

HEALTHIEST EMPLOYERS OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA

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The Philadelphia Business Journal teamed up with an independent research firm to identify local companies with winning wellness strategies.

WELLNESS ON THE JOB

WHAT MAKES FOR A HEALTHY WORKPLACE?

With the Philadelphia Business Journal honoring the region's healthiest workplaces this week, it seems like a good time to ponder the question: What would be the ultimate healthiest place to work?

The answer depends on whom you ask.

Dr. David Nash, founding dean of the Thomas Jefferson University School of Population Health, believes the key attribute isn't so much what amenities a company has, but rather the tone its leaders set.

"Companies can say they care about wellness and jump on the latest bandwagon, but that alone isn't enough," Nash said. "Our research shows the leadership sets the wellness and health prevention tone for a company. They have the power to set the cultural barometer for a workplace. If employees see the boss go out and run a marathon, they'll think that must be a good idea and try to mimic that behavior. Smokers and others [who participate



Dr. David Nash

in unhealthy behavior] will recognize they are not with the program. They'll feel isolated and not with the cultural norms of the organization."

Nash said amenities like a workplace gym and healthy snacks in the cafeteria help, but they are pretty far down on his list of what makes a healthy workplace.

"Companies have to align the economic incentives with the culture of wellness they want to create," he said. "They have to say that those who get with the program get their health insurance premiums reduced."

He also said the people in charge need to communicate goals effectively with employees and celebrate achievements publicly, whether it's reduced



Dr. Arthur Frank

absenteeism or weight loss as part of a group initiative.

"The senior-most leaders of an organization have to recognize employee wellness is an economic strategy," Nash said. "When you improve wellness employees are more productive, there are fewer days of missed work and less presenteeism" – a term for when people show up for work with health problems or personal issues that affect their productivity.

Dr. Arthur Frank, chairman of the department of environmental and occupational health at Drexel University's School of Public Health, says creating the ultimate healthy workplace begins with creating a safe work



Richard Cohen

environment.

"Under OSHA mandate, every worker is entitled to a healthy and safe workplace, but in reality not everyone has that here in Philadelphia," Frank said. "Workplaces must be made as safe as possible. That takes both systemic and personal approaches. Systemic approaches include safe equipment. If in an office that means proper, ergonomic computer set-ups, and for blue-collar workers, it means adequate protection against potential hazardous exposures."

Frank also mentioned the importance of culture, saying workers should

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be encouraged to advise management if they perceive any hazards in the workplace – and workers need to be informed of any potential hazardous exposures they may have had.

“For personal approaches to health at work, employers should encourage regular exercise, provide encouragement and opportunity to use stairs, and offer healthy food,” he said.

Richard J. Cohen, president and CEO of Philadelphia-based Public Health Management Corp., had the opportunity to create a healthier workplace for the nonprofit company’s 750 Center City workers when PHMC moved to its new offices in Centre Square about a month ago.

The five floors PHMC is leasing were renovated with an open-office design with amenities such as a fitness center, a cafe with local health food from MANNA (Metropolitan Area Neighborhood Nutrition Alliance), and even an area to store bicycles.

“What we wanted was a place that was open with good light and good air quality to make people feel good,” Cohen said.

One of PHMC’s challenges, he said, is keeping employees away from the less-than-healthy food options available near the new office.

“We bring in nutritious food at the start of every week, and it’s usually gone by the middle of the week,” he said. “We have our own gym and we encourage people to use it by having classes in the beginning of the day, the middle of the day and the end of the day. We have these big, open staircases between floors to encourage people to walk. I’d say 80 percent of our staff use the stairs.”

Cohen, too, said the culture of a workplace is important when emphasizing wellness.

“We all agreed not to eat at our desk to help keep the offices clean,” he said. “We eat in group settings which encourages communication.”

Cohen said the design of the new offices and tone he hopes to set as CEO is one that reduces stress in the workplace. “The world puts enough stress on you,” he said. “If we can give people them an environment with as little stress as possible, and the resources to deal with any stress, that is important.”

– John George