

Fit for hire

As employers look for health-care cost containment, some job seekers can show evidence that they can deliver at least their share.

By Robert D. Chadbourne

Fitness and wellness are alive and well on America's college and university campuses, and related offshoot programs are proliferating. Results of a 1993 study by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, titled the *National Survey of Worksite Health Promotions Activities*, found that of 1,507 campuses sampled, 81 percent had introduced a fitness and wellness center.

Campus programs

With thousands of individuals on campus both dropping in for a workout and participating in academic majors to operate fitness and wellness centers, Bowling Green State University in Ohio has taken a new logical, sequential step by introducing its program, Fit-for-Hire (FFH). The eight-week program aims to enhance employment opportunities for graduates by teaching them how to market the healthy lifestyle as a desirable plus in later one-on-one encounters at the personnel office.

"There are two types [of individuals]. The type that recognizes the need for a healthy lifestyle and does something about it and improves; and the type that does not, and proceeds on their way to being an overweight person," says Richard Bowers, professor of health and physical education at Bowling Green. Bowers, an exercise program director, oversees FFH.

Now eight years old, FFH addresses a major concern of most Americans: health care. An FFH graduate actually holds a gold certificate describing him/her as a health-aware person who has backed up awareness with a course and test to meet standards.

"We evaluate about 200 to 300 seniors each year with a full one-hour test, and we do 1,200 to 1,500 cholesterol screening tests," explains Bowers, who says, "It's not our purpose to give passing or failing grades. We refer to it as an assessment they can use, talk about -- in individual counseling."

The program looks at cholesterol, blood pressure, body composition, aerobic fitness and lifestyle analysis. When there is concern, students can avail themselves of individualized programs in exercise, diet or special counseling for a problem such as quitting smoking.

"Bowling Green has an excellent program," reports Forrest C. Tyson, director of the health fitness program at Springfield College in Massachusetts, one of the first schools to define fitness center directors as an academic major with a 1979 graduation of three. (Last year more than 60 graduated with more than 90 percent immediate placement.)

Another pioneer in the field was the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, which developed a program called Fit Stop. The program involves upperclassmen in health-related fields who pull cart-mounted testing equipment into dorms to perform blood pressure and endurance testing.

Health and wellness programs on campuses are growing. "Now, as colleges and universities open fitness centers, they also start these new programs," says Tyson, who has tracked the offshoots of the corporate premise that a healthy worker is absent fewer days, back from hospitalization quicker and represents an annual \$1,000 savings to his employer. In more mundane areas, the person practicing a healthful lifestyle is less apt to smoke, less likely to abuse alcohol or drugs and more likely to use seat belts.

At first glance it would seem America's 18-to-22 age group would least need a fitness program and a fitness certificate as a sales tool to a corporation focusing on health care cost containment. However, in the education profession, the in-house jargon contains the expressions, "The Freshman-Five," "The Freshman-10" and "The Freshman-15" to identify the individual who is 1) a freshman and 2) beginning to show varying degrees of "spare tire" around the middle.

"They're away from home for the first time, they're learning to drink beer, they're not eating well, and they're keeping irregular hours," points out Bowers, who continues, "Many recognize the situation and get in shape. Others don't, and many of them flunk out."

The "coping with college" problem is often dealt with by colleges and universities with special orientation programs such as *The Freshman Year Experience* with attention to physical fitness as part of the curriculum. In terms of productivity, physical fitness is surely one contributor to at least one unpleasant college statistic. The number of students requiring one or more additional semesters to reach degree requirements is growing steadily. Many school catalogs now include breakdown costs based on a four-year and a more-than-four-year time period.

Benefit to gaining employment?

Just how aggressively a graduate with a FFH certificate should use it to market him/herself can be a delicate matter and brings a variety of responses from human resource professionals who were asked for a first impression evaluation of FFH.

When a company's mission is such that it does not hire for a wide range of jobs, attitudes toward recognizing physical fitness and health awareness tend to take a back seat.

At Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company in Springfield, Mass., where such areas as food service and custodial maintenance are contracted services, nearly everyone is a white collar employee with great reliance on the computer. "We don't look at physical characteristics, only the abilities needed to perform the job," says Eva Dion, of Mass Mutual's human resources department.

"I'd applaud such a program, and would hope it would establish a lifestyle an employee would follow throughout a career," said Meredith Wise, personnel specialist at Western Massachusetts Employers Association in Ludlow, Mass. Wise goes on to say, "I'd be a little hesitant to attach a certificate to a resumé on an initial contact, because in the actual hiring process, we're restricted in evaluating a person's ability to perform the essential functions of the job. However, at a later interview or discussion at the point of an offer being made, it would be a plus to bring it up."

Others cite the danger of running afoul of the Americans with Disabilities Act by favoring an applicant using an outward selling point of being health aware and committed to a healthy lifestyle. But Bowling Green's Bowers dismisses that approach with emphasis.

"Everyone has capabilities, and most hires are through the framework of 'the person,'" he says, pointing out, "It's a matter of how you package your program. We test people with handicaps, and we give them FFH certificates according to their abilities."

"There's no reason any potential employee can't tell an employer he is aware of the health care cost issue, and that he has a positive attitude toward lifestyle and recognizes he, as an employee, would have a responsibility in the battle to control costs," says Bowers, predicting the message will fall on appreciative ears.

As for males vs. females needing fitness help, Bowling Green (62 percent male; 38 percent female) finds the issue to be pretty much a wash, and turnout for testing and assistance is in proportion, with the school promoting its programs at freshman orientation, through brochures and in the student newspaper.

Benefit to the fitness industry?

Is promoting enhancement of post-graduation job opportunities an area suitable for marketing by the commercial fitness facility industry?

"If employers would choose their questions carefully, and show that health care cost containment is really important to them, our industry would respond with tailored programs," says Marina Lebow, general manager of New England Health & Racquet, a multipurpose fitness and wellness center in West Springfield, Mass.

"If I hung out a sign that read, 'Get Tested Here. Get A Fitness Certificate,' people would say, 'who cares? I don't need one,'" continues Lebow, who sees nothing wrong with asking, "How do you stay in shape?" or asking a person who has had an arm amputated, "What do you do to keep your upper vascular system in shape?"

"I'd be a lot less concerned about an applicant who was obese if he or she recognized it and was addressing it," concludes Lebow.

"If I managed a commercial gym or fitness center, and wanted to be part of the picture in the medical cost containment equation, I'd be looking at the government statistic that shows 85 percent of newly created jobs are from growth of small businesses," says JoAnn Kroll, Bowling Green's director of career services, who makes it very clear to visiting corporate recruiters on campus that a positive attitude toward fitness and wellness is the mark of a Bowling Green graduate.

"While many large corporations have fitness centers, the small firm probably does not," says Kroll, who advises the commercial facility manager to be sure programs match various work time settings to attract those available for early morning, lunch hour and evening visits, along with special programs to accommodate the growing numbers of workers able to take advantage of flex-time choices.

"There are several ways to reference FFH," says Kroll. We don't put it on resumés, but raising the point that 'I believe in a healthy lifestyle' has its place in the preliminary job-hire process, emphasizing 'I had the self-discipline to invest eight weeks in a program' comment.

"I don't see FFH as a tremendously important item in the job search, but I certainly would label it 'value-added.'"

"It can still be a murky and potentially dangerous area," reports Kevin Hacke, executive director of the Association for Worksite Health Promotion in Northbrook, Ill., who adds, "Where there used to be a move toward mandating certain aspects of a healthy employee lifestyle, the workplace has moved away from the stick and more toward the carrot. Now we're more likely to see incentives,

premium reductions in shared health benefits, and other methods of inducing those out of shape to get into a program."

Hacke mentioned his experience monitoring Quaker Oats, the Gannett Co. and Steelcase Furniture in Michigan as major firms that looked at fairly aggressive inducements to join in physical fitness, but scaled down their approaches after legal studies.

Another job issue involving fitness is staffing. At high-pressure aircraft engine manufacturer Pratt & Whitney in Connecticut, the company promotes fitness by not only maintaining a fitness center, but also by staffing at a level that assures workers can leave the assembly line to use it and perhaps become active at a neighborhood facility.

A middle ground: corporations & fitness

Thus, it is middle ground for which the search is centered. The workplace seeks cost containment, but is limited in questioning on fitness.

As fitness and wellness centers mushroom on the nation's campuses, it is natural for people in education to wonder about new opportunities to take from new technologies, and whether continued fitness center involvement will be fruitful.

"The Aerobic Institute in Dallas has cited research that indicates 50 million Americans need physical activity," notes Bowers, who concludes, "We begin at the other end of the spectrum. We turn out the fitness- and wellness-conscious graduate."

That boils the issue down to: If a healthful lifestyle and attitude can now be made a matter of record, can the record be considered in the hiring process?

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