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HEALTH LIVING 2008: A PBN SPECIAL SECTION

Exercise, good nutrition belong in workplace too

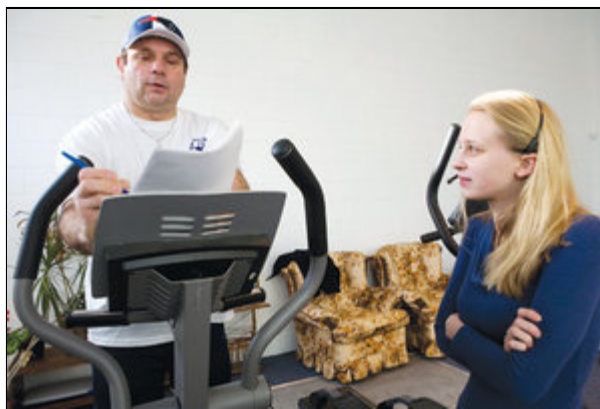
By Bridget Botelho
Contributing Writer

When Ed Medeiros bought the building on 22 Morris Lane in East Providence for his credit card processing company four years ago, one of the first things he did was outfit a gym for his employees.

The building where Medeiros runs East Commerce Solutions Inc. and East Funding is now fully equipped with treadmills, elliptical machines, an exercise bike, a weight bench, Nautilus equipment, a Total Gym, and a bunch of medicine balls and plyometric bands. The baseball lover also installed two full-size batting cages and pitching machines, and this summer he's even putting in showers.

"I personally like to come to work and work out, and I know people like to work out to get away from their desk and do some walking on the treadmill," said Medeiros. "About 15 percent of my employees actually use the gym. It changes all the time, but it is there if they want to use it."

Medeiros also installed a full kitchen where he can be found at the stove cooking Egg Beater omelets and making health shakes



PBN PHOTO/STEPHANIE EWENS

ED MEDEIROS, owner of East Funding/East Commerce Solutions, signs papers while using fitness equipment at work. At right is receptionist Krystal Johnston.



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WORKOUT WARRIOR: Ed Medeiros, owner of East Funding/East Commerce Solutions, works out in the full gym he installed for his employees.

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for his employees.

Medeiros said his investment in equipment and healthy foods at his business may reduce sick time and improve employee moral.

"I think when you add it all together, buying them healthy drinks for the kitchen, and giving them a place to exercise, people don't get sick and miss work as much, but that isn't why I do it," Medeiros said. "People who take care of themselves are healthy [and] are happy, and when you work in a good atmosphere, you stay at the job longer."



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Chris Dunn, vice president of East Funding, works long hours but is able to squeeze in workouts at the office gym.

"It's so much easier than going to the gym [elsewhere] and saves us that monthly payment," said Dunn. "It really is a nice incentive as part of our job, just knowing it is there. I try to use it two or three times a week. You can start off your day with a workout or workout for 45 minutes at the end of the day as a stress reliever."

Bigger companies also have realized the benefits of having healthy employees. Hasbro Inc., the multinational toy company based in Pawtucket, engages in wellness initiatives and also has invested in gyms for its 1,000 employees, said Susan Boothe, a registered nurse in Hasbro's medical department.

The company installed a small gym with five cardio machines and some weight machines in the Narragansett Park Drive building in East Providence last spring and opened a second one at the Newport Avenue building in Pawtucket this month, Boothe said.

The company also encourages walking groups and offers weight loss and weight management programs, like Weight Watchers, at their offices, and fitness boot camp, held by a trainer who comes to the building after hours.

Hasbro is one of the 67 companies involved in the Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island, which encourages businesses to invest in employee health.

Companies engaged in worksite wellness programs report a boost in morale and reductions in absenteeism. Some 2007 Worksite Wellness award winners estimate a return on investment for each dollar spent on worksite wellness activities to range from \$2.42 to \$9.85.

One local company closely tracked health care costs and found that participants in worksite-wellness programs had, on average, a \$1,128 per-person reduction in annual costs over non-participants, according to a press statement, the Worksite Wellness Council reports.

Boothe said Hasbro is trying to figure out the return on its investment in health and fitness, but it isn't a major concern.

"The ROI is difficult to measure, and we are working on that. But our hope is that by having these things available at work, people will use it and get more involved in their own health," Boothe said.

ROI aside, a November survey by Watson Wyatt and the National Business Group on Health found that on average, employers spend about 21 percent of payroll on direct and indirect costs of programs for wellness, sick leave and disability.

To help determine how a business compares with others, the National Business Group on Health offers a free, downloadable "Obesity Cost Calculator" at www.businessgrouphealth.org/healthtopics/obesitycostcalculator.cfm that looks at the cost of unhealthy employees. •

The Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island, an affiliate of the Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA), is dedicated to promoting and supporting health initiatives at businesses and organizations across the state. Additional information is available at wwcri.org.

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