

THE HUMAN FACTOR

SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR

TRajgopal has a passion for collecting small replicas of exotic car models — his office at the Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) headquarters in Mumbai has a whole lot of them. The doctor obviously loves speed — at work, too.

As vice-president (Medical and Occupational Health) at India's largest fast-moving consumer goods company, Rajgopal and his team have been able to implement — quite quickly — a 'personal vitality' initiative for the over 15,000 employees of HUL in India. And the health plan that is ahead of the curve is reaping great rewards for the com-

pany.

The move makes sense. After all, what employees are doing at lunch and after work can affect their companies more than one would expect. HUL can look at the rewards-ratio of many other global companies which have implemented a well-thought-out health plan for their employees. In case of Johnson & Johnson, the rewards-ratio is 3.8:1 (the return on investment has been \$3.8 for every dollar spent). The ratio for Citibank is 4.56:1 and for Pepsico, Motorola and Dupont, it's between 1.9:1 and 6.1:1.

"We're giving employees the encouragement and the tools to actually change unhealthy lifestyles before these turn into chronic diseases. And we do it in a fun way that also lets them choose the path that fits them best," says Rajgopal.

At the heart of the HUL initiative is a vitality index, which is the measurement of the personal

What's your vitality index?

Hindustan Unilever's health initiative for its 15,000 employees is reaping great rewards

vitality of individual employees based on four parameters — the Body Mass Index (BMI), blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood sugar.

For each employee, these four parameters are measured and a scoring is done on a vitality index score card. The lower the score, the better is the personal vitality of the concerned employee. A score of 0 to 4 puts you in the green zone, a score of 5 to 6 puts you in the amber zone and a score 7 and above puts you in the red zone. Each employee is intimated his/her personal vitality score/colour zone while confiden-

tiality is assured. The first burst of this exercise was completed in just two to four days.

Such programmes succeed only if there is a buy-in at the top and that's where the management committee, headed by CEO Nitin Paranjpe, came in. All of them were also measured under the vitality index. Getting the top-management's buy-in was almost half the job done.

Next came the challenge to create a buzz around the vitality initiative. That led to mailers and posters such as "Cool as a cucumber about your health? Don't wait till it be-

comes red-hot", or "Do you see red every time you see a staircase?"

In the second stage, employees were encouraged to improve their personal vitality scores by conducting workshops all across the company's locations, arranging events like Vitality Exhibitions, Family Day, Walkathons, nutritional menu counselling etc. Through interactive sessions, the employees were taught about the concept of BMI, its measurement, ways of improving life style, healthy and controlled diet to avoid/reduce obesity as well as exercises for weight man-

agement.

These workshops also focus on correct practical nutritional advice, proper scientific exercise techniques and stress management. The overall aim is to create awareness on health so as to achieve better fitness levels and improved lifestyle patterns. Workshops are also conducted on health planning after retirement for managers who are nearing retirement.

To encourage employees to make the correct food choices, the in-house cafeteria provides caloric displays of all food items and has a fixed-calorie-meal counter.

The factories have also been assessed for occupational health risks such as heat stress, noise, whole body vibration and respiratory or skin disorders.

Has the vitality index added value? Rajgopal reels out figures that show the number of HUL employees in the red zone has come down

from 938 in 2006 to 501 in 2008. The company, of course, has organised expert medical advice for all of them.

Leena Nair, HUL's executive director (HR) says she personally monitors the progress of the vitality initiative as it has to be a way of life for all HUL employees. "It's not just a fad, we are dead serious," Nair says.

Though the company has not attached any monetary initiatives to the vitality scores as yet (high performers on this account are acknowledged as champions in the company's internal get-togethers), Nair doesn't rule out doing so in future, but says it's perhaps a bit too early to do that. What she religiously does however, is to counsel some key employees who have consistently been in the red zone.

At a basic level, the vitality index reflects basic common sense: The healthier the employees, the more likely they are to be at work.