

# INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

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More than 4,000 Allstate employees from office locations across the country took part in Allstate's Walk to Wellness campaign, part of a larger "Well & Fit at Allstate" program featuring Mayo Clinic health resources that the company introduced earlier in the year. The company's fitness initiative carries over into meetings, which feature "recovery breaks" that incorporate exercise and healthful foods.

## Healthy Meetings Fitness "Action" Plan Boosts The Bottom Line

By Karen Brost

Leaving home for a meeting can carry with it some attendant wellness issues, including discomfort and stress while flying, shifts in sleep habits, jet lag, worrying about falling behind at work, dietary disruptions...the list goes on. When savvy meeting planners leverage these concerns by adding wellness and fitness activities to the agenda, the result is attendees who are more alert and productive. And when wellness is part of a company's overall philosophy, it's important to carry it over into meetings that result in healthier employees and a healthier bottom line.

Vera Bond is a Reebok Master Trainer who specializes in providing corporations with entertaining, informative and inspiring fitness programs. She explained, "Preventable medical problems are costing businesses billions of dollars a year in lost productivity, and increasing medical and insurance fees. Incorporating health and fitness activities into meetings accomplishes three things. First, it creates excitement and motivation to take personal wellness to a higher level. Second, it educates participants on the correlation of fitness to health and longevity. And third, it energizes, de-stresses, and creates clarity and focus to maximize productivity."

### Get Groups Revved Up

One option Bond suggested is kicking off the meeting day with 30 to 60 minutes of activity, depending on the fitness levels of the participants. "It gives attendees a chance to learn and do something new and interact with their fellow

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attendees, but most of all to feel energized, clear-minded and ready for the day of meetings.”

Bond works with Equanimity, a Phoenix-based speakers bureau, training and event solution company to provide fitness and wellness activities. “We recommend simple, fun and active programs with a ‘take home’ component. Our Equanimity programs vary from educational life-balance nature hikes to core conditioning, muscle conditioning with simple and inexpensive equipment, dancing, yoga and Pilates-based exercises with stretching and meditation. Our attendees get really excited when they are booked into a team competition such as a custom-built obstacle course.”

### Take A Hike

Equanimity’s president, Bobi Seredich Rusing, described the life-balance hikes her company offers. “These can be done anywhere that is conducive to an outdoor environment,” she explained. “We’ve done them with companies meeting here in Arizona, usually at sunrise. A lot of the time, people coming from different time zones are up anyway.”

The Phoenix-area hikes take place at one of several local mountain trails. “When they’re at the top of the peak, we have an Apache Indian who shares stories about the desert environment and does a morning sunrise song,” Rusing said. “He usually focuses on something from the Native American culture to provide a life lesson, and the participants can take a moment and enjoy where they are in the present. The hikes are really well received,” she added. “The participants like the combination of being outdoors and tying in the Native American culture.”

### It’s A Stretch

One of the meeting sessions Bond offers is called “Tubing and Travel.” It teaches participants how to work out using simple elastic bands. “The American College of Sports Medicine guidelines suggest that for health purposes, exercises should be performed on each major muscle group at least two times per week and eight to 15 reps per muscle,” she explained. “The unique benefit of ‘Tubing and Travel’ is that the elastic resistance provides a variable resistance to promote the development of muscular strength and endurance. Exercise tubing is optimal for travelers because you can use them anywhere, from an outdoor field to a hotel room.”



Vera Bond  
Reebok Master Trainer  
Equanimity Inc.  
Phoenix, AZ

**“Incorporating health and fitness activities into meetings... energizes, de-stresses, and creates clarity and focus to maximize productivity.”**

### All In The Family

Allstate’s senior management learned new techniques to improve personal performance and energy management, including resistance band training, when they attended the Human Performance Institute, an energy management organization based in Orlando, FL. They were so impressed with what they experienced firsthand that they embraced the concept company-wide. In fact, to launch its new “Well and Fit at Allstate” program for employees, Allstate sent exercise bands to all employees along with information on how to use them to perform different workout routines.

“Allstate Corporation’s President and CEO Tom Wilson is very dedicated to investing in our people,” explained Sasha Bigda, Allstate’s corporate relations manager. “He wants us to be personally and professionally engaged in what we bring to the table every day.”

Wilson explained, “I believe strongly in caring for the health and well-being of our people. We want our employees to have more energy for their jobs, their friends and their family. At Allstate we work hard every day to help our customers protect and invest in the things they value. Through our employee Wellness program we are protecting and investing in our most valuable resource — our people.”



Allstate President and CEO Tom Wilson (blue shirt above and right) with employees at the Walk to Wellness campaign two-mile kickoff walk at Allstate’s headquarters in Northbrook, IL.  
Photo by Robert Carl



**Hamilton Park Hotel & Conference Center, Florham Park, NJ, expanded and upgraded their fitness facilities in response to a meeting planner focus group that indicated an increased demand among their attendees for top-quality equipment.**

Photo courtesy of Hamilton Park Hotel & Conference Center

Wilson, who is a marathon runner, recently led employees from the company's Northbrook, IL, headquarters on a two-mile fitness walk to kick off the company's 28-day "Walk to Wellness" campaign. Nationwide, more than 4,000 employees participated. "We're very committed to developing our employees and providing resources for them to have better lives," Bidga added. "Part of that commitment is to create a high-performance environment."

The company's fitness initiative carries over into its meetings. "Our meetings have a really exciting component to them," Bidga explained. "We have what we call 'recovery breaks' that last anywhere from five to 15 minutes."

She shared a recent example. "At the meeting we brought in some upbeat music, and we led the group through some resistance band exercises using Dyna-Bands. It gets the blood flow going so you start getting back on focus, back on task. You're able to laugh a little bit and have some fun. You've completely stepped away from some heavy discussion, and then you come back into it with a fresh perspective. A five-minute recovery break makes a huge difference. These energy and recovery breaks are taking root in a lot of places throughout our organization," Bidga continued. "It's a pretty big organization, and to see our peers all doing this in their departments is pretty powerful."

Bigda explained that 10 minutes of intense Dyna-Band use is the equivalent of 30 minutes of resistance training. She believes the bands make an ideal giveaway. "Companies often hand out branded merchandise at meetings, so why not give employees a tool that can really benefit them?"



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**Bobi Seredich Rusing**  
President  
Equanimity Inc.  
Phoenix, AZ

### **The Gift That Keeps On Giving**

Once attendees learn how to use their exercise bands at a meeting, they can continue to use them at home or while traveling since the bands are so portable. "While on the road it is important to maintain one-third to one-half of your regular fitness program in order to preserve your hard-earned fitness level," Bond explained. "The exercises in our 'Tubing and Travel' segment demonstrate a time-efficient program using all major muscle groups. While traveling, there's less time for training, so it is important to be efficient."

Dana Schmitt is chief operating officer of GSE Meetings & Events, a Rochester, MI, events planning firm that specializes in sports and entertainment. "In general, we're seeing an increased focus on the wellness initiative," she noted. "We have a lot of clients who make sure we arrange for the fitness

center to have special hours or extended hours. We've seen clients who have made personal trainers available. We have clients who have done activities that run from biking and hiking excursions to climbs.

"Most clients who are in the insurance or financial and banking industries have a corporate wellness initiative that is tied in with their human resources, and they're putting a lot of energy behind it," she continued. "It's something that the employees appreciate and it brings down the cost for the company. We're definitely seeing more and more companies focusing on that because of the rising cost of health care."



After hiking to the top of Pinnacle Peak Trail in Scottsdale, AZ, meeting attendees learn to live "in the moment" as an Apache Indian shares stories about the desert environment and Native American culture. The nature hike was organized by Equanimity, a speakers bureau, training and event solution company.

Photo courtesy of Equanimity

### Food As Fuel

Healthful snacks also can play an important role in keeping energy levels high at meetings. According to Bigda, Allstate's meetings incorporate foods that are rich in protein as well as fresh fruit, energy bars and low-fat items such as angel food cake with strawberries. And plenty of water is always available to help attendees stay hydrated.

Schmitt stated that many companies are making sure they have heart-healthy menus at conferences. "We've also had clients who have brought in speakers who have talked about nutrition and diet. It makes the employees feel that the company cares about them."

### The Right Environment

Making the right choice for a meeting venue also can help inspire attendees to spend less time at the buffet table and more time getting fit. And several major hotel chains are working hard to make that task easier.

- The "Great Health, Fit for You" program is available at participating Marriott and Renaissance Hotels & Resorts in the U.S. and Canada. It offers guests a choice of three kits that make it easy to complete a fast, easy workout in the privacy of their rooms. The kits include easy-to-follow instructions along with any necessary exercise equipment.
- Hilton "Fitness by Precor" is now available at more than 50 Hilton properties in the U.S. and Mexico. Every elliptical trainer, treadmill and exercise bike is equipped with a TV to make cardio workouts more enjoyable.
- Hyatt's "Stay Fit" gyms are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week to help attendees fit in a workout before or after their meeting agendas. The well-equipped, state-of-the-art gyms can be found in Hyatt properties throughout North America and the Caribbean. Hyatt also offers "Yoga Away," a choice of fitness and stress reduction programs that attendees can follow on their in-room TVs.
- "WestinWORKOUT Powered by Reebok Gyms" are available at Westin properties around the world.

In addition to top-of-the-line workout equipment, the facilities offer the Reebok Core Training Zone designed to enhance guests' strength, flexibility, balance and aerobic conditioning. Westin also recently announced the formation of the Westin Renewal Council, a panel of six lifestyle experts who will begin offering in-room television programming in categories such as "Unwind," "Energize" and "Create," beginning in 2008.

- Meeting planners also are making their needs for health and wellness options known. Planners who participated in a focus group conducted by the Hamilton Park Hotel & Conference Center in Florham Park, NJ, highlighted the importance of up-to-date fitness centers. Said Steve Sackman, marketing and sales director for Destination Hotels & Resorts, which manages Hamilton Park Hotel & Conference Center, "Meeting attendees sit for long hours and want the opportunity to unwind and keep fit at the hotel fitness center. Consequently, the fitness center is a key component to a successful meeting." Meeting planners also stressed the importance of organized morning walks and guided fitness programs as well as creative ideas such as offering attendees "Gym Bags to Go," which might include small weights, a flexibility cord, yoga mat and CD of special music, and running watch or pedometer.

Focus group planners also indicated that they want to meet their attendees' demands for more healthful menu choices to maximize their meeting experience and minimize energy drain. In response, the conference center created a nutritious menu program entitled "The Mark of a Well-Balanced Choice." The 219-room property offers a fitness club as well as indoor and outdoor pools.

- La Costa Resort and Spa located in Carlsbad, CA, recently completed a multimillion-dollar redevelopment project. In addition to its internationally acclaimed feng shui-influenced spa, the 552-room resort offers an Athletic Club, 36 holes of PGA championship golf and 17 tennis courts to help meeting attendees stay fit. It is also home to The Chopra Center, led by renowned mind-body medicine guru Dr. Deepak Chopra. Among the Center's many offerings are corporate training programs designed to help employees reduce stress and take charge of their overall health.

### Mind Over Matter

Having a healthy mindset can be just as integral to an attendee's health as his or her physical condition. To help address this issue, Equanimity offers sessions on emotional intelligence.

"Emotional intelligence is about how you manage your emotions and your emotional connections with others," Rusing explained. She added that managing emotions can help avoid stress that can lead to heart disease. Emotional intelligence sessions are designed to help attendees learn more about themselves, including what their triggers are and what kinds of things stress them out. It even helps them understand how they trigger other peoples' emotions.

Participants who attend an emotional intelligence session also learn some new language they can use in their corporate culture. Rusing gave a few examples. "One of the terms we use is 'awfulizing' — running to conclusions and getting all stressed out without knowing all the facts. Another one we talk

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**Dana Schmitt**  
Chief Operating Officer  
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Rochester, MI

about is having an 'amygdala hijack.'" The amygdala is the part of the brain that governs our fight or flight instinct. "If someone is having an amygdala hijack, you know they're in a very high-stress place," she said.

"It's a great program," Rusing added. "There's a focus on coaching others and having skill sets of empathy. It's so important for our health to have emotional fitness. Companies don't want people to be taking sick days. To be proactive is much better."

### Motivational "Action" Plan

"We always receive a positive response," Bond said of the reaction she receives from participants who attend her fitness sessions. "The attendees speak of being motivated, invigorated, energized, challenged and joyful.

They often ask questions pertaining to their personal fitness plan with intent to continue when they are back in their home environment."

Jennifer McLaughlin, who works in media relations at Allstate's headquarters, has become a big fan of her company's exercise breaks. "I'm calmer. I have more energy. It helps release stress because you're releasing the endorphins. It's very much part of having a more engaged, happier, healthier work force." **I&FMM**

### Healthy Demand For Fitness

With meeting planners' budgets continuing to climb, and the number of meetings per year also on the rise, hotels and conference centers are noting that the number and types of demands also have increased, especially in the areas of health and fitness.

“There’s no doubt that there are more guests in the fitness center than ever before,” said Amy Wickenheisser, CMP, director of operations at Hamilton Park Hotel & Conference Center, the Florham Park, NJ, property managed by Destination Hotels & Resorts.

According to Wickenheisser, who has more than 13 years of conference services experience, a state-of-the-art fitness center is just one expectation. The ability to provide menu, seating and location options for maximum health and well-being are equally important.

Additional trends noted by Wickenheisser include the following:

- State-of-the-art, ergonomically designed chairs in meeting spaces are desirable and are becoming the “norm.”
- The need for outdoor function space has increased. Planners look for diversity, providing mental and physical health benefits.
- Ample meeting space throughout public areas is imperative, since meetings, networking and sidebar discussions continue after the facilitation has ended.
- Because meeting participants are often served heavy meals that require an afternoon nap rather than furthering meeting productivity, Hamilton Park’s nutritious menu program, “The Mark of a Well-Balanced Choice,” for example, offers menu selection geared to tastes and preferences of health-conscious attendees.
- With attendees taking office work with them through Bluetooth and wireless laptop technology, Internet access in public spaces is becoming a necessity, allowing attendees to do their “real” job while away from the office.
- Interestingly, men prefer chairs to couches for discussion or working on laptops. Consequently, the number of chairs in the lobby and public spaces has increased.

“We’ve become adept trend-spotters,” Wickenheisser concluded. “We try to anticipate all of our meeting planners’ needs. That’s how we continue to provide a gratifying and worry-free experience for everyone involved.”