

Health Care Reform Opens Many Opportunities for Fitness Jobs in Corporate Wellness

The new health care reform legislation, along with initiatives by the Obama administration to provide incentives for corporations to create a healthier, more active American workforce, has opened a huge window of career opportunities for fitness professionals in the area of “corporate wellness.”

“This is the best time to be in wellness,” said Jill Dorris, Worksite Health Promotion Consultant and operator of Well-Connected, a small worksite health-promotion consulting firm that specializes in developing and delivering wellness programs to corporations in the San Diego and Orange County areas of California (www.well-connected.org/).

Gregory Florez, chief executive officer and founder of First Fitness, Inc., and Fit Advisor.com, which provide fitness technology, personal coaching, and training programs to executives and employees, including Fortune 500 companies, echoed Dorris’ sentiments (www.twitter.com/fitadvisor).

“A lot of health care programs are becoming more consumer-directed and there is a greater reliance on the employees to take care of their health, and as such, they are being rewarded with money, days off and other incentives to become more active,” Florez said.

Given the growing career opportunities for fitness professionals in the area of corporate fitness, ACE has asked Dorris and Florez to share their views on their own requirements for hiring fitness professionals; discuss differences in population, culture and programming at corporate vs. commercial health club settings; and outline opportunities for creating your own corporate wellness programs.

The Education and Background That Fitness Professionals Need to Enter Corporate Wellness

According to Florez, understanding the corporate population and its culture requires specific know-how and skills.

“The first thing to look at is a community college or university-based program for a degree or classes that deal with the area of corporate wellness,” Florez.

An ACE certification offers an optimal start. But to have a career in corporate wellness and gain a better understanding of the changed corporate world (technologies that allow workers to work remotely, etc.), continuing education is required, according to Florez.

Examples include college classes that address models of corporate culture or how behavioral change affects employees' wellness.

Dorris, who started working in corporate wellness in 2000, said she got her start with an intense weekly corporate wellness training program at the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas, Tx., back in 1999.

Since then, Dorris has completed numerous other courses, seeks out educational workshops and always stays abreast of industry trends by reading newspaper articles and scientific journals.

She anticipates that the new health care reform bill will raise corporate wellness to the next level.

Like Florez, Dorris' firm also contracts with fitness professionals to provide group fitness classes and personal training for corporate clients.

Both emphasize that employees' needs and goals are often different than those of health club members.

"You have people who are often more stressed and are much less motivated than gym members," Florez said. "That's because employees often are extrinsically motivated (by incentives provided by the company) rather than intrinsically motivated."

Most corporations hire corporate wellness companies to manage their own programs.

The corporate wellness firm, in turn, contracts with full-time or part-time fitness professionals or contractors to lead certain wellness programs, teach group fitness classes and provide one-on-one personal training.

Corporate Fitness Professionals

Dorris said when she contracts with fitness professionals to serve her corporate clients, she first looks for individuals who act and dress professionally.

"I look for someone who understands the corporate culture," Dorris said.

Given that corporations tend to be more conservative than commercial health clubs, professionalism starts with the instructors' understanding that they need to cover up when walking through the company halls and cafeteria. No company executive wants to see a fitness professional walk around in skimpy clothing.

Group fitness instructors should make it a point to choose music that is non-offensive and upbeat. Personal trainers need to provide a safe and effective environment when dealing with a workforce that often is sedentary, overweight or obese, and has little or no experience with exercising.

Dorris also expects fitness professionals to carry their own insurance.

Corporate Incentives

America's rising overweight and obesity crisis and the associated spiraling out-of-control health care costs have created a need by corporations to provide rewards and incentives to employees willing to make a positive lifestyle change, Florez said.

Altruism is less a factor than the necessity to curb rising health insurance costs to cover employees, which is a significant corporate expense. By creating a healthier workforce, firms reap the rewards of having a more productive workforce and less absenteeism.

Under the health care reform wellness provision, small businesses can apply for government grants up to \$50,000 over three years, or up to 50 percent of the total cost to implement a wellness program, Dorris said. Qualifying small firms must have 100 or fewer employees who work 25 hours or more a week.

Statistics show that healthy workers are more productive, require fewer doctor visits and call in sick less often. Rates of absenteeism are lower. And healthy workers tend to be more "present" in their daily job activities by showing up less tired, with fewer health problems and with more energy, Dorris said.

Types of Corporate Wellness Programs

Corporate wellness programs can take various shapes and forms.

The key is that employees are involved early on in the decision-making process. If the program isn't fun and something of their liking, they will either not participate or drop out, Florez pointed out.

Creating teams and group activities is an effective way to allow workers to socialize, keep each other accountable and create some friendly competition.

Here are some of Florez' ideas for creating group activities:

- Find out what exercises employees are interested in, and then start group exercise classes during lunch: yoga, Pilates, walking groups, strength-training, etc.
- Create specific monthly programs such as "getting ready for bathing suit season"
- Incorporate technology, such as a pedometer to provide incentives for employees to walk more, or the Wii Fit. In Florez' experience, Wii Fit games such as golf, tennis and yoga can have wide appeal.

A Corporate Client Leads by Example

Dorris' long-time San Diego-based corporate client Resmed, which creates technologies to alleviate sleep-disordered breathing, offers its 340 employees not only access to an 8,000-square-foot state-of-the art corporate gym for \$15 a month, including group

exercise classes, but also incentives and rewards for joining weight-management programs and participating in health-oriented initiatives.

Here are some of Resmed's wellness programs, which are facilitated by Dorris:

- A 12-week weight-management program offered by Kronos Optimal Health Company. A participating employee pays \$95, with Resmed contributing \$100 in addition to a \$50 company rebate, provided the employee commits to the program for 10 weeks.
As part of the program, employees have a weekly meeting with a registered dietician to learn about healthy food choices and participate in a weekly physical activity. Additionally, each employee gains access to online services, such as a daily food log, a daily caloric goal and information on healthy eating (www.kronoshealth.com).
- A six-week program where employees join online basketball teams with five players on each team. Each employee who commits to a daily healthy habit, such as eating a certain amount of fruits and veggies, gets to drag the ball through the hoop on a computer screen, earning a point for the team. The team that earns the most points over the six-week period wins the game. Meanwhile, Dorris keeps track behind the scenes of each employee's lifestyle improvements.
- A weekly supply of healthy snack foods provided by employees for employees. A team of five to 10 employees is provided a list of healthy food choices. Each week, employees rotate to buy healthy snacks for members on the team. This keeps employees away from the vending machine while educating them about healthier eating.

Dorris, who has created wellness programs for Resmed since 2000, said she has seen mixed results, with some employees making a true lifestyle change, others falling back to old habits and many opting out of the programs entirely.

Ultimately, it's up to each employee to make the change.

"I think employees know what they need to do (in terms of eating better and exercising), but they need the environmental support and accountability to help reinforce good habits," Dorris said. "I can ask employees how many fruits and veggies they should eat each day and they know the answer. But a lot of them feel stressed and I try to take away as many barriers as I can."