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## On-the-job recreation

Firms promote physical activity for health, civic reasons

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One generally thinks of personal goals and activities as distinctly separate from professional ones. Those interested in running may plan to complete a half-marathon to raise money for charity. Individuals thinking about joining a recreational program such as the local volleyball league or softball team rarely contemplate doing so during work hours.

But, as companies throughout the state offer employees recreational opportunities on and off the clock, certain workplace and personal lines begin to blur. And, that's a good thing, according to Owen Milne, director of development at Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR).

Companies and communities benefit when firms offer a variety of recreational programs, said Milne. He points to a study by the University of Vermont and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (GMCX) which demonstrated "the tangible performance, social and employee-retention metrics resulting from employee volunteerism," he said.

The study, released in 2006, focused on the results of GMCX's Community Action for Employees (CAPE) program and how such an effort could encourage other companies to adopt a similar program.

Companies that participate in workplace recreational programs, particularly those which support other individuals or nonprofits, experience increased brand strengthening as they gain perception by their communities as a positive entity, said Milne. "The communities benefit by having a company that donates employees' time to engage in volunteerism, and this further promotes the idea of giving back," he said.

"When it comes to physical recreation, we hear from companies that they benefit from their employees' health and well-being. Recreational activities may not have the same net-positive effect on the community, but the overall health of those in the community does have an impact," Milne said.

Mack Molding Company, a plastic injection molding facility with Vermont operations in Arlington, East Arlington and Cavendish, has instituted a handful of programs to help its employees pursue recreational activities to enhance teamwork and aid charities.

"Each year, Mack sponsors a very large team of runners/walkers for the Komen Vermont-New Hampshire Race for the Cure, paying all entry fees for employees and their families and providing Mack Team shirts for all," said Julie Horst, director of communications.

Other programs at Mack include companywide recreational events each summer and holidays. "The events impact all areas of the company, helping employees to get to know and interact with other employees and their families," said Horst. "It contributes to a better work environment."



Participants in the 2011 Penguin Plunge at Lake Paran in North Bennington raised funds for the Vermont Special Olympics.

The firm does such a good job promoting workplace wellness that Governor Peter Shumlin recently presented it with a gold award for workplace wellness.

Mack was recognized for lifestyle initiatives that urge workers to take personal responsibility for their health. The award-winning programs included a community garden and its Eat Right, Stay Fit program, which highlights lifestyle changes that encourage healthy eating habits that resulted in a combined weight loss of over 400 pounds among 50 employees.

Meanwhile, Mack's Promoting Health and Wellness program includes an on-site physician with weekly office hours. Certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine, Dr. Brian Timura is an occupational-medicine specialist and primary-care physician.

Amy Kirschner, manager of the VBSR Marketplace Program, was seeking to connect with other women business owners when she joined the Vermont Women Business Owners' Network (WBON) Lake Champlain Dragon Boat Festival team in 2010. The race, which draws approximately 50 teams, raises money for charity.

"Connecting with people in a new way," she said, "seeing a new side of them and sharing a different side of me, enjoying a new sense of

camaraderie with women I had met before but hadn't fully connected with" were among her favorite benefits, said Kirschner. The experience, she added, "gets you outside your comfort zone."

Kirschner's decision to join the race was born out of a WBON meeting led by Nancy Somers, a local yoga teacher. "The meeting was called '17 and 1/2 Ways to a Healthier, Happier and More Enjoyable Life,' and one of the ways was to combine community physical activity and learning. That's what I think of these types of events," said Kirschner.

"I enjoy getting to know and spend time with people outside of work or networking functions," she said. "And, combining learning, physical activity and helping a good cause is the best of all worlds."

The Penguin Plunge, a well-known and popular event which occurs in Vermont's colder months, raises money for the Special Olympics by challenging volunteers to plunge into icy waters.

Not only has the event grown each year, it's also spurred Penguin Plunges in North Bennington and Newport. Four years ago, the North Bennington Penguin Plunge became a component of the Bennington Winter Festival.

"We wanted to help them out," said Joann Ehrenhouse, executive director of the Bennington Chamber of Commerce. "As a result, we moved our Winter Festival events to North Bennington and added a chili contest, live music, dog sledding at the Park McCallough House, ice sculpture competition and an indoor kid's carousel at the North Bennington Graded School."

The 2011 North Bennington Penguin Plunge drew 112 participants who raised \$15,919 for the charity, according to Kim Bookless, fundraising-events manager at Special Olympics. For 2012, the Penguin Plunge for Vermont's three locations anticipates drawing 1,500 participants, with a fundraising goal of \$400,000.

The event, said Bookless, and others like it, is a great benefit to both employers and the community by promoting team building.

"It's a fun way for employees to get out and interact with colleagues," said Bookless. And, in a business world which includes more time spent in cubicles and private offices, this type of interaction and face time is invaluable, she said.

"It's also a great way for businesses to support their employees, who may already be volunteering," Bookless noted that often, employees who have a friend or relative participating in Special Olympics want to become involved in helping the organization.

In addition, said Bookless, "It's a good way for a company to get a little positive PR." She said she often hears from companies who participate as a team, "Wow, that was a fun way to get involved with the community." ♦

