

BY OSCAR PEDRO MUSIBAY

**D**irect marketing company Inktel Direct Corp. takes a "whole-istic" approach to providing benefits that help make employees healthy and happy – right down to its vending machines. And company officials believe they receive return on the investment.

Rather than limiting choices to the latest cheesy what's-it with the half-life of uranium, Inktel Direct's vending machines have fruit, vegetables and low-fat items.

The Miami Lakes-based company has also brought a nutritionist and exercise counselor to its offices. Its insurance company offered testing for cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar. Inktel offers a catered lunch program to give employees more healthy eating choices.

Additionally, financial counselors help employees with personal budgeting, and the company participates in community volunteer programs.

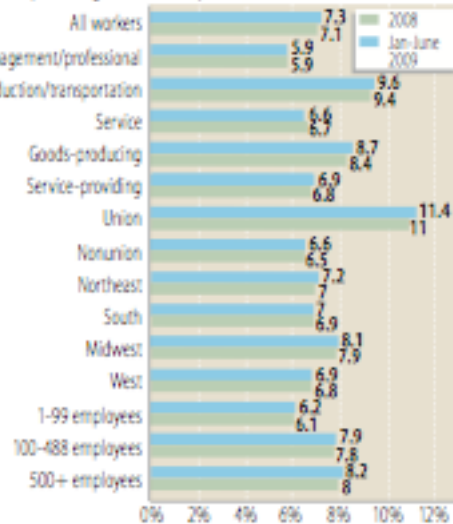
Inktel Direct President and CEO Ricky Arriola said his big-picture approach to helping employees is tied to retention. But, Inktel's strategy is in line with what other companies are doing in South Florida and across the nation to lower their high cost of health insurance by encouraging employees to buy into strategies that will make them healthier. The companies' better health track record can save them money on health insurance.

In South Florida, medical plan costs increased by 7 percent in both 2008 and 2009, according to Seitlin Insurance & Advisory Services. To help offset that, employers continue to expand plan offerings for employees to include coverage with higher deductibles.

The momentum behind the trend is softening with larger employers when they find employees don't like higher deductibles when combined with less coverage, said

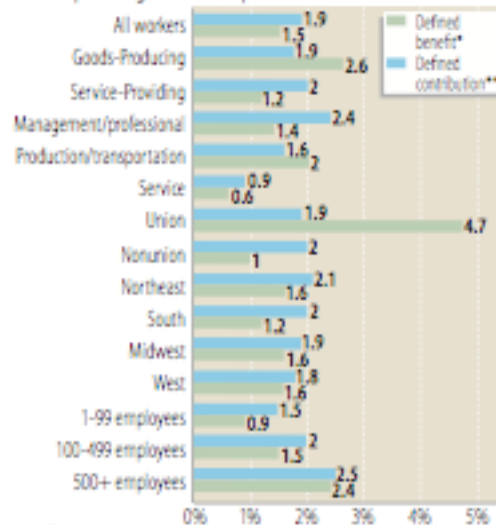
### Employer costs for health benefits

Costs as a percentage of total compensation



### Employer costs for retirement and savings benefits

Costs as a percentage of total compensation



\*Includes pension plans

\*\*Includes 401(k) plans with employer match

Source: Spencer's Research Reports

Linda Quick, president of the South Florida Hospital & Healthcare Association.

South Florida employers are increasingly incorporating wellness programs such as obesity management and smoking cessation into their offerings. Seitlin's perspective is drawn from a survey of more than 100 companies with 50 to 4,000 employees. Generally, our region lags the rest of the country in terms of local company participation.

In South Florida, for example, 17 percent of employers are offering health club membership discounts, compared to 28 percent of employers nationwide. About 8 percent of South Florida businesses help employees quit smoking, while 23 percent nationwide offer such programs.

**Mario** Careaga, senior VP of Seitlin, which helps companies manage coverage, said employees typically underestimate the annual cost for their health benefits package by more than half. That's one of the reasons employers are moving toward giving staffers more medical information – to help them make better decisions that will, ideally, result in better health and lower health care costs.

In fact, nearly one-fourth of South Florida businesses give their employees medical information, compared with 44 percent of corporations nationwide, according to Seitlin.

The premiums for South Florida families cost about 12 percent of an individual's salary, with both the employer and employee covering the cost. So, for an employee with a salary of \$35,000, the annual cost is \$4,200, with the employer taking on the bulk of the bill.

Carriers generally require the employer to pay either 75 percent of single-employee premiums or half of employee-and-dependent premiums. Companies with 50 employees or less typically pay about half of a single-employee premium.

Generally, more employees participate in wellness programs when there are incentives to change behavior, said Becky J. Cherney, president and CEO of the Florida Health Care Coalition, which counts Miami-Dade Public Schools and JM Family Enterprises as members.

But, wrinkles in the program might limit what kind of programs companies institute in the future. Some worry that some incentives are going to be challenged in court as

discriminatory. For example, a person whose blood is tested and found to have sugar levels that might lead to diabetes might be offered \$200 to eat better and join a gym. The same program might not be available to someone in good health, which might spark discrimination lawsuits.

The concern over potential litigation is getting some companies to rethink wellness programs and how they institute them, Cherney said.

"You don't want that be that one test case," she said. "It would cost millions to defend and, even if you won, you could break the budget."

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