Raising health awareness in India – one step at a time

When we think about typical sports activities in India, we usually think of cricket, field hockey, badminton and possibly polo – but not necessarily walking. It is said that fitness, in general, is still not a high priority for most people in India, particularly those living in urban environments. Many of them do not even consider walking a form of exercise. In January 2012, the Health Management team at Siemens India headed by Dr. Ganesh Kulkarni set out to change this perception within the corporate culture. They introduced the Fit4Life program and were pleasantly surprised by the response.

India has seen tremendous social and economic changes over the past decades, particularly in the cities. Millions of people with desk jobs in offices commute long distances to and from work. What many of them are not aware of is the impact that office work has on their health – and the importance of exercise.

The daily routine of 54-year-old Mangesh Lachake is typical of many Siemens employees in India. Mangesh commutes some 30 kilometers to his workplace in Worli every day. As the head of a family of three, he gets up early to catch the company bus to avoid the rush-hour traffic in the morning. In the evenings, he’s not so lucky. It takes him twice as long to get back home. Very little time remains in the day for looking after family matters – and practically none for exercise. It is a lifestyle that frequently leads to stress and related ailments – at home and at the workplace.

Making fitness a part of life

Well aware of the situation, Dr. Ganesh Kulkarni and the Health Management team at Siemens India introduced the Fit4Life program in January 2012. The initiative goes beyond simply addressing the issue of stress at the workplace by attempting to create a healthy balance between work life and personal life.

“...You can improve relations with your superiors or peers at work and family members at home. You only need to respond better to potentially volatile situations.”

Dr. G. Kulkarni

Low health consciousness

Focus on four key elements

Based on the rational emotive behavioral therapy model, the Fit4Life program focuses on four elements: obesity, blood pressure, stress and diabetes – a serious problem in India, which ranks among the countries with the most diabetics worldwide. According to the approach, if we are able to control these four factors, we can remain fit for life. At the same time, the program emphasizes the need to maintain a good balance between work and life. In addition, it strongly urges employees to add an element of fun to their daily lives.

From stress to success

With nearly 2,200 registrations in the first seven months, the program has enjoyed tremendous success. Not only has it positively impacted employee motivation at work – but also off work. As Dr. Kulkarni puts it, “you can improve relations with your superiors or peers at work and family members at home. You only need to respond better to potentially volatile situations.”

Mangesh Lachake, who also took part in the program, credits the professional guidance for the success: “We may exercise or do our daily walks, but how do we know if we are doing it correctly. That’s where the professional counsel comes in handy.”

Dr. Armin Bruck, Managing Director of Siemens India, points to yet another positive effect of the program: “We do believe that a fit and motivated workforce is key to sustaining our growth momentum and our focus on delivering excellence.”

Dr. Ganesh Kulkarni
Vice President Health Management
South Asia Cluster, Siemens Ltd.
Getting healthier with every step

In February 2013, Dr. Kulkarni and the Health Management team at Siemens India decided to take Fit4Life a step farther – quite literally. They introduced the "Walk For Life" program – a 90-day initiative which, in his words, is designed "to establish a simple and cost-effective concept for making physical activities a permanent fixture in the minds of employees."

In essence, the "Walk For Life" program is all about healthy competition. When it was launched, 1,500 employees enthusiastically signed on to participate. Following an initial medical check-up, every participant was given a pedometer to monitor the number of steps taken throughout the day. Those that achieved the minimum target of 10,000 steps per day were allowed to keep the pedometer as a gift. Individuals, sectors and central functions with the best performances were also presented with awards and titles.

Everybody wins

Many employees even made an extra effort to top their step counts completely on their own free will. Suvarna Joshi, an employee in the HR department, attributes this to the fact that "a fitness regime done in groups is always more motivating. We keep a check on each other’s pedometer. It is like a mini competition. Almost everybody I know – and maybe precisely for that very reason – completes the daily quota of 10,000 steps." Her comments allude to other very positive side effects of the program – the strengthening of the team spirit at work and the many personal success stories.

Did you know that ...

... more than 1,500 employees took part in the “Walk For life” program when it was introduced? That is almost 8% of the total Siemens workforce in India.

... the program has already motivated over 1,600 employees to request a pedometer to exercise more?

... 5 minutes of stair climbing can burn up to 50 calories?

... 50 calories is roughly equivalent to one scoop of strawberry ice cream?

A true champion of health management

Dr. Ganesh K. Kulkarni is an occupational health professional with over 30 years of experience – and a true champion of his field of expertise. Currently serving as Vice President of Health Management for South Asia Cluster at Siemens Ltd., he has been the driving force of numerous health management initiatives in all manufacturing units for over 20 years.

Dr. Kulkarni was recently invited to serve on the Governing Board of the National Safety Council of India. The appointment also affirms the sustained efforts of EHS in India, as he stresses: "the co-option to the National Safety Council provides Siemens a national platform to share our best practices."