

Solving a Weighty Problem: Companies can combat the rising costs of obesity in the workplace.

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Corporations being strangled by rising healthcare costs and falling productivity can use wellness programs to get a grip on both issues. Just be sure to think long-term: obese employees didn't gain the weight overnight and they won't lose it overnight either.

The Problem

Obesity has created a strange paradox in our society. How can so many Americans be overweight and obese when our country is the leader in advancements for medicine and medical technology? It seems that these two items contradict each other, but they don't. Despite all the medical advances, the United States is one of the most obese industrialized nations.

Although we focus on America in this document, it seems obvious that we are simply "leading the charge" in this area. Obesity is a *global* crisis. Indeed, the phenomenon is commonly called the *globesity epidemic*.



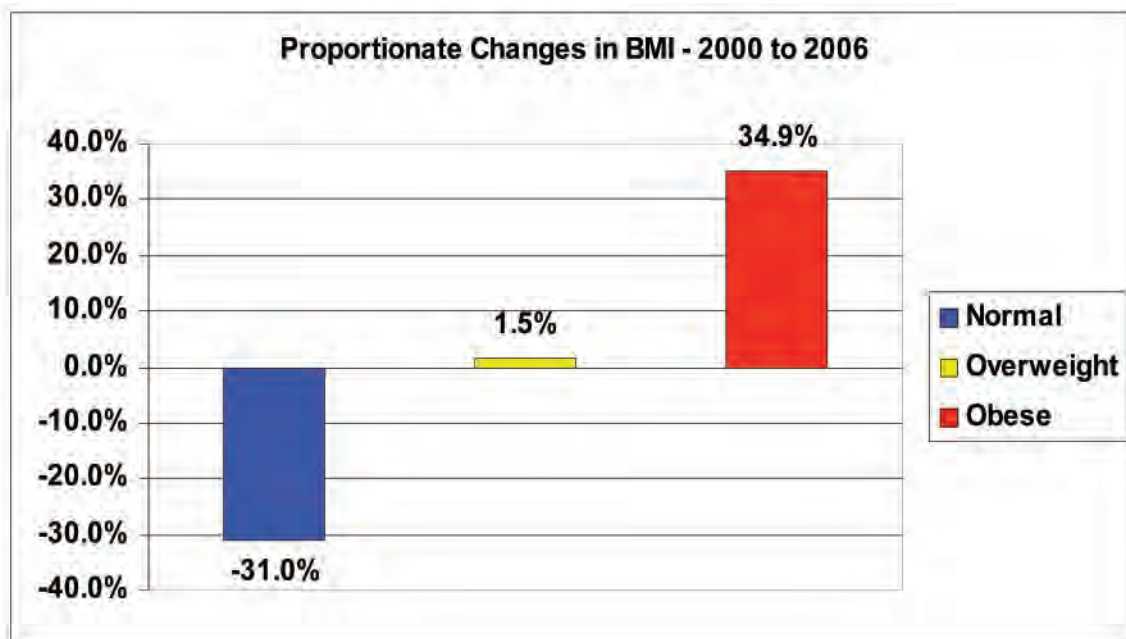
Obesity was once an "old people" problem. In fact, many health professionals thought it was okay to gain weight as you grew older, especially after you crossed the fifty-year milestone. Look at the old height-weight charts that insurance companies once used and you will see this is true. But today obesity is affecting people of all ages and the impact of this has yet to be measured—mostly because so many of our cost assessments and predictions for related diseases are done retrospectively.

Why our society is getting fatter is really no mystery. We eat more—a lot more—and exercise even less than we did ten years ago. Portion sizes have ballooned. Our dual-income families have less time to prepare nutritious meals, relying on calorie-dense processed and fast food offerings for more and more meals. Thanks to our suburban lifestyles, we drive everywhere. Our kids, who (not incidentally) are heavier than ever, watch TV and spend hours surfing the Net instead of playing hard outdoors.

The workplace itself shares some of the blame. Automation is proving to be a double-edged sword. Yes, it has enhanced profits and productivity. But at the same time, computers, robots, and all kinds of new equipment have taken the “physical” out of work. As a result, the worker is less physically active today at work. Workers expend fewer calories today than what they did ten or twenty years ago because of this automation. This has been a real culprit in contributing to the obesity epidemic.

The wages of society’s sins are definitely impacting American corporations.

A recent data analysis of the Industrial Physical Capability Services, Inc. (IPCS) new hire database clearly shows that new hire applicants in industry under the age of forty have a greater prevalence of obesity than those over the age of forty. For the younger age groups, more males than females are obese. More normal weight individuals are becoming obese within a five-year span. This means the economic burden related to increased healthcare costs—not to mention indirect measures such as absenteeism and equipment replacement costs—can only get worse as the younger workforce becomes obese earlier in their prime. Who pays for these costs? What impact will this trend have on productivity and global competition? And what does it mean for *your* company?



When studying the number of normal weight new hire applicants in the year 2000 and comparing those numbers in 2006, there has been a 31 percent decrease. A normal weight applicant has a body mass index greater than 18.49 but less than 25. In contrast, the number of new hire applicants in the United States who were obese in 2000 compared to 2006 has increased by 35 percent. Body mass index is the international measure for obesity. Implications: The industrial community will be spending many more dollars related to obesity for many years to come.

Economic Cost

Data published in several research journals in 2005 show that the obese worker costs a company an extra \$1,432 each year in healthcare costs and \$377 more due to absenteeism and presenteeism (the productivity-draining practice of coming to work when you're not feeling well enough to do so). Add to these numbers indirect costs, which range anywhere from two to twenty times the direct costs, and it's not hard to theorize that obesity costs a company thousands, if not millions, of dollars each year.

A research article that appeared in the March 2006 issue of the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine—*The Cost of Lifestyle Health Risks: Obesity*, by Dr. D. Adam Long—showed the healthcare claim cost breakdown of obesity by gender and by age. Dr. Long's current analysis shows that obesity lifestyle-related healthcare claim cost per member per month for the fifty-five- to sixty-four-year-old age group is \$10 for males and \$13.88 for females. The costs per month per member are conservative in that they do not include prescription drugs related to obesity, which could add 10 to 25 percent. Contrast these figures with the costs associated with the nineteen- to twenty-nine-year-old obese age group: \$0.87 for males and \$3.44 for females per month per employee.

Now . . . what happens to these costs for the younger age group as obesity begins to take its toll more often at the younger ages? It is just a matter of time before these costs begin to skyrocket for the twenty-year-old worker. Imagine paying on average \$11.50 per member per month for a twenty-year-old instead of \$1.50. This means you will be paying higher premiums for forty years on the younger worker instead of fifteen years as with the older obese worker. This could be an economic catastrophe for companies.

Another cost consideration: how much does the obese worker accelerate the replacement timeline for equipment—office machinery, maintenance, and so on—due to additional wear and tear? What does this factor do to long-term budget forecasts? Cases have been reported in which a worker hired to fill a maintenance role can no longer climb stepladders because he or she exceeds the OSHA weight limit. In other cases, warehouse workers have exceeded the weight limit on cherry pickers' safety harnesses. Most office chairs are not built to accommodate obese people. As the number of obese workers grows larger, how many new chairs must be ordered for the office or breakroom—and at what cost? It's not just about buying replacement pieces sooner, but new heavier duty (more expensive) equipment.

Some Sobering Statistics

Adult Population

2000: 29 percent of America's new hire applicants were obese (Body mass index 30 or greater) [Source: Industrial Physical Capability Services, Inc.]

2005: 37 percent of America's new hire applicants were obese

2010: 45 percent of America's new hire applicants projected to be obese—almost one of every two applicants

Children—Future Workers of America

2005: 24 percent of America's children were either overweight or obese

2010: 48 percent of America's children estimated to be either overweight or obese [Source: International Journal of Pediatric Obesity, 2006]

Children and Obesity

In its first publication (March 2006), a new research journal called the International Journal of Pediatric Obesity showed that by the year 2010 nearly half of American children would be overweight or obese (in an article by Dr. Youfa Wang). First, think about the implications of the fact that a new research journal had to be launched just to deal with the overwhelming issue of obesity and children. Second, think about that shocking statistic. The research clearly shows that at least half of these obese children will become obese adults—our future workers.

But it's not just a "future" issue. Don't forget about how much obese children cost *right now*. Being severely overweight increases the chances that a child will suffer physical illness or injury (for obvious reasons) and emotional problems (due in part to low self-esteem and depression/anxiety from being teased and/or ostracized by peers). Not only must your company foot the bill for the inevitable insurance increases associated with obese family policyholders, it also suffers loss of productivity when Mom or Dad has to stay home with sick children.

In short, the obesity epidemic in the United States for both the adult and children populations is real—and is not going away anytime soon. It took our nation more than twenty years to reach the obesity epidemic stage and it will take us at least that long to reverse it. There is no quick fix. Some people say our obesity is no different from our tobacco health crisis. But actually, there is a difference—a big one. It is okay for a person to stop smoking. But it is not okay for a person to stop eating. We need food daily for our very survival. So what is the solution?

The Good News

For the most part, obesity is preventable and correctable. No, it is never easy for an *individual* to lose weight and keep it off. Likewise, it's not easy for a *company* to combat an employee obesity epidemic. Yet, with a proven, scientifically based wellness program and a firm sense of commitment, it is possible. Long-term planning is required to control the costs associated with obesity. A six-week wellness program is *not* the answer. Such flash-in-the-pan efforts will result only in failure. *A company must make a rational program designed to combat obesity part of its budget process and ongoing operations plan.* If it's going to work, you must take it seriously.

Programs that focus on body weight can be part of an effective wellness effort. Body weight (obesity) is the common link to so many diseases, disorders, and illnesses: heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, some cancers, low back injuries, joint replacement, and the list goes on. Focus on body weight long-term and many other wellness components are automatically brought into the fold. It really is a "magic bullet" of sorts. Workers who achieve and maintain a healthy body weight will be less susceptible to the diseases mentioned above and many more. And when you, the leaders, focus on body weight long-term, you send a strong message that the company is committed to a healthier workforce.



Knowledge and motivation work! People choose questionable quick fixes regarding their body weight because they don't understand how their body functions. They don't understand the role of exercise and good nutrition. If they did, it stands to reason that they would no longer rely on the quick-fix method. Give them a solid understanding of how to prevent obesity and related diseases and they will be motivated to make positive changes in their lifestyle that will lead to long-term benefits.

Companies are well served by providing education and incentive programs aimed at encouraging overweight and obese workers to achieve a healthy body weight. These companies must recognize that controlling body weight is a complex proposition, and must avoid the temptation to subscribe to "fad" and "crash" diets that will fail in the long run. Losing weight slowly over time (i.e., twenty-four months) is effective, and the plan you adopt must recognize that reality.

Include Everyone

Also, your wellness plan should focus on all workers. The idea is to make sure the worker who is not obese doesn't become obese in the future. Implement programs and incentives aimed at making sure the "normal weight" person doesn't become a costly statistic. It should go without saying that by inviting

everyone to participate in a wellness program, you minimize the risk that an overweight person will feel “singled out” or humiliated.

And don't forget the family. Spouses and children contribute significantly to your annual healthcare costs; therefore, you have a vested interest in helping them achieve healthy body weights as well. Obesity really is a “family” issue, stemming from lifestyle practices that originate in the home. Make sure any wellness program you implement in the workplace takes your employees' dependents into account.

Many companies are getting involved in community-based programs to combat obesity. Obviously, this demonstrates goodwill and social responsibility. Corporations *can* play a key role in resolving the obesity epidemic for adults and children. For instance, sponsoring educational programs designed to teach

children the importance of physical activity and nutrition is a good first step. But for the program to succeed, the commitment must be long-term. For example, communities need more playgrounds that are safe and that encourage play and fun. Funding and maintaining such a playground can be a wonderful way to spread the “live healthy” gospel.

Five Factors to Look for in a Wellness Program

1. Long-term timeline. It takes about twenty-four months to lose weight and establish healthful lifestyle habits that allow employees to maintain their new bodies. Fad diets and get-thin-quick programs are doomed to fail.
2. A philosophy centered on small, gradual changes. People cannot transform their lifestyles overnight. Slow and steady wins the race.
3. Emphasis on education. When employees understand how weight loss works, as opposed to “following orders,” they're more likely to buy in and voluntarily make changes. Teach it; don't preach it.
4. A family-centered approach. Today's children are tomorrow's workers (and today's family insurance policy liabilities). Choose a program that helps them eat right and exercise, too.
5. The fun factor. If employees don't get to bond with coworkers over recipes, walk together at lunch, or engage in some friendly departmental competition, they're less likely to stick to it. Select a program that makes it fun.

Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.® Program

Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.®, created by T. Gilliam & Associates, is one of the first wellness programs in the country designed to teach all individuals about how to manage their body weight. The central tenet of this program is that by achieving a healthy body weight, workers are less susceptible to the diseases and illnesses that impact performance, absenteeism, and productivity. It is an

integrated program that starts with a simple premise: it takes time to achieve a healthy body weight. A person who is eighty pounds overweight needs a slow and sensible approach to shedding the weight. It took him or her several years to gain that eighty pounds and it will take several years to lose it. Companies that commit less than two years to dealing with the body weight issue will fail in their efforts.

The **Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.**[®] program is designed for everyone: the individual with a healthy body weight, the overweight individual, and the obese individual. It is for the young and the old. It is for the employee, the spouse at home, and the children who will become the next generation of workers.

It is the goal of this wellness program to provide educational materials and other tools that make it possible to manage body weight via subtle changes in eating habits and physical activity patterns. For example, if a person consumes three twelve-ounce soft drinks a day at 140 calories a pop, the **Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.**[®] philosophy might encourage him or her to consume two soft drinks a day and replace the other with a bottle of water. This subtle lifestyle change will result in a reduction of nearly 52,000 calories consumed over the year—resulting in a sixteen-pound weight loss. Add a fifteen-minute daily walk and the individual will lose another six to eight pounds.

You are who you are! You have been eating and drinking what you have been eating and drinking for years. Many diet and exercise programs fail because they try to suddenly and drastically overhaul those habits. The **Move It. Lose it. Live Healthy.**[®] program provides various ways an individual can make subtle changes in his or her lifestyle over time. Small, doable efforts—ordering the side salad instead of fries, snacking on carrots instead of potato chips, walking for thirty minutes during lunch—add up to big results.

The program's foundation is a book titled *Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy. Achieve a Healthy Workplace One Employee at a Time!* (T. Gilliam & Associates, LLC, 2005, ISBN: 0-9762703-0-7, \$19.95), by Thomas B. Gilliam, Ph.D., and Jane Neill, R.D., L.D. Integrated and coordinated with the book are quarterly newsletters, monthly posters, weekly challenges, children's books, and numerous other items all designed to provide knowledge on how to achieve a healthy body weight.

The book's last four chapters are written specifically for the family. They discuss ways to make sure children become more physically active and eat more nutritiously. These chapters introduce the Heart "E" Heart cast of characters in the home—the same characters used in the Heart "E" Heart curriculum designed for pre-school age children and primary grade children in the local schools. *No other program offers a turnkey program integrated with a consistent wellness message between work, home, and school as does the **Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.**[®] program.*

Finally, one of the strengths of **Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.**[®] is its versatility in regard to individual needs and differences. The program can be customized for any population or age group.

Conclusion

Long-term, education-based wellness programs like **Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.**[®] *do* work. Companies simply have to devote enough time, effort, and commitment to them. Your workforce and their dependents *can* achieve a healthy body weight, which will lead to better profits, greater productivity, and a happier workforce in the long-term. The result is a win-win for everyone.

Finally, you may be surprised by some of the positive results you see unfolding in your company. Losing weight can be a very life-affirming experience. People gain confidence. They get happier. They see firsthand the rewards of working hard to meet goals. This translates to more effective, productive employees who are likely to feel intense loyalty to you for helping them turn things around. So, a company that empowers people to lose weight may not see an improvement only in healthcare costs; it may also gain better employees. And that, in and of itself, is a good reason to make the commitment.

To find out more about **Move It. Lose It. Live Healthy.**[®], call us at 877-316-5097 or visit www.healthybodyweight.com.