

Taking part in the Global Corporate Challenge will benefit the Tesco workforce and the business

Colin Williams, 02 June 2010

Tesco's commitment to entering 245 teams in this year's Global Corporate Challenge (GCC) represents a key health and wellbeing initiative for the retailer this year and it is the first time we've taken part.

In supporting nearly 2,000 Tesco employees in the GCC across all areas of the business, we are backing an event that has a proven track record in creating a healthy, happy and motivated workforce which, in turn, will benefit Tesco, the environment, local communities and, most importantly, our employees themselves. The GCC encourages participants to take part in a virtual walking race around the world in 125 days, which equates to 25,000 steps a day. Teams of seven compete against other teams from Tesco and other large businesses around the world. The benefits of such a scheme are numerous for an employer such as Tesco.

A healthier, happier and energised workforce is undoubtedly good for any organisation and this initiative forms a key part of our health and wellbeing strategy. With an activity such as GCC, which aims to achieve just that, it is not difficult to see the potential business case for taking part. We can all relate to our own experience of feeling better when we are exercising regularly, and this has been proven to manifest itself in increased productivity and enthusiasm at work. The target for the GCC is to get everyone to walk at least the minimum recommended 10,000 steps a day and the health benefits are striking. In 2009, according to figures from the GCC, 35% of participants reported weight loss, with an average of 4.5kg lost and, importantly, 63% of people taking part reported that they felt more energised as a result of the challenge. A workforce that feels confident, energised and fit is more likely to contribute positively and less likely to take time off due to illness.

There is also a large benefit to any workplace in the enjoyment and team spirit that is fostered in a group challenge like this. Having a common goal, and something to talk about with colleagues other than day-to-day activities, is an important step towards building the positive relationships and strong teams that are vital to the success of a large organisation like Tesco. A further element that we have found fosters wider team spirit is encouraging other employees to sponsor our GCC participants in the challenge, which also has the benefit of raising money for charity. In 2010, Tesco's charity of the year is CLIC Sargent, which raises money for young people supporting cancer sufferers. With over 280,000 employees in the UK we hope that participation in the GCC will go a long way towards reaching our charity targets.

However, an important part of encouraging a healthy lifestyle at work is changing attitudes towards exercise. The GCC is a great way of doing this, encouraging workers in our stores and distribution centres to look again at the walking they do as part of their day-to-day job and consider it as exercise. In this way GCC is not seen as a chore or an extra task at the end of the day, but is simply seen as part of their daily routine. Another key step that is encouraged by the GCC is changing attitudes towards travel to and from work. Time spent travelling to work can become exercise that is also environmentally friendly. Among participants in the GCC last year, walking became the primary mode of transport and journeys to work by car dropped by over a half. There is also a system in place for participants to convert the distance they cover when cycling or swimming into miles for the GCC so everyone can use their preferred form of exercise. A lot of our employees within stores and distribution centres live close to their place of work and by taking up a walking and cycling challenge, people can work exercise into their daily routine and help reduce our carbon footprint.

Another great benefit for Tesco taking part in the GCC is that it goes some way towards achieving our CSR goals. Corporate social responsibility is vital for an organisation like Tesco. As the largest private sector employer in the country, we have the ability to really promote positive change. However, we see that this must begin with our own employees and cutting their own carbon footprint cuts ours which, in turn, encourages others.

For the first time this year, for every employee an organisation enters into the GCC they will also be paying for a school child to enter the Global Children's Challenge free of charge, which promotes a healthy and active lifestyle in schools. Promoting ties with local schools is an important strand of our Community Plan. We appreciate that due to Tesco's size we are in a unique position to get millions of people active.

So there is a strong business case for promoting initiatives like the GCC at Tesco. We can encourage healthy and productive employees with team spirit and all the while we are helping the community and the environment. Maybe we should all walk round the world?

Colin Williams is head of occupational health at Tesco