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## Financially fit employees boost company

By Valerie Dugan



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For many people who have been deskbound all winter, spring brings a renewed focus on fitness and wellness: the sunshine, blooming flowers, and pleasant climate encourage us to get moving and trade sedentary pursuits for outdoor activities.

Spring is also a perfect time to focus on financial fitness.

Financial fitness contributes to our overall health and wellbeing. Being financially fit — being able to afford what you want without the stress of future financial woes — means that we are balancing our earnings and savings, investing thoughtfully, managing our debt, and poised to meet our life's goals and milestones as they occur.

Being financially fit means freedom from stress.

Conversely, being financially unfit could be detrimental. There are a number of things that worry Americans, from work, the current political climate, and market swings, but concerns about money are among the top stressors plaguing Americans.

Studies have shown that over half of employees are stressed about their finances, and 48 percent of employees are distracted by their finances at work.

For employers, this presents a problem, as stressed and distracted workers lose productivity. In fact, research has shown that stress over finances causes workers to miss almost twice as many workdays per year as those not experiencing financial stress. Because of worries about finances, over half of all employees, 54 percent, plan to postpone retirement.

How, then, do we become more financially fit?

With our physical fitness, we identify areas that might need more attention than others (our cardiovascular health, our strength, our flexibility) and work toward holistic improvement.

Similarly, with our finances, we look at all the elements of our entire financial profile, such as maintaining a budget, paying down student debt, managing our credit-card debt, balancing our portfolio, planning charitable giving, and saving toward retirement.

Being financially literate goes hand in hand with being financially fit. For instance, we should be on top of our 401(K) benefits so that we track our savings for retirement. We should be familiar with concepts such as the cost of credit card debt versus other means of financing — perhaps there are alternative solutions that may lead to a monthly savings?

A trend among more and more companies is to provide financial resources to help individual employees set up their financial profiles — creating a budget, for example. These programs may also help the employee pool take advantage of any benefits the company offers, like refinancing solutions for student debt, a problem that takes a huge toll on saving for other financial goals, such as retirement.

This type of personalized approach within the sphere of the company not only helps reduce employee stress and increase financial wellness, but for the employer it has the added result of increased productivity and perhaps a feeling of greater connectedness between the employer and employees.

One company, for example, offers a wellness assessment that is comprised of a series of questions that yields an overall “score.” The answers an individual provides then leads to a “game plan” for improving that score.

Like physical fitness, levels of improvement are part of a journey toward wellness: from identifying the starting level; engaging specific, action-oriented behaviors; giving immediate feedback; and, of course, reinforcement.

For physical fitness, that reinforcement comes from feeling healthier. For financial fitness, the reinforcement comes from a reduction of stress and an increased ability to meet each of our goals for our wealth.

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