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University of Washington sets record with employee engagement efforts

The University of Washington danced its way into the Guinness Book of World Records this week, also marking a year since the inception of the university's revolutionary employee engagement program.

On Jan. 28, coinciding with National Have Fun at Work Day, more than 2,000 members of the UW community took to the Huskies Field to perform the world's largest umbrella dance.

More than just a PR stunt, the event was organized by the university's community engagement program, The Whole U, a part of the university's human resources department. The core of the program focuses on overall health, specifically honing in on six pillars: staying healthy, being active, eating well, recognizing family life events, volunteering and engaging personal interest.

The entire effort began about a year and a half ago, says Mindy Kornberg, vice president for human resources at UW, in reaction to trends affecting much of the U.S. workplace. Gallup had just come out with new data showing 70% of the employees are not engaged, or are actively disengaging.

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"It wasn't shocking because we had just come out of this horrible recession," Kornberg says. "We needed to figure out how we can actively reengage our staff and faculty here at UW."

Kornberg decided to go to UW's president, Michael K. Young, with ideas on boosting engagement throughout the campus. "I pitched this holistic approach, allowing staff to meet and building a community based on personal goals," she says.

It started with a survey sent to the entire university staff, asking employees what it is they wanted to do. A simple approach could have been to offer something simple like yoga classes. "But, if I'm interested in running, a yoga class won't do much good," she says. Instead, the school opted to create The Whole U program, emphasizing recreation as part of an overall healthy lifestyle, both on the job and in employees' personal lives.

"[Young] suggested launching The Whole U while trying to break a world record to build some hype, so last year we launched the program while trying to break the record for the largest kettlebell [workout]," Kornberg says. This week's umbrella event reached the record-setting goal.

With a staff of five, she says, The Whole U began leveraging events already happening around UW, essentially creating a central repository of information on events happening around the campus. Today, that Web site garners an average of 1,016 views a day.

The program has had a profound impact the UW employees, and has helped with recruitment and retention, she says. In fact, she adds, UW was named one of the best places to work by the *Chronicles of Education* for the first time last year.

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But, she advises, a program like hers can't simply come from benefits and HR managers being prescriptive on health and wellness plans. "It has to be driven by the employees that want to be leaders in their community," she says.

"The engagement aspect means people will be more productive, have increased loyalty and less absenteeism if they feel a part of it," Kornberg says. "The goal was to get people across the university to be a part of the system."

As an example, Kornberg points to a group of surgeons at the medical school who would bike together. When the news of a biking group broke, "we had custodians, analysts ... all sorts of different people that these surgeons never would have met, join in. It really is a community builder."

As that work-life balance becomes more blurred in this 24/7 world, the importance of including family becomes even more necessary. "There is almost no work-life balance unless you can incorporate family," she adds.

"The umbrella dance yesterday, it means if you're going to have to do some work at home one night ... your kids understand where you work and how cool it is, it makes them more understanding. With these programs you're breaking down barriers," she

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adds. "You begin to realize, 'we have common interests in where we work outside our little vacuum.'"

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