

Praise from track star Kriss



AWARD – Trevor Best, of BAE Systems, Kriss Akabusi, Brian Toward, also of BAE Systems and Christine Murray of Amacus

By **CHRISTOPHER KNOX**
Business Reporter
christopher.knox@ncjmedia.co.uk

BUSINESSES across the region are celebrating after being recognised by former athletics star Kriss Akabusi for improving the health and wellbeing of their employees.

The Olympic medallist was at Gateshead College for the North East Better Health at Work awards where he presented prizes to some of the region's biggest organisations including ABB, Akzo

Nobel, BAE Systems, Gateshead College and South Tyneside Homes.

The awards are managed by specialist training provider Amacus and are a partnership between Gateshead College, the NHS Primary Care Trust for South of Tyne and Wear and the TUC.

They encourage employers to support their workers in leading healthier lifestyles by making it easy for them to gain free access to health advice and support and getting them involved in health programmes at work.

Other winners included HMRC Child Benefits, HMRC Contact Centre, Jobcentre Plus, NHS South of Tyne and Wear, and Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service.

Those taking part introduced a wide variety of initiatives such as health MoTs for workers, healthy eating programmes, cycle and walk to work schemes, stress awareness sessions, weight loss campaigns, prostate cancer awareness and smoking cessation.

Volunteers within each company known as

'health advocates' were the driving force behind the initiatives and worked with the Amacus team to identify key health concerns among colleagues and develop the basic health advice needed to help them address any issues.

Speaking on the night, Kriss said: "I know from my own career the benefits to be gained from being fit and healthy and how big an impact it can have on your performance in the workplace."

"It makes good business sense for employers to focus on the wellbeing of their employees and has a massive impact on motivation and productivity."

"I always loved competing in the North East and I'm delighted to see the impact the awards have had here. It's a pleasure to celebrate the achievements of these companies and their health advocates."

Christine Murray, managing director of Amacus, said: "This region traditionally has been among the poorest in health and fitness. The awards are designed to tackle this, raise awareness of health initiatives and create a better workforce by offering advice on healthier lifestyles and support services."

"The number of people involved and the impact has been brilliant – particularly the health advocates who are the real stars in driving the awards."

"We're delighted someone as enthusiastic about health and fitness as Kriss has been here to celebrate with us. There are so many fantastic stories to tell."

Organisations taking part in The North East Better Health at Work awards work towards bronze, silver and gold awards over a three-year period to demonstrate improvement.

The intention is to drive improvement from the workforce upwards by boosting the fitness of employees and helping employers to cut absenteeism and achieve a more productive workforce.

BAE Systems was one of the companies on hand to share its positive experience of the initiative. One of its big schemes has been a better health roadshow to help workers understand the types of health and fitness support available.

As a result, around 150 people have been involved in blood pressure and cholesterol testing, several smoking cessation programmes have been held and BAE's catering manager has even been signed up as a health advocate.

BAE Systems health advocate and union learning representative Trevor Best said: "We're a traditional business and I think when we first started the award people were wondering why we were doing it."

"Now though they are starting to see the advantages and things are really taking off. We've got the bronze and will be pushing on for the silver next time."

"We had 150 involved in the cholesterol testing, lots involved in smoking cessation courses and we're planning to introduce a Skills for Life course to help people return to the workplace from long-term absence."

"We've taken the bull by the horns to the extent that our colleagues in America have even been impressed by what we've done."