

Northeastern Companies Reap Benefits of Healthy Habits

Six winners of the New England Employee Benefits Council's Best Practice awards for 2011 include Ocean Spray's Moms at Work program and Staples' use of computer games to entice the office supply company's younger workers to save for retirement.

- By Lisa Beyer

New moms and dads at Lakeville, Massachusetts-based Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc. can take advantage of a week of paid parental leave thanks to the juice producer's comprehensive Moms at Work program. Launched in 2011, the program is offered to 2,000 employees in the U.S. and includes flexible return-to-work options for new mothers and fathers.

"Ocean Spray continuously looks for ways to enhance the work-life balance of our employees, and we have experienced a shift in demographics as newer-in-career employees have replaced retirees," says benefits manager Susan French. "We began to explore work-life-balance issues and saw opportunities to address the impact of parenthood, and specifically motherhood."

Ocean Spray is one of six winners of the Waltham, Massachusetts-based New England Employee Benefits Council's Best Practice awards for 2011. Announced in November, Framingham, Massachusetts-based office-supply company Staples Inc.; the Massachusetts Group Insurance Commission; national service organization City Year; Eastern Bank; and power systems-maker Vicor Corp. were also recognized.

"From my perspective, the most innovative companies are implementing best practices that address overall well-being, including social, financial, physical, community and career," says Roxann Kerr Lindsey, vice president of CBIZ Benefits & Insurance Services in Leewood, Kansas.

Kerr Lindsey says effective change begins with the organization embracing the concept as an important part of their culture and taking the steps to change it when necessary.

"This is not a quick fix by any means," she notes. "You begin with a two- to three-year strategy but it's really more like a three- to five-year strategy. It takes a full year to just get comfortable with the philosophy and terminology."

According to Kerr Lindsey, the process begins with surveys of the target population, followed by discussions with key executives to determine a baseline and a goal and to obtain their buy-in. Then it's time to develop the strategic plan.

Staples uses computer games to entice younger workers to plan finances and save for retirement. One game is called the Bite Club and features a vampire with the slogan, "When you're immortal, retirement is eternal."

"We launched the program to our U.S. retail associates in the fall of 2011 and have received great feedback so far," says Amy Costello, senior analyst, benefits, strategy and design for Staples Advantage, a division of Staples.

Costello says younger employees who work at the retail level can play the games and link to the 401(k) vendor to enroll mid-game.

"We wanted a creative way to boost participation, and this program is doing that," she says.

At Eastern Bank, a "birthday as paid time off" program provides incentives for employees to exercise and lead healthy lifestyles, and Vicor enhanced its 401(k) features and communication to boost participation by 20 percent and the deferral rate by 54 percent. The campaign includes mailings, one-on-one meetings, group seminars, fliers and emails.

Senior executives are driven by economics and productivity, says Dee Eddington, director of the Health Management Research Center at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

"If you're not impacting economics and productivity, it's been my experience that CEOs will listen to you, but they won't do much about it," he says.

Kerr Lindsay says that once there is support from the top, selecting the right vendors to partner with, such as a supplier of fresh fruit or a company that stocks vending machines with healthier snacks, is critical.

"You must take a holistic stance; for example, if you support gym memberships but have vending machines full of junk food, what message are you sending?" she says.

And she believes that making preventive care more accessible to employees, by offering free vision exams, can help change employees' health habits.

"Employers save money and increase engagement when they can get their employees to do the right thing, and if an exam is free, it's a no-brainer to get one," Kerr Lindsey says. "Or, you give employees time off to volunteer, and that may contribute to their social well-being, which comes right back to the workplace."

She says that outreach to employees is critical.

"If you can connect people who have challenges, such as trying to stop smoking or lose weight, they will feel better about their efforts and be more accountable."