

Fit for the job



Forget sweat. Adidas takes a more holistic approach in its corporate gym, using the latest in healthcare technology to treat mind and body

REPORT **ROGER TRAPP**

CORPORATE GYMS HAVE BECOME SO COMMONPLACE THAT any self-respecting company is almost duty bound to find space for at least a few exercise bikes and weights. Yet there is little evidence that the rash of corporate fitness centres is leading to an improvement in the health of employees.

Indeed, the cost of ill-health is so steep that Patricia Hewitt, secretary of state for trade and industry, has used it as a reason for business to support the budget's increases in National Insurance contributions to fund improvements in the NHS. There was a "strong business case" for better healthcare, she told the British Chambers of Commerce annual conference in April. It would lead to less absenteeism, which was costing companies nearly £11 billion a year, she said.

One organisation that seems to have grasped this is the UK division of sports company Adidas, where great

improvements in employee health are being attributed to a holistic "well-being programme".

Since the start of the scheme in 1997, about 80 per cent of the company's 450 British employees have been through it and reported impressive results in terms of not just their physical health, but also their mental attitudes to work and to the stresses of everyday life.

UK managing director Gordon Baird is hugely enthusiastic about the initiative. "I'm an avid supporter and user," he says, emphasising the great difference it has made to him personally. He says the Wellness Centre at Adidas's UK headquarters in Stockport, Cheshire, devised a personal programme that enabled him to lose weight, experience higher energy levels and "a general feeling of well-being".

Nor is this just a perk for executives. Among those sharing Baird's keenness for the programme is Pryce Williams,



a 60-year-old stock controller in the warehouse who never went near the centre until just before a serious heart operation last year. Thanks to the schedule agreed between his surgeon and the Wellness team, he returned to work within three months of the surgery – “much sooner than would otherwise have been the case,” he says.

The scheme is the brainchild of Dorian Dugmore, an internationally-known cardiac specialist who had been involved in the burgeoning “wellness industry” in North America. He won some fame through a television report on stress tests he was running on football managers. These were part of the “Fit to manage” venture between Adidas and the Football League.

Dugmore’s relationship with Adidas stretches back to the 1980s, when he was testing athletes. Adidas – which is committed to promoting health among its employees – later invited him and his team to England after seeing

their work in the 1990s on improving lifestyle and reducing cardiovascular risk among Canadian chief executives.

“Many companies pay vast amounts for their staff to be members of gyms which most never use. Redirecting this investment into a programme that bridges the gap between gym facilities and healthcare technology has been shown to have a direct effect on health. Productivity and morale are also increased and stress is reduced,” Dugmore says of the approach he developed with Adidas.

The company will not say how much it has devoted to installing state-of-the-art technology and highly-trained staff, but it admits it is a “considerable amount”. Baird says it is “tough” to assess the absolute return on the investment, but believes it “has been worth every penny” because of decreased sickness and increased morale.

Participation is not compulsory, but the company runs regular internal campaigns to encourage even the least health-conscious employees to “know their numbers” – that is, be aware of such crucial measures as their blood pressure, cholesterol and body fat proportion.

Those who do sign-up gain access to the sort of rigorous health assessment that has typically been the preserve of senior executives. They go through a thorough initial check-up, answering questions on their diet and the amount of exercise they do, and undergoing tests on their heart and lungs.

The result is a written report that, as well as giving basic data such as blood pressure and cholesterol, assesses the employee’s risk of heart disease and makes suggestions for reducing the risk. Because the Wellness Centre staff are not employed directly by Adidas, this information is completely confidential. Most important, though, is the follow-up and monitoring of employees’ efforts to stick to the regime. This shows Adidas moving away from having an attitude of enlightened self-interest towards its employees, almost like old-fashioned paternalism, to a more modern approach.

Dugmore sees this as part of the transition from the traditional medical approach of reacting to problems, to a more proactive emphasis on prevention. He says this will help feed what a recently published book – *The Wellness Revolution* by Paul Zane Pilzer – predicts will become a trillion-dollar industry.

Adidas UK is helping to recoup its investment by running programmes for executives of other companies under the title of Project Life (Lifestyle Intervention For Executives) and its experiment is being monitored by the company’s board for possible replication elsewhere. Dugmore and his team have already been involved in developing a facility at the headquarters in Germany.

But it is not clear whether the programme can be duplicated widely. Not only is such an investment likely to be beyond many companies, it also requires the involvement of specialists, who are in short supply.

Still, Adidas’s experience could prove that such an approach amounts to sound business sense. **PM**

PEAK PRACTICE: THE WELL-BEING PROGRAMME AIMS TO IMPROVE BOTH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Wellness Revolution: How to make a fortune in the next trillion dollar industry by Paul Zane Pilzer, is priced £18.50 and published by John Wiley & Sons (01243 775878).