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BODYWORK

Making it easier to work out at work

■ Companies looking to cut healthcare costs are adding fitness programs to keep employees active and healthy.

By Jeannine Stein, Times Staff Writer

Lunchtime at Electronic Arts finds most employees doing what employees do — heading for the cafeteria. But some take a slight detour and head for the state-of-the-art 24-hour gym for a spin on an elliptical trainer or to the outdoor field for a quick round of soccer.

And then there are those who spend the noon hour at "fight club," battling each other with fake swords.

Of course, unlike the employees at this video game company, not every business has the inclination or the means to build a well-stocked gym and devote pricey real estate to athletic programs. Nor does every company encourage its workers to fashion swords and shields out of Styrofoam and engage in mock combat, in the process getting some much-needed cardiovascular exercise.

But many corporations are setting up fitness programs, in various permutations. Others are contemplating such a move.

Some opt for partially or fully subsidized fitness centers (usually built and run by another company) that occasionally rival first-class health clubs. Others sponsor off-site gym memberships or Internet or telephone fitness and wellness coaching. When there's no room for a fitness center, some

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companies support walking and running clubs or on-site Weight Watchers programs. And some businesses even dangle a healthy carrot in front of employees in the form of financial rewards — a discount on insurance premiums for those who partake in health and fitness programs.

The National Business Group on Health, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit concerned with healthcare issues of large employers, recently reported that of 84 companies surveyed, 77% have an on-site fitness center, 69% have on-site fitness programs and 38% have Web-based tools that offer on-line health appraisals, identify risk factors and track progress in areas such as weight loss.

It's been at least five years since businesses were so gung-ho about keeping employees healthy, before the dot-com bust and a tanking economy that found companies downsizing and ordering layoffs. Today, even as some businesses begin to recover financially, they find themselves faced with skyrocketing healthcare costs. Climbing obesity rates have put millions of people at risk for diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and other high-ticket conditions and diseases.

"Companies are saying, 'If we're going to control costs, we're going to have to tackle these problems,'" says Helen Darling, the group's president. "If you look at the top drivers of medical claims, they're frequently conditions related to lifestyle and behavior."

But building a fitness center doesn't always mean they'll come. Despite in-house promotions, two-thirds of those companies surveyed said that fewer than 25% of employees participate in the programs. Fewer than a third reported 25% to 50% participation, and only 2% of companies said that more than half their employees took part. The numbers aren't shocking, considering how few people stick with an exercise program, but it demonstrates there is some interest.

Smaller companies with tighter budgets usually try to get employees involved in interactive Internet health sites or subsidize memberships in nearby health clubs, Darling says. She sees this trend growing in companies of all sizes as they make it a priority to encourage employees to lead fit lives.

Companies that want to add fitness programs believe it's the right thing to do for their workers, but "these days, they're not fools" Darling says. "They're not looking to throw away money." To bolster their case, businesses often look to studies that show those who exercise regularly and eat healthful diets have fewer medical claims.

At Electronic Arts, about three-fourths of employees signed up for the completely subsidized gym when it opened a few months ago, says John Batter, a company vice president. He estimates that half of the 400

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employees use it or engage in on-site sports.

Part of the fitness plan's success so far is management's supportive attitude toward employees who have started yoga classes, a biking group that cruises the nearby wetlands and that fight club. Other Electronic Arts offices have similar programs, the idea being that it's not only a great recruitment perk but also keeps employees healthy as they age.

The company is lucky that its demographic is fairly homogenous — mostly guys in their 20s to 40s who are software engineers, programmers, designers and animators — which makes it a little easier to tailor fitness programs. Those taking part help dispel the myth of the computer nerd/video game geeks who sit staring at computer screens all day and subsist on junk food while their bodies turn to blubber. Although many employees do work at computers all day, that's the reason some feel compelled to exercise.

The fight club was born when designers and animators wanted to get a feel for realistic sword fighting while working on the "The Lord of the Rings" video game series. They had so much fun, they decided to keep going. Mark Skaggs was a proud member of the three-day-a-week fight club until he jammed his thumbs with the faux foils. The vice president and executive producer says he misses what he calls "nerds with swords."

"We sit at our desks or are in meetings all day, and besides growing in size, you become mentally sedentary," he explains. "This is really invigorating. It's like you're doing a bunch of little sprints. It's one of those things that makes you think better when you come back to your desk."

Jon Lutz, a finance director who used to play soccer at the company's Redwood City office, started a club at the Playa Vista facility. On a recent sunny day he and a handful of colleagues and contract workers (valet, security) were kicking around a ball on the small but well-tended field. Next to it, the basketball court was being meticulously washed down.

"One of the things EA likes to do when building its campuses is have the workplace be somewhere employees want to spend time. Exercise helps increase productivity," he says. "I get back to my desk in the afternoon, and I feel a lot fresher and ready to go."

Other Southern California companies also have devoted copious time and money to fitness programs. Mattel's decade-old center at the company's headquarters in El Segundo is 12,000 square feet and includes cardiovascular machines, weights, a separate women's workout area with a Curves-like circuit and group exercise classes. Outside are basketball and volleyball courts and a softball field. Program manager Sue Ward estimates that a third of the company's 1,800 employees visit at least once a week, and half go about once a month. It helps that the partially subsidized center is conveniently located in the parking garage.

Pfizer Inc.'s new La Jolla lab facility boasts a well-stocked gym offering

personal trainers and yoga classes. Cost to build: \$250,000. The grounds also include a jogging track that's spawned a running club. Computer health assessments assist employees with diet and exercise programs, and follow-ups are done via e-mail and phone. The company plans to have this done eventually at an in-house clinic.

According to a company spokesman, the partially subsidized gym had a slow start a year ago, but with positive word of mouth, it's now "going gangbusters."

For those businesses skeptical that a fitness program will take off, things might not be so bleak. Said Lutz of Electronic Arts' soccer league, "A couple of companies in the area have already looked us up after seeing us out here. They're interested in playing."

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