Healthiest Employers
Larger employers take holistic approach to health
Incentives help employees achieve their healthy goals
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When Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts started its wellness program in 2005, participation was the main goal.

Employees got credit just for attending an event or joining a gym.

“As the program evolved, we moved to more outcome-based participation,” said Debra Weafer, vice president of human resources. “Instead of just attending a weight-loss class, now employees get rewarded if they achieve a certain goal.”

BCBS, along with Genzyme Corp. and Eastern Bank, were named finalists in the large company Healthiest Employers category.

Other unique aspects of the BCBS program include penalties (higher premiums) for tobacco use, and rewards (no co-pays) for tobacco cessation. Co-pays are also waived for meds for underlying diseases, such as diabetes and asthma.

Last year, the company began a pilot study with on-site walking stations. Treadmills were outfitted with headphones, laptop stands and phones, and 120 employees volunteered one hour a day, three days a week to walk while working.

“We took pre-walk biometrics like blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, and will take them again after six months,” Weafer said.

Employee Robert Giles doesn’t have to wait six months.

“I’ve been attending Weight Watchers and the walk station pilot,” he said. “I’ve lost almost 70 pounds and my life has changed for the better.”

Genzyme Corp. in Cambridge works with several vendors to run a wide-ranging wellness program for its 4,200 Massachusetts employees.

Through its health insurer, BCBS, Genzyme offers employees reimbursements for joining a gym or weight loss program. The company also works with Best Doctors to help employees find medical specialists and second opinions.

Another vendor produces monthly newsletters and webinars on topics ranging from stress management to good sleep habits, and aging gracefully to cultural awareness and bullying.
Another vendor runs lunchtime yoga, meditation, walking and other fitness classes and talks on nutrition, sleep, stress, “anything that has to do with fitness and wellness,” said Sue Gillis, benefits analyst.

Genzyme also sets up health information tables in company cafeterias.

“For February we did a heart-healthy table,” Gillis said. “With summer coming, we’ll do a table on skin care.”

The company’s employee health and safety group also sponsors a health fair twice a year with screenings and information.

Wellness is part of the culture and values at Eastern Bank.

“It’s part of our relationship building philosophy,” said Nancy Stager, executive vice president of human resources. “We want to have people here for the long haul. Wellness is part of that strategy.”

Stager said the bank’s approach to wellness is “holistic,” involving not just physical and mental health, but financial health as well for its 1,800 employees.

Ten years ago, the company built a full gym for its 500 employees and family members in its Lynn operations center. Other employees in its 94 branches can receive reimbursements for gym membership, weight-loss and smoking cessation classes.

The company holds “lunch-and-learn” classes on topics such as healthy eating, physical activity, to financial management and retirement. It sponsors employee recognition programs for participating in various wellness activities.

“We had over 900 employees earn their birthday off for participating in wellness events,” Stager said.