

Horton workers shed the pounds

(<http://www.dailysouthtown.com/business/616401,102407healthmatters.article>)

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This time last year, the water cooler talk at Orland Park-based insurance firm Horton Group was different than it is today.

With collegial bravado, employees compare notes on how much physical activity they've done the day before, including how many steps they had registered on the pedometers issued to participants in the company-sponsored Virgin Life Care's HealthMiles program.

"Last year, you'd get to work on Monday morning and everyone would be talking about TV shows, and now they're talking about how they're doing on the Virgin challenge," said Robin Bettenhausen, director of operations.

The program is part of a growing trend of companies using incentives to wrangle ballooning health care costs by getting workers to live healthier lifestyles.

"We asked ourselves, were we setting a standard our clients could follow?" said Kenneth Olson, president of Horton's benefits division, who used the gift cards he earned through HealthMiles to buy new sneakers to replace the ones he wore out.

Illinois companies saw a more than 11 percent increase in health insurance premiums in 2007, according to a Compdata survey. More than 65 percent of companies were, like Horton, implementing wellness programs to keep costs in line.

At Horton, wellness initiatives also include weekly exercise classes, a walking club, health screenings and a Weight Watchers program. And they took "doughnut Friday" off the calendar.

So far, company managers are satisfied with how their experiment is going. Nearly 90 percent of Horton's employees, both full- and part-time, participate in the program. That's up from about 82 percent enrollment when the program debuted in February.

The average person takes about 4,000 steps in one day, and the HealthMiles program encourages people to take at least 7,000 steps by setting the point threshold at that level. Hitting higher benchmarks merits more points. Participation can earn workers up to \$400 per year in gift cards at stores such as Target and Best Buy, and in aggregate they've earned nearly \$20,000-worth so far.

Employees upload their steps to a Web site using a USB connector on their pedometers. They also earn points toward rewards by setting exercise goals on their pages, participating in group competitions and showing improvement in weight and blood pressure on a Virgin kiosk in the company's lunch room.

Horton workers said they are almost never without their pedometers - one described "freaking out" when she lost hers over the weekend - and you have to have a good excuse to take the elevator at the office these days.

Some employees even said the competition and the new office culture has contributed to profound lifestyle changes. A worker who went off blood pressure medicine and others who have shed some pounds are a few of the program's success stories.

"Some days you don't have an incentive to get off the couch," account executive Beth Kilimnik said. "Now, I'm going for an hour walk every night and feeling better about myself."

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