteeism, and lower overall health care costs.

I spoke to three honorees of the New Mexico Business Weekly's Healthiest Employers awards about their wellness programs. Charlene Hurley at MEGA Corp. and Bob Zeitel at the Manuel Lujan Agencies were passionate about the programs their companies have initiated, not only because they are seeing the risk of disease going down, but because the employees are grateful for the companies' efforts.

Both companies have about 100 employees and utilize Nuvita, a health promotion company. Nuvita does an impressive initial 15-minute health screening evaluation that establishes the employee's risk for disease, ranging from back problems, diabetes and heart disease to mental health. The program encompasses direct meetings with coaches and support online for exercise and diet. Both companies started with an initial 12-week course, but because of their effectiveness, the programs run year-round.

Hurley notes, "The program empowers employees with tools and coaching that motivated them to perform a desired level of cardiovascular exercise predominantly by walking every week. They track their food intake using a Web-based program and perform mobility exercises."

The cost is around \$500 per person. The Lujan Agencies also has a special program to deal with mental health.

The screening is mandatory. Employees can receive a reduction in health insurance premiums and a fitness gym contract if they

participate in the program, so most do.

Although saving money is a motivator, Zeitel said, "The lost weight, waist size, lowered blood pressure and sugar levels keep people engaged."

I spoke to other employers who did not have wellness programs because they were deemed too costly. Sharon Dillard, who is CEO of Get A Grip, with 13 employees in Albuquerque, has proven that assumption wrong. She instituted a health promotion program using entirely free resources.

Smoking was the first challenge. She brought in the New Mexico Department of Health to provide speakers and written materials about diet, exercise and smoking cessation, and was astonished to discover that many of the smokers in her company did not know how devastating that addiction can be. Dillard has seen some major health benefits and continues to utilize no-cost resources to keep her employees thinking about health.

The local experience, of course, is not a scientific study. One of the earliest was Robert Berea's in the American Journal of Public Health, which compared 41 sites with health promotion programs to a control group with no programs. Berea found a 14 percent disability decline over two years, with a 5 percent decline in the control group. He concluded that the savings in lower disability costs as a result of health promotion programs was \$2 for every \$1 invested by the end of the second year.

These results are similar to other studies suggesting that if you do not have a wellness program in your workplace, you should ask yourself whether you can afford not to.

BARRY RAMO, M.D., an Albuquerque cardiologist, was the keynote speaker at the Business Weekly's "Healthiest Employers" event on March 22.