



PEOPLE & ORGANIZATIONS

How To Shrink Employees' Waistlines To Help Your Bottom Line

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OVERVIEW

A majority of the population of countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is now classified as overweight or obese, with weight-related health costs accounting for up to 10 percent of total healthcare spending. Levels of obesity are also rising in the developing world.

Excess weight can lead to multiple health issues, increasing the number of sick days as well as health insurance premiums. In addition, poor health costs U.S. companies US\$227 billion a year in lost productivity, while U.K. companies are losing £29 billion a year (US\$45 billion) through sick leave costs. With lack of physical activity during modern office workdays a core contributing factor to the sedentary lifestyles that are increasing obesity, encouraging exercise is in everyone's interests.

Boosting the fitness levels of employees is not just about cutting the number of sick days. Encouraging your staff to exercise has plenty of additional benefits, with one meta-study of companies with active employee wellness initiatives showing a 25 percent decrease in sick days taken, 24.5 percent reduction in health costs, 32 percent reduction in worker compensation and disability costs, and an average reported cost-benefit ratio of 5.56. The question is no longer so much whether you should invest in employee wellness, but how.



IN DEPTH

Numerous studies have shown positive business benefits from encouraging employees to exercise, not least a reduction in health insurance premiums, as healthier employees tend to need less medical treatment. But there are plenty of other business benefits:

- **Reduced employee susceptibility to illness:** Walking briskly for 35-45 minutes a day can lead to a 50 percent reduction in sick days.
- **Better problem solving:** Want your employees to get better at solving problems and innovating? Aerobic exercise has been shown to boost both positivity and creativity.
- **Boosted brainpower:** Exercise has been shown to boost some cognitive functions up to 10 percent, while regular exercise can improve memory, and high-impact running can increase learning potential.
- **Increased energy:** Regular moderate exercise boosts energy and reduces feelings of fatigue, as well as helping regulate sleep patterns, which increases daytime productivity.
- **Increased efficiency:** As well being shown to reduce the number of sick days, daytime exercise (especially around lunchtime) also improves time management and mood: "There are clear implications not only for employee wellbeing, but also for competitive advantage and motivation by increasing opportunities for exercising at work."
- **Improved mental health:** Physically active employees are significantly less likely to suffer from depression or job burnout.
- **More capable management:** Getting managers exercising not only reduces their stress levels, but makes them better managers, according to some studies.

There are several approaches that companies can take that can help even the most reluctant employee to start adopting a more healthy lifestyle. However, it's important to remember that to get the benefit it is important that employees see the exercise as enjoyable and practical, not as a chore. Here are just a few:

- **Calorie-counted staff cafés:** Consuming too many calories is the key cause of most weight issues, so helping staff to manage their intake by providing healthy yet nutritious meals at an on-site café can be a major boost. In addition, several studies have shown that workplace cafés can act as social hubs that boost employee engagement and motivation.
- **On-site gyms:** Employees are more likely to exercise if it's convenient, while time lost in travelling to an off-site gym can reduce productivity and increase stress. On-site company gyms can save employees an average of US\$58 a month in membership fees – and make it easy to get the productivity and health benefits of daytime exercise.
- **Discounts for regular workouts:** With the rise of wearable fitness tracking devices come new

opportunities to monitor employee lifestyles, and reward the healthy ones. The ability to keep track of employee activity is sparking a fresh wave of apps that could help reduce insurance premiums if adopted at scale.

- **Standing desks:** Studies have shown standing desks — a popular alternative in modern workplaces — to lead to an increased heart rate, improved energy levels and employees burning up to 20 additional calories an hour. Long periods of sitting, meanwhile, have been associated with increased mortality across a range of illnesses, with some doctors warning that “sitting is the new smoking”.
- **Cycle to work schemes:** As well as saving employees money (up to US\$7.3 billion a year in the U.S. alone) and being a great way to burn off excess calories, people who cycle to work take on average one less sick day per year than non-cycling colleagues.
- **Group calisthenics:** One of the oldest workplace wellness programs, and still popular in many Asian countries, organized all-company workouts are starting to make a comeback in the west. Though they can be awkward at first, done right they can boost team spirit as well as employee health.

It has become a truism that employees are businesses' biggest asset. Just as you would invest in keeping your machinery operating at its best through regular maintenance, so investing in maintaining your staff's health is increasingly vital. Not only could it be good for productivity, but studies have shown that such programs can be vital in both attracting and retaining top talent. With staff turnover rates increasing across the world, if you want to thrive in the long-term, investing in employee health and wellness could be an increasingly important strategy to keep your people active, productive and engaged.

TALKING POINTS



“Instead of viewing exercise as something we do for ourselves—a personal indulgence that takes us away from our work—it's time we started considering physical activity as part of the work itself. The alternative, which involves processing information more slowly, forgetting more often, and getting easily frustrated, makes us less effective at our jobs and harder to get along with for our colleagues.” – Harvard Business Review



“Workplace wellness and community prevention programs are a win-win way to make a real difference in improving our health and bottom line all at once.” – Jeff Levi, Executive Director, Trust for America's Health



“Employees are eight times more likely to be engaged when wellness is a priority in the workplace.” – World Economic Forum

FURTHER READING

Are Wellness Programs Right for Your Company? – Entrepreneur, May 2015

Companies Take a Broader View of Employee Wellness Programs – The Washington Post, June 19, 2015

The Dark Side of Corporate Wellness Programs – Fast Company, June 8, 2015

Meta-evaluation of Workplace Health Promotion Economic Return Studies – The Chapman Institute

Measuring Wellness: From Data to Insights – Economist Intelligence Unit

Wellness and Beyond: Employers Examine Ways to Improve Employee Health and Productivity, Reduce Cost –
Aon report

