

# Virgin Life Care's HealthMiles

*the next generation in wellness*

By Richard Federico, Workplace Innovation

Why can't it be fun to suddenly want to become healthy? Better still, why can't employees have fun while changing their behavior so they'll become healthier while working?

The simple answer is that few employers have rewarded their employees for changing their behavior — whether it is for using the stairwells, frequently leaving the potato chips at the cash register or using a treadmill to take a break from stress. And really ... has getting healthy ever been fun in the past?

I was recently invited to attend a demonstration of an innovative, entertaining and unique service that makes staying healthy fun. Boston-based Virgin Life Care's HealthMiles Rewards program has brought a startling new dimension to the wellness arena. Instead of counting calories, participants count steps — and have fun doing it. Then they attach to the soon-to-be-shrinking belt line a pedometer that uploads data to a personalized Web page with a simple USB cable.

Instantly there are daily reminders that doing the two-step or the 10-step

during a lunch-time workshop can add steps to the HealthMiles Rewards total and give participants the miles they need to earn a gift card for their favorite items or services.

Sound far-fetched? Not really. Lots of best-place-to-work companies that are in the lead with their expanding and comprehensive wellness initiatives already have many of the key elements in place.

"We offer country-line dancing workshops during lunchtime, promote stairwell walking and provide free fruit on every floor," said Eric Gasbarro, vice president of human resources at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Rhode Island, based in Providence. "I think fun incentives can correlate to lower health-care costs. As a wellness-in-the-workplace award winner, we're always looking for the latest and greatest wellness ideas."

## Focus on Fun

Other companies have tried in small ways to provide financial incentives — but it is rarely fun. It is no surprise that HealthMiles is based on fun, since it was founded

by the epitome of the active lifestyle, Sir Richard Branson, chairman of the global Virgin Group. As its name suggests, the rewards program draws heavily on some of the same consumer concepts that led to the success of Virgin Atlantic's frequent traveler program — except it targets employee health-care consumers.

When browsing through the HealthMiles promotional materials, I found a photo of Branson seated at a

## QUICK LOOK

- ➔ As its name suggests, the rewards program draws heavily on some of the same consumer concepts that led to the success of Virgin Atlantic's frequent traveler program — except it targets employee health-care consumers.
- ➔ During my visit and subsequent demonstration by the HealthMiles team I had the chance to try out all three HealthMiles "Zones" — the GoZone, the HealthZone and the LifeZone, the program's core elements.
- ➔ Employees use the LifeZone's password-protected Web site to set their goals, log their exercise sessions that correspond with their lifestyle, read about the hottest topics in fitness and health, and select and monitor a personal exercise program (complete with animated instructors for exercise).

cool kiosk called a HealthZone. He looks like he is ready to pilot a craft to the moon rather than monitor his weight, blood pressure and body fat to track how well his personal exercise program is doing during a particular week. I imagined employees simulating Branson in a kiosk positioned in their company cafeteria or fitness center and singing “Fly Me to the Moon” while aspiring to make the onboard weight cutoff.

During my visit and subsequent demonstration by the HealthMiles team I had the chance to try out all three HealthMiles “Zones” — the GoZone, the HealthZone and the LifeZone. These are the program’s core services. Here are my observations, zone by zone.

### GoZone

Clipping the GoZone pedometer to my belt was the start of a health commitment I had never made before. The GoZone tracks steps, distance and calories, and participants can upload their activity to the HealthMiles Web site daily. Employees can count steps as part of a personal exercise program, at an onsite corporate fitness center, at participating discounted health centers or at a combination of all three. Because I, like about 80 percent of all employees, have never seen the inside of a fitness center, I chose the personal exercise route.

Counting steps sounds easy enough, but getting them to rise in big enough numbers to earn HealthMiles “Reward Miles” can be challenging. A thousand monthly miles are typically the reward threshold, but employers call the shots on the reward value. They can flex the value of the miles when they implement the program — which, in turn,

flexes their costs because much of the program’s expense is the cost of the reward gift cards that employees redeem.

### HealthZone

With my step count having reached about 50 and knowing I was within 4,500 miles of a gift card, I was led to the HealthZone kiosk. It was far larger than I had envisioned when I saw the Branson promotional photo. As I entered the HealthZone, I immediately stepped on a scale built into the floor. It is hardly noticeable until the computer screen at the participant’s right registers his or her weight in big, bold — and sometimes shocking — numbers. I was pleased the kiosk has a wide backside partition that hides the view from onlookers. “Good planning,” I thought.

### LifeZone

Next I was told to put my thumb on the fingerprint security station in front

of the computer screen to activate my LifeZone personalized Web page. Prior to attending the demo, I filled out the HealthMiles Health Snapshot questionnaire — the program’s customized health-risk assessment survey. The Health Snapshot baseline data, along with my journey into the HealthZone (a bit like the Twilight Zone of another era in terms of the ahead-of-its-time technology), provided everything I needed to know about how I was doing on day one of my exercise program. With only 50 steps, I knew I had a long way to go, but I was having fun and could not wait to revisit the Twilight Zone ... I mean, HealthZone and LifeZone.

Then the real fun began — seeing my personal healthy behavior progress. To update my LifeZone records, I slipped my arm into the blood-pressure sleeve and also updated my body mass index (BMI) based on my latest weigh-in.

FIGURE 1: THE VIRGIN LIFE CARE HEALTHMILES WEB SITE



Employees use the LifeZone’s password-protected Web site to set their goals, log their exercise sessions that correspond with their lifestyle, read about the hottest topics in fitness and health, and select and monitor a personal exercise program (complete with animated instructors for exercise). And, most importantly, it is the tool participants use to track their progress. (See Figure 1 on page 42.) Because the GoZone pedometer can store up to two weeks of step exercises, I thought if I were an employee I would probably visit the cafeteria’s HealthZone kiosk every two weeks and save the time in between for full lunch hours to devour healthy salads.

### The Competitive Fervor


I had passed day one of my planned progress with flying colors — no significant improvement in my health at this stage, of course, but a substantial impact on changing my behavior. The fun experience lit a competitive fire in my belly (coincidentally, the area that needs the most work). For now I’m competing with myself — day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month. But I was really excited about how the HealthMiles Rewards program builds team competitions into the program. Whether it’s individual against individual, team against team or department against department, or even how employees compare to their co-workers in a volunteer charity walk, the competition adds to the fun and the fervor. I could see myself participating in the next 10K in my hometown — well, maybe not quite yet. But I’m looking forward to eventually trading my Rewards Miles for cash that can be used for gift cards at a host of retail, travel and entertainment providers.

### The ROI

The demo was done, but not the discussion. I was especially interested

in how fun can equate to return on investment (ROI) — the only thing that HR senior management wants in a new program, no matter how innovative and compelling it might be. Another observer I know that has also seen the HealthMiles demonstration agreed.

“Wellness incentives are a great idea and badly needed in the workplace; but in the end it’s all about return on investment,” said Joe Wert, vice president of human resources at Reuters. “I think the time has come for employers to give these kinds of incentives a try. After all, little else has worked in efforts to reduce health-care claims by changing employee health behavior.”

Although the aggregate data of the HealthMiles user database (Health Information Portability and Accountability [HIPAA] prohibits individual data) is still fairly small, as the concept continues to build in the United States the early numbers are impressive. Participation is high, behavioral changes are happening and employees are being rewarded. And there’s that intangible, hard-to-measure side benefit that best-place-to-work companies seem to thrive on. Employees are having fun. 

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

In addition to consulting on innovative workplace and wellness issues, Richard Federico is also the editor of [www.TheFedericoColumn.com](http://www.TheFedericoColumn.com), a quarterly online newsletter. He can be reached at [RichardFFederico@yahoo.com](mailto:RichardFFederico@yahoo.com).

#### RESOURCES PLUS

For more information related to this article:

Go to [www.worldatwork.org/advancedsearch](http://www.worldatwork.org/advancedsearch) and:

- Type in this key word string on the search line: **Wellness programs.**

Go to [www.worldatwork.org/bookstore](http://www.worldatwork.org/bookstore) for:

- *Planning Wellness: Getting Off to a Good Start*
- *HR Networking: Work-Life Benefits.*

Go to [www.worldatwork.org/certification](http://www.worldatwork.org/certification) for:

- W3: Health and Wellness Programs — **Creating a Positive Business Impact: Incorporate Health and Wellness into Your Organization.**