

VITAL SIGNS

How a doctor measured the health of 15,000 Hindustan Unilever employees in cold numbers and set about improving them.

M Anand

THE NEWS CAME AS A SHOCK TO PARTHO Roy, a Senior Manager at Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL). He was only 47 and enjoying life when he took part in a health check-up being conducted at his office. Roy felt good and wasn't expecting any untoward news. In fact, he had been quite amused when HUL told its 15,000 employees they would all have to go through a check-up over a four-day period.

When the results of his stress test came out, however, Roy knew something was wrong. The doctor told him his heart wasn't responding the way it was supposed to. Further tests showed there were multiple blocks even though he had never ever experienced any troubling symptoms.

After the shock came the stents. Roy went through an angioplasty, with HUL paying all the expenses. He was not the only one found having a weak heart during the four-day check-up in 2006. There were about half-a-dozen other employees who were found to require similar preventive angioplasties.

Worryingly, 938 employees, or about 6%, were found needing "focused attention with periodic reviews" of their health. These employees were identified with a red colour code in an Excel sheet maintained by Dr T Rajgopal, Vice-President (Medical and Occupational Health) at HUL. The remaining 14,000 plus employees received an amber (need periodic evaluation) or green (excellent health) rating.

Colouring By Numbers

"Health is too nebulous to measure, but people find comfort in numbers," says

Rajgopal. That's why the doctor created a comprehensive colour coding system using four important parameters: body mass index, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar level (fasting). Readings on each of

has since exported the Vitality Index to the global Unilever family, to subsidiaries in Africa, the Middle-East, Asia-Pacific, and Central and Eastern Europe.

For Rajgopal, the Excel sheet was proving to be as important as his stethoscope. Developing the index and identifying employees in the red zone was only the first part. His bigger, more challenging job was to move those in the red category into the amber zone, and those marked amber into the green zone. Again, he chooses to measure his success in numbers. "In the first year, we brought the number of employees in red down from 938 to 619. In the second, it was down to 501. We want to lower this even more," he says.

How He Did It

More than shocking employees with their medical reports, Rajgopal decided he had to create a buzz about health across all of HUL's offices. One day, employees walking into the canteen found cards displaying the calorific values of all the dishes. Another time, they found

dishes marked with amber and green flags. A special vitality meal counter was opened. Employees have a choice of three meals with calorific values of 450, 650 and 850 calories. Healthy meals were made available even in office parties. Cooking classes were held in the office to teach employees to stir up low cholesterol meals.

One morning, employees walked in to find skipping ropes on their desks, with the message 'don't skip your exercise'. Another day, they found an apple. Emails were sent out, posters were put up, brochures were handed out, exercise classes and special desk-stretch sessions were conducted. A team of dentists carried out check-ups one day, while

“Eventually, the health of the employees of a company reflects on the health of its business.”

— Leena Nair, Executive Director, HR, HUL



these four parameters were recorded for each of HUL's 15,000 employees. They were then translated into a score (See chart: Vitality Index Scoring). Employees with a total score of less than 4 were put in the green zone, those with a 5-6 were marked amber, and anything above 7 was a red alert.

HUL, a company known for its marketing innovations, had come up with a health idea—the Vitality Index. The company has applied for a copyright for the index, which is not just a set of numbers but a reflection of its employees' health. Eventually, says Leena Nair, Executive Director, HR, HUL, the health of HUL's employees reflects in the health of its business. The company



STAYING ALIVE: Dr T Rajgopal, VP, Medical and Occupational Health, HUL, gets employees to live vitality.

SOUMIK KAR

Vitality Index Scoring

SCORE	0	2	4
BODY MASS INDEX	19-25	26-34	>34
BLOOD PRESSURE	<120/80	>120/80 and <140/90 or normal with medication	>140/90
CHOLESTEROL	<160	161-225	>225
SUGAR FASTING	<110	Diabetic with Glyc. Hb.-Normal	Diabetic with Glyc. Hb.-High

Total score: 0-4: Excellent health; 5-6: Need periodic evaluation; >7: Focused attention with periodic reviews

yoga teachers held a session on another. But in all this, employees were always offered the choice. "There was no room for overzealousness," says Rajgopal.

Healthy Brands, Employees...

In the beginning, the word vitality did not denote a state of health at Unilever's offices worldwide. In 2004, the then Chairman Antony Burgmans announced that the company would make vitality the heart of all its brands as it wanted consumers to "feel good, look good and get more out of life." Initially, the global HQ wanted to sell vitality to consumers. Roughly, three years after that, Rajgopal decided to get its employees to live vitality, at work and at home.

Employee vitality leads to clear business benefits too, HUL discovered. In some branches, as sales teams took on weight-reduction targets, productivity increased too. "The experience of some global companies shows that every rupee invested in employee health leads to savings of Rs 6," says Rajgopal. "But these benefits will come over five years. So, we need to wait before we can measure the benefits," he says.

Hindustan Unilever has some interesting practices when it comes to spending money on employee health. It does not buy a single medical insurance policy for its employees. It does not offer medical allowances either. But it foots all the medical bills of its employees, their spouses, children and

parents. "Insurance is an administrative headache. And there are so many things that are excluded from policies," says Rajgopal. "We did a cost analysis and found it cheaper to meet the expenses." HUL finds it simpler to issue a credit note to hospitals where employees are getting treatment. It also has 40 doctors at its offices.

Like many other things in the business, the top management at HUL is leading the health initiative by example. HR chief Nair is a regular at the vitality meal counter in the canteen. "Five of the eight management committee members have run in city marathons," she says. "The senior team believes in role modelling." Partho Roy, the Senior Manager who had his heart fixed, has since become a health evangelist within the company. After being encouraged by CEO Nitin Paranjpe, Roy has been preaching the health gospel outside too. "I recently had a long chat with a cab driver who was smoking," recalls Roy. "He was surprised to find that I even care. So, he listened to my advice on his health." But, are you listening? ■