

But then he gives them the good news too. Krishnan cites research that says 30 minutes of walking every day reduces anxiety levels — and, consequently, heart disease — by 48 per cent. “It doesn’t have to be strenuous activity,” he says. “Even walking to the coffee vending machine counts.” The average person has to walk 10,000 steps a day — equivalent to 6.4 km — to stay fit. This is exactly what Krishnan’s Stepathlon is signing Indian companies up for.

According to Krishnan, Indian companies have mostly focused on illness rather than wellness. “In the West, employers have realised that wellness programmes not only reduce healthcare costs for the company, but also boost employee morale and team skills.”

Stepathlon organises an annual race where teams of five employees each from companies around the world compete virtually. Each participant is provided with a stepack — a kit which includes a Stepathlon Budd-E (pedometer), water bottle and cap. The pedometer records every step a participant takes and converts it into distance covered, which is then imposed onto a race track. The team which covers the maximum distance in the shortest time is the winner.

Top companies that have taken part in the Stepathlon virtual race include Tata Steel and HDFC Bank, with a total of 3,000 participants. A woman employee of HDFC Bank, which won the title of the most active company last year, wrote to Stepathlon saying how her participation in the contest made her think beyond her responsibilities as a

STEPATHLON

YEAR OF FOUNDING: 2012

WHAT IT DOES: Gets employees of corporate India to walk; organises virtual races where employees from around the world compete

POTENTIAL: The market is virtually unlimited, since any corporate (in India and abroad) can enrol, and it counts as an employee initiative

FUNDING: Self funded

COMPETITORS: None in India

REVENUES: Rs 6 crore in 2013-14

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 17

working mother as well as the benefits of staying active and healthy.

Stepping Stones

The roots of Stepathlon go back almost 30 years to when Krishnan was playing the Australian Open in 1984 as a junior. There he met Bilsborough. By the time they reconnected in 2011, Bilsborough had introduced in Australia the concept of getting people to walk. They figured the idea could work in India too.

Validation came in the form of response. Krishnan’s first pitch, to IDFC, was so well received that he was invited to present his idea at the IDFC town hall. Soon after, the company enlisted its entire staff. A year and a half later, Stepathlon 2013, a 100-day virtual race, was organised with 30,879 participants representing 210 companies from 34 countries. The 2014 event is under way with 60,000 participants.

At Rs 2,250 per participant, which works out to Rs 22.5 per day for the 100-day race, Stepathlon earned Rs 6 crore in revenues in 2013-14, says Krishnan. He declined to disclose its costs for the

previous year. He does expect the company to break even this year. Considering the ease with which he has been able to enrol people, his target of two lakh participants for this year’s race does not seem far-fetched. Britannia has been roped in as title sponsor for three years.

Formative Days

Krishnan’s pedigree as a sports management executive was probably what helped him break ground in the early days. In his 17 years at IMG — during which he rose to the post managing director for South Asia — he helped create properties, including the Sahara Cup, the Chennai Open tennis tournament and the Lakme India Fashion Week, and scripted IMG’s joint venture with Reliance to develop sports in India.

A lawyer by training, Krishnan’s association with sports has been long. Besides playing competitive tennis, he was a club-level cricketer in Australia. His PowerPoint presentations brim with research from *HBR*. He cites an *HBR* study that lists the six principles of an effective wellness programme: accessibility, communication, supportive environment, multilevel leadership, fun and relevance. “Stepathlon strives to ensure these principles,” he says.

One of the reasons why Stepathlon has become popular is because it brings mass participation to competitive sports. In essence, it commercialises something that people do anyway. It is a win-win proposition for employer and employee, says Krishnan. While the employee becomes more active, this results in better productivity for the employer. **BW**

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RIGHT STEP: Ravi Krishnan, one of the founders of Stepathlon, wants companies to focus on wellness