

## Tipping the Scales Against Obesity

# Winning by Losing



It seems that the popular television show *The Biggest Loser*, which gives cash prizes to contestants who lose the most weight, has nothing on Corporate America.

In what can perhaps best be classified as a lose-win proposition, big companies, such as **General Electric** (ticker: GE), **Oracle** (ORCL), and **Halliburton** (HAL), are increasingly turning to weight-loss contests to improve health and combat the more than \$153 billion a year in productivity alone that a Gallup Well-Being Index in 2011 estimated is lost to absenteeism by employees who pack too many pounds.

Apparently, the contest works, because employees have some figurative—and literal—skin in the game, says David Roddenberry, co-founder of a contest coordinator, Healthy-

### Fat Chance

**Big companies like General Electric and Halliburton are promoting weight-loss contests with monetary prizes.**

Wage. “Loss-aversion is a powerful principle,” says Roddenberry, who notes that participants (who could include some family members) are loath to lose the \$70 they each kick in to enter the contest, which typically lasts 12 weeks for short-term versions and nine months for long-term ones. Teams of five, some of them executives, are formed, and the successful entrants are those

who shed a certain percentage of their weight.

Paige Niccoll, HealthAhead operations leader for General Electric’s GE Capital, says 5,000 people participated in its first foray into team-losing in April. “Many people gained from the experience,” Nicoll says (pun perhaps unintended), with a total of 23,000 pounds being lost. The company awarded the five members of the top team \$5,000 each. With 60% of GE Capital’s employees considered obese on body mass index, Nicoll adds, the contest was a “can’t-lose type of deal.”

