

Firms Learn Health Tactics

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In between hiring and firing, it makes good business sense for human resource managers to keep their employees healthy

By offering benefits such as discount memberships to gyms and removing fatty foods from the corporate cafeterias and vending machines, companies can contain rapidly rising health care costs that hamstring businesses.



Peter Townsley says such prevention tactics are foremost. "Once such awareness methods are in place, companies will be in a better position to negotiate with insurance companies and lower their premiums," said Mr. Townsley, a spokesman for the Georgia Department of Human Resource's cardiovascular health initiative.

Speaking to a group of 40 human resource and health care professionals Wednesday, Mr. Townsley said that everything from promoting leisurely walks and dieting to bringing in doctors to test workers' blood pressure will help prevent the onset of illness and save a company money in the long run.

"Employees are your greatest assets," he said after a monthly luncheon meeting of the Society for Human Resource Management Augusta Area Chapter. "It costs a little money up front, but prevention is worth it."

The state group is creating seminars and workshops to educate employers on how healthier workers can cut costs.

"If these 12 percent to 17 percent annual rises keep coming, it will cost about \$45,000 a year to cover an employee," Mr. Townsley said. "That's astronomical. We can't afford to go there."

The specter of rising health care costs has caused companies to shift more of the premium costs to workers in the past year, lowering take-home pay and hurting morale. This comes on the heels of repeated premium rises, which have soared by double-digit percentages in the past few years and outpaced wage increases, Mr. Townsley said.

Aside from burdening workers, companies have been more reluctant to hire extra workers at a time of high unemployment because benefits dig into the bottom line.

The country spent \$1.4 trillion on health care in 2001, mostly for treating chronic diseases, statistics show.

Mr. Townsley says that figure is poised to triple if the focus isn't shifted from treatment to prevention and that must start in the work place. "We're too geared toward getting sick first and then going to the doctor," Mr. Townsley said. "We need to focus first on what we can do to head off that visit. Staying and thinking healthy is key."