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Business



A perk that's keeping Silicon Valley workers healthy — and on the job

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SUNNYVALE — At LinkedIn, employees at the world's largest online professional networking website enjoy a smorgasbord of perks, from gourmet meals to on-site dry cleaning to car washes and oil changes.

Yet in the uber-competitive world of attracting and retaining top talent, some Bay Area tech companies have been turning to a benefit that may not be as flashy as adoption assistance or doggy day care, but could have a profound impact on something much bigger: their employees' health.

For Google, Apple and Facebook employees, the doctor is always in — at work. In addition to traditional health coverage, these companies are providing employer-paid health care — with access to physicians, nurses, and therapists — at clinics onsite. And a growing number of other companies like LinkedIn are offering similar benefits in clinics they fund just off campus.

The business model is thriving in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, experts say, because it focuses on preventive services that treat workers before their illnesses and pains — physical and emotional — become more expensive for their employer plans.

And since it's so convenient, employees are more inclined to not put off that annoying trip to the doctor across town for an ache or symptom that just won't go away.

Sunny Kullar, right, and Nancy Tran, take appointments in the waiting room at the Crossover Health medical clinic in Sunnyvale, (Gary Reyes/ Bay Area News Group)

More and more Bay Area companies are jumping on board.

Just ask Larry Boress, executive director of the Chicago-based National Association of Worksite Health Centers, the nonprofit group that advocates for the industry.

During a recent Silicon Valley employer forum, Boress said a recruiter for a top tech firm told him that on-site clinics are becoming the coin of the realm.

If on-site acupuncture, massage therapy and chiropractors are not part of a company's benefit package, the recruiter told him, workers "will go somewhere else."

"It's a battle of the benefits," Boress said.

Nina McQueen brought the idea to LinkedIn when she came over from Facebook, which had already been offering an on-site clinic since 2012.

LinkedIn's new clinic, operated by San Clemente-based Crossover Health Medical Group, opened in March, about a mile from its Sunnyvale headquarters. Nvidia and Intuit have similar clinics near their offices.

That quick access is key for LinkedIn's 2,700 employees, said McQueen, vice president of global benefits and employee experience.

Instead of driving to a medical appointment and hassling with traffic, then waiting to be seen by a doctor, LinkedIn workers — mostly millennials — can use their smartphones to book a same-day or next-day appointment at the clinic, then walk or bike there without busting their day.

If they're in a real hurry, employees can get a free ride from Lyft.



Dr. Saba Haq is one of the primary care doctors at the Crossover Health medical clinic in Sunnyvale. (Gary Reyes/ Bay Area News Group)

The programs are usually run by turn-key medical companies, often physician-led, like Crossover, or Premise, or One Medical. Cisco Systems has been offering on-site health care since 2008 when LifeConnections Healthcare Center opened. It's now run by Stanford Health Care Alliance.

At LinkedIn's Crossover clinic, for example, employees can make appointments with a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a certified health coach, a physical therapist, a chiropractor, an acupuncturist — even an optometrist, who also oversees a hip eyeglass shop that sells designer frames. Employees are charged a \$10 co-pay to use the services at the clinic.

Because the medical staff is not paid based on the number of patients it sees, doctors are able to spend more time talking to patients instead of rushing them through appointments. An hour-long physical is not unusual, said primary care Dr. Saba Haq, who works at LinkedIn's Sunnyvale Crossover Health clinic.

Inside, the atmosphere is relaxed — even whimsical. Each office is named after games — think “Pong,” or “Centipede” or “Dig Dug” — developed by Atari, the arcade game pioneer whose former headquarters are nearby.

Whether they're ailing from a weekend warrior injury or chronic health issues, Haq's patients talk to her about everything, from the stresses of arranged marriages to addictions, to pressures some workers face from their families abroad.

She's also the patient's referral source — known as a “warm hand-off” — for on-site treatments like acupuncture, massage or physical therapy.

“It does not feel like the doctor's office,” said Haq. “This is what I dreamed about it medical school.”



Opticians, James Huynh, and Wendy Paiyou, left to right, work in the full-service optometry department at the Crossover Health medical clinic in Sunnyvale. (Gary Reyes/ Bay Area News Group)

The employers — all of which like LinkedIn have self-funded health insurance plans — do not bill insurance companies or accept payments from national carriers. Instead, operators like Crossover charge the companies a monthly fee for each benefit-eligible employee.

McQueen said the clinic's holistic approach that starts with a primary care doctor is a huge draw, particularly for LinkedIn employees from outside the Bay Area, or the U.S., and for millennials — many of whom don't use the traditional health plans the company still provides.

As a result, she said, LinkedIn noticed that employees who got sick or injured — especially over the weekends — would head straight to a hospital emergency room for unnecessarily expensive treatment.

“They did not know what to do, they did not know what doctor to see,” McQueen said. Today, she noted, about 45 percent of LinkedIn workers use Crossover, and almost 75 percent of them now consider Crossover their main health care provider.

Kalee Dankner, a 32-year-old design program manager, relied on LinkedIn's Anthem Blue Cross health plan when she was pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy in February.

But her primary care doctor was unable to help cure her post-pregnancy lower back pain.

"I tried pain medication and muscle relaxants, and cold and hot treatments, but I still had stiffness in my back," she said.

So, she sought out Jerod Gard, the physical therapist at Crossover.

For the past two months, during her weekly appointment with Gard, she's started to feel stronger and less pain, and is grateful for the clinic because she doesn't have to miss work to drive to appointments.

"We have ridiculously good benefits," said Dankner, "and I'm taking advantage of this one."



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