

CORPORATE NETWORK SERVICES

Three years ago, Karen Kalantzis decided that she wanted to do something to encourage her employees to improve their health.

The majority owner and CEO of Corporate Network Services (CNS), an information technology services firm with offices in suburban Washington, D.C. and Florida, Kalantzis saw that many of her employees were not as healthy as they could be. They weren't getting enough exercise, and weren't eating as well as they could either.

Many of the company's 47 employees are in their 20s and 30s, but Kalantzis worried that they were on the road to a range of health problems, such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease. IT work tends to be sedentary, with employees spending hours at their desks staring at computer screens.

The company began by holding an employee health fair. Each year, the fair features a variety of stations, including a table for checking vision; one for gauging blood pressure; another that allowed workers to try on "beer goggles" that simulated how alcohol affects perception and coordination; and a space where a Zumba instructor demonstrated the popular exercise technique.

Kalantzis, who formerly worked for Hewlett-Packard and other large IT companies, hopes the program, which costs about \$4,500 a year, will make the company more efficient, ultimately saving money. She said that while it may not lower health insurance premiums, there are other ways in which it can save money. "Increasing presenteeism is our goal," she said. "We think that this will increase our employees' efficiency, and their energy for their jobs."

Kalantzis also said that the program, which is called "Your Wellness Counts," makes her company more attractive to potential employees. The IT industry is growing, and as a result, companies are competing vigorously for top workers. "We're all trying to recruit the same employees," she said. "I'm a big believer in branding, and wellness is a great way to differentiate our company from others. It's just another good reason to work here." She said that some employees have told her that the wellness program was a major reason they chose CNS when they had more than one job offer.

In 2010, CNS began having regular "lunch and learn" wellness sessions; employees gather in a conference room at the company's headquarters in Poolesville, Maryland to hear speakers on a range of topics, including yoga, women's health and stretching at work. Last year, Kalantzis brought in an expert from an organic market to talk about how certain foods have especially healthy characteristics. The sessions are videotaped and webcast, so that workers in Florida and Ft. Detrick, Maryland (where many CNS employees are now based) can also take part.

Although the wellness program is voluntary, Kalantzis encourages CNS workers to take part. Last year, she began tracking participation. By collecting and using these metrics, she hopes to learn to reach those who so far aren't interested. "If we see we're not reaching our goals," she said, "we follow up with people."

For the past two years, the company has held a holiday weight-loss competition that begins before Thanksgiving and lasts until after New Year's Day. Employees put in \$20 each, and the company matches half of that. Any employee who loses weight is eligible to win some of the money. Kalantzis estimates that during the 2011 contest, about 15 people lost weight, winning between \$20 and \$40 each. "People were into it," she said.

As part of the contest, the company holds a healthy holiday potluck party, in which people bring in low-calorie versions of their favorite recipes. For instance, someone might bring in a dip that uses reduced-fat cream cheese rather than the full-calorie version. After the party, the company posts the recipes on its internal website.

Her efforts are garnering notice. In 2011, the Washington Business Journal named CNS one of its 40 healthiest employers in the Washington area.³¹⁶

CNS encourages health in other ways too. It added medical monitoring equipment to its offices, including blood pressure cuffs, a BMI monitor and a scale. The company reimburses employees for the cost of running in local races, and provides support to local charitable athletic events, such as a 5K race in Poolesville and an all-night relay race to raise money to help those who have cancer. Last year, the company held two events involving physical activity: employees dug trenches to help install rain barrels at a farm a few miles from company headquarters, and played laser tag and other games at an amusement park.

CNS also encourages employees to take advantage of the preventive features of their health insurance. For instance, the company's provider offers an online assessment to help members analyze their health status.

CNS computer engineer Damien Ancruem said CNS' wellness program has made a difference in his life. He said he realized that he needed to watch his cholesterol and exercise more. Since taking the survey, he has begun to take long walks with his wife, and plays more on weekends with his highly energetic 6-year-old son. "They're definitely more concerned about your wellbeing than other companies I've worked for," he said. "That makes a big difference. They honestly care about your health."