

Healthy, wealthy & wise

Blake Wolfe



Andrea Holwegner



Tommy Europe



Leslie Beck

How better health equals better bottom lines

Have you ever thought about how your diet and exercise plan (or perhaps lack thereof) may be affecting your performance at work?

A healthy diet, regular exercise and good sleep go a long way in workplace performance by contributing to increased energy, alertness and better moods, which translates into improved productivity, efficiency and a positive workplace culture.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), poor employee health leads to increased rates of absenteeism, disability and reduced work output. Those issues directly affect the bottom line of a company; the indirect costs from productivity losses are sometimes larger than direct medical expenses. The CDC estimates that in the U.S. alone, those losses amount to approximately \$225.8 billion per year, or around \$1,685 per employee.

But there's good news: Research shows that a workplace which supports a healthy lifestyle sees not only the reversal of such problems at the employee level, but benefits from an enhanced corporate image through the production of its healthier – and happier – staff.

Here is some expert advice on how to promote health and fitness in your office.

Benefits of better health

Among the largest expenses billed to company benefit plans are medications for both physical ailments such as diabetes and high blood pressure, as well as mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression.

Nutrition expert Andrea Holwegner says that better health means less sickness, and less sickness means more savings for companies on medical benefits.

There's also the impact of good health on concentration and alertness, creating not only a safer workplace but fewer claims resulting from accidents, as well as better quality work being done – a direct effect on business performance.

"When you have a healthy workforce, you have a productive workforce," Holwegner says. "They're able to come in and concentrate and work hard. We know that depending on what industry you're in, particularly creative industries, overall wellbeing affects how you can think, create and innovate on the fly."

Fitness trainer Tommy Europe adds that as a rough estimate, companies will save \$4 in lost productivity for every dollar they invest in employee health. While larger companies will have more to spend on such initiatives, any amount of effort will have a positive impact.

What employers can do

- Offer health and fitness seminars, providing information about making more manageable lifestyle choices or ways to exercise while working on the road.

- Examine the food selection made available in the workplace, for example, the contents of an on-site vending machine and what communal snacks are brought in for meetings. If eliminating these sources means reducing non-healthy options, direct the savings toward funding other health initiatives (i.e. a healthy snack program.)

- Europe recommends putting out a survey to learn what employees want to see in a workplace health program. He says this often comes down to an emphasis on fun and inclusiveness.

- Seek out fitness role models in the workplace to act as examples to their coworkers. As Holwegner says, "The runners, the fitness buffs and those who pack the healthy lunches – those people are contagious and can work as support for their less-active coworkers. They should also be supported with higher-level fitness and health challenges."

- The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety suggests starting the workday with a pre-shift stretch, negotiating employee discounts with local gyms or installing bike racks to encourage cycling over driving.

Just as important is the role of management, who should support and participate in health initiatives alongside their reports.

"That's key," says nutritionist Leslie Beck. "It creates a culture and it has to be supported from the top down; management has to be seen as a role model. I've spoken with so many clients over the years who felt that it was wrong to sneak out of the office to go to the gym – it was just the culture they were working in."

Europe points out that in his work with companies such as Pacific Blue Cross and B.C. Hydro, upper management has taken the lead in promoting health amongst employees, "as opposed to sending out a memo and telling employees to 'do this, this and this.' You get a lot more success that way because employees feel supported and that everyone is in the same boat." ■

Simple fixes for individuals:

- Make more time for better meals. A fast-paced schedule often leads to "on-the-fly" meal choices such as opting for drive-through dining over healthy lunches, which can lead to decreased health and motivation. Pre-planning a week's worth of lunches on the weekend is a great way to stay on top of your nutrition, even if you have a busy week ahead.
- Find time to move around during the day! Take a walk on your lunch break, get off the bus a few stops early, or perhaps consider investing in sit-stand workstations.
- Drink lots of water. Staying hydrated is vital to allowing your body to function properly.
- Commit to taking several small breaks whenever you can throughout the day. Allowing yourself a quiet moment is important in managing daily stresses and avoiding burnout.



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