

Start Small, Look Long

Arrowhead Computing Consortium joins with Fit City Duluth in steps toward healthier lifestyles for employees.

Stretching to counteract long hours working at the computer. Adding healthy choices such as fruit and water to the meetings with school administrators. Surveying the 14 employees to find out their ideas for equipping an exercise and relaxation room. “It’s just taking small steps that will have an impact,” says Denise Bohrer, controller at the Arrowhead Regional Computing Consortium. These changes for the better were sparked by the Statewide Health Improvement Program.

When Bohrer serendipitously saw an announcement about an upcoming SHIP meeting, she knew that a few of the consortium’s employees with health issues already were concerned about the affordability of health coverage. SHIP uses policy, systems and environmental changes to decrease smoking and tobacco use, as well as improve nutrition and increase physical activity to fight unhealthy weight.

Although the Arrowhead Regional Computing Consortium one of 16 businesses using SHIP services in the area, conducts meetings with 31 member school districts—so healthy choices and habits have a multiplier effect. The consortium, by making specific, sustainable changes, is more likely to be successful, according to Christy Clay, the SHIP coordinator for seven counties that includes Duluth and a Fit City Duluth employee.

“We often say, ‘Think small,’” Clay says. At one hospital in Clay’s region, yoga was offered—but at 45 minutes to an hour, people found it hard to commit. “Some of these people haven’t done anything for 10 years,” Clay says. “It’s easy to get discouraged.” Now, 10- to 15-minute yoga sessions are offered, making it easier for employees to participate.

To help businesses improve their worksite wellness, Clay and her team first carry out a comprehensive assessment of current practices and policies, then present a plan to senior leadership and management.

Once the employer is ready to create a health team, Clay makes sure it’s done right. She works with them to build a team that represents a cross-section of employees. “We’re not trying to make the healthy people healthier—35 percent are doing pretty darn well,” Clay says. “I’m trying to reach the other 65 percent.”

Once that health team is in place, Clay works with them to build capacity—“to expand the knowledge base on worksite wellness for those who can provide these services and those who can benefit from them”—within these businesses.

At the Arrowhead Regional Computing Consortium, this help includes some training from Fit City Duluth staff in basic yoga stretches and other activities to launch their program. Cindy Lee Olson, the consortium’s finance, funding and management specialist, says, “Everything we do now is electronic or remote control.... It’s good to bring that getting up and moving to the workplace.”

By taking small, measurable steps, Clay says, they can be successful—and evidence shows worksite wellness programs save money in the long term. The long term is where consortium Network Engineer Bob Buchanan is looking, too. “A year from now,” he says, “I hope a number of these ideas have changed our work habits.” •

