



Guides to Corporate Fitness Success

Lockheed Martin Global Communications has efficient facilities and effective programming.

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An onsite fitness center is an important recruiting and retention tool for corporations. Employers who offer exercise opportunities experience improved job performance, productivity and morale, and may benefit from reduced healthcare costs, reduced absenteeism and reduced turnover.¹ To ensure a company reaps the greatest rewards from its onsite fitness center, managers must be able to create exercise programs that serve the unique needs of the company's employees, while at the same time conserving company resources. Try using the following ideas from Lockheed Martin Global Communications (LMGT) to help make your corporate fitness center an integral part of the company, instead of just an exercise room.

Three aspects of fitness

Corporate fitness programs should include at least the three basic aspects of fitness: cardiovascular conditioning, resistance training and flexibility training. What can be offered depends on the available space and the money the company is willing to invest. As a corporate fitness manager, you may be running a fully stocked facility with all of the latest cardiovascular and strength-training equipment, or you may be managing a facility that only has a treadmill and a rack of free weights. In the latter case, you must be creative in giving your clients the full fitness experience. Using the outdoors, offering group exercise classes and forming corporate recreation leagues are all ways to ensure that customers are getting fit.

LMGT in Bethesda, Md., started its fitness program 17 years ago with a 500-square-foot room for group exercise classes and a few pieces of cardiovascular and strength-training equipment. Today, exercise facilities at both of its locations are approximately 3,000 square feet each. Each facility has 14 pieces of cardiovascular equipment, 14 pieces of strength-training equipment, a rack of free weights ranging from 1 to 80 pounds, and five to eight group exercise classes a week.

Keep costs modest

Most companies want reasonable results (such as improved morale) from modest exercise expenditures, particularly when the workforce is small. For example, having several full-time personal trainers, group exercise instructors and administrative personnel on staff might be possible for a large corporation, but a small company may only be able to afford one fitness employee. That person might be asked to be a personal trainer, group exercise instructor, facility manager, program director and nutrition consultant all in the same day. If your company must hire only one person, it should hire someone who has many fitness talents and also has some managerial experience.

LMGT has a manager and three exercise specialists who cover two facilities for 13 hours each day, five days a week. Each person must be able to teach group exercise classes, provide personal training, run the facility and answer basic nutrition questions. It also offers an internship position three times a year to a college student majoring in health or fitness. It uses the interns to expand its knowledge base and programming options, as well as to substitute for the regular staff members when they are on vacation or sick leave. In this way, staffing costs are kept to a minimum.

Workforce-appropriate program design

An exercise facility and its programs should be designed with the workforce in mind. Employees who are desk-bound will need a general exercise program that includes all three aspects of fitness, while construction workers may need special equipment to strengthen the lower back and upper body. Also, a majority of corporate fitness customers would benefit from a class on stress management.

To get an idea of what to offer, ask your members. Get their input on what types of group exercise classes, seminars and other programs they would like you to offer. Their advice, mixed with your knowledge of their needs and limitations, can create a well-rounded fitness program that focuses on helping members lose weight, improve their general health, relieve stress and more. Occasionally, you can offer programs that reward members who are extremely fit (i.e., sports competitions), but make sure you balance those with programs for employees who are more physically challenged (i.e., basic stretching classes).

Liability

The issue of liability is challenging for corporate fitness center managers. Companies tend to be conservative about who they let into the fitness center, what programs are run and who staffs it. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) has excellent guidelines for pre-participation clearance for exercise, requiring people who have more than one cardiovascular risk factor (high blood pressure, high cholesterol, family history, etc.) to obtain a physician's clearance before joining a fitness facility. Sometimes facilities may lose potential members because people do not want to obtain a physician's clearance before beginning an exercise program, but the risk of not obtaining a clearance is high compared to the potential revenue lost.

Companies also have to be very careful with incident documentation. Any injury that occurs at the workplace (even in a fitness facility) while on company time can become a potential claim for worker's compensation. For instance, if your member injures a knee while exercising and is required to be off work for six weeks due to surgery, that person can file a worker's compensation claim or short-term disability claim that will be paid for by your company. Incident documentation needs to start with your fitness center staff to make sure the employee gets all the money they may be entitled to, and to determine whether the employee is trying to make a false claim. Without proper documentation, a simple incident can turn into a legal nightmare.

Harassment issues must also be dealt with. Since harassment is not tolerated in the workplace, this applies to the corporate fitness facility. Sometimes members think they can "loosen up" their language or actions since they are in a relaxed atmosphere or because they have changed out of their suit. However, the same rules still apply. If there is a problem, it must be documented, taken up to the company's human resource department and, if applicable, disciplinary actions must be taken.

Equipment and space

Corporate fitness centers need to offer clean, well-maintained equipment and facilities (including lockers and showers) in pleasant surroundings that are accessible to employees throughout the day. Most corporate fitness users will be in the facility before work, at lunch or after work, creating three distinct "busy times" for a company that is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. But some companies with 24-hour operations will need fitness staff around the clock to accommodate all employees' work schedules. For example, Citicorp Fitness Center in Hagerstown, Md., teaches a group exercise class at midnight.

Also, many corporate fitness managers must deal with a facility that is converted office space or set in a small corner of the basement. This presents unique marketing challenges to make sure all employees know where the facility is located and what equipment is offered. Standard ceiling heights in many offices do not accommodate taller pieces of equipment, and the centers are often not big enough to offer a separate area for group exercise classes.

Incentives

In the long run, fitness is its own reward, but short-term incentives encourage participation. Tracking and rewarding faithful attendance and personal improvements, such as enhanced aerobic fitness or weight loss, are more appropriate than direct competition among participants. It is intimidating enough for most people to work out alongside a coworker or their boss; a corporate fitness manager does not need to add to this stress by only offering programs that reward "the best" or "the most fit."

One way you can offer incentives is by "spotlighting" a member on a monthly basis who has accomplished a fitness-related achievement. Examples include people who have lost weight, people who have participated in charity events and those who have completed their first marathon. You can also reward members who have perfect attendance or who help bring in another member. FM

REFERENCES

DiNubile, N.A. Exercise and the bottom line: Promoting physical and fiscal fitness in the workplace. *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* 27(2), 1999.

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