

[WORKPLACE WELL-BEING: DION KLEIN]

Let's get physical

The case for active workers

Investing in employees' health through fitness and health programs is "sweat equity" for an organisation's future success

FITNESS FACTS:

Corporate-sponsored fitness programs:

- Corporate fitness challenges
- Lunchtime walks
- Low-impact group fitness sessions
- Stretching and flexibility classes
- Yoga
- Subsidised health club memberships
- Fitness workshops

Savings per employee per \$1 spent on corporate fitness:

- Bank of America: \$US5.96
- PacBell: \$US3.10
- Wisconsin School District: \$US4.47
- Prudential Insurance: \$US2.90
- General Mills: \$US3.50

MOST of us spend at least half our day at work, with much of that sitting in front of a computer or being fairly sedentary. It is therefore not surprising that adult obesity has increased over the years due to the decrease in incidental activity that may have been associated with working.

For example, 10 years ago, if we had to deliver something to a colleague down the hall, we got up from our desk and walked down the hall to deliver it to the person directly. Today, we send an e-mail with the document as an attachment. We have become "physically lazy" in the workplace.

This physical laziness, in addition to poor eating habits and increased stress, has impacted not only on the workplace with regards to productivity but it has also put more pressure on our health-care system.

The National Occupational Health and Safety Commission reported that 62 per cent of all injuries in Australia were sprains and strains of joints/muscles. Many of these injuries may have been able to be reduced if the person had more muscular endurance that can be achieved through physical activity, especially resistance training.

A health and productivity benchmark study of 43 large public and private employers in the United States found that 53 per cent of the median annual health and productivity costs (\$US10,000 an employee a year — or about \$A20,000) were for workers' compensation, turnover and absenteeism.



At least 100 million workdays are lost each year to lower back pain at a cost to employers of \$US20 billion and workers' compensation claims for back problems total \$US8.75 billion a year. Seventy per cent of an organisation's benefit costs are incurred through cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal injuries (including back and over-use syndromes), respiratory ailments, digestive disorders, cancer, and stress. These are preventable or at least modifiable through physical activity and other lifestyle/behaviour changes. People who partake in physical fitness and back-care programs can reduce their susceptibility to lower back pain.

Just as an employee has an obligation to serve the employer, the employer has a duty to provide a healthy working environment and opportunities to increase the employee's overall health and well-being.

A recent study argues that health promotion is an investment in human capital. Dr Bob Karch, editor of *Health Promotion: Global Perspectives*, made a similar claim in 1999: "Workplace Health Promotion is not only the most valuable of all capital but it is 'imperative capital' if a company, or, for that matter a country, wants to be competitive in local, regional, or global marketplaces."

Canada's *National Wellness Survey Report 2000* surveyed 422 businesses (716,885 employees). With 64 per cent offering some wellness initiatives, 17.5 per cent of companies offered comprehensive work-site wellness programs. These companies offered work-site wellness programs because they (1) considered healthy employees a valuable asset, (2) wanted to promote a healthy lifestyle, and (3) wanted to reduce absenteeism.

Conversely, the five most important reasons companies do not have a comprehensive wellness program in place were lack of resources, lack of staffing, concern about implementation costs, lack of knowledge about employee wellness programs, and being unconvinced of cost savings.

Plenty of studies have reported cost savings after implementing health and fitness programs. According to *A Report of the Surgeon-General on Physical Activity and Health*, in a nine-month analysis of decision-making capabilities, there was a 70 per cent greater performance by exercisers over non-exercisers. Dr Roy Shephard found corporate wellness programs returned \$US1.95-\$3.75 an employee for every dollar spent and had a cumulative economic benefit of \$US500-\$700 a worker a year.

In Canada, municipal employees in Toronto missed 3.35 fewer days in the first six months of the "Metro Fit" fitness programs than employees not enrolled in the program. Toronto Life Assurance found that employee turnover for those enrolled in its fitness program was 1.5 per cent versus 15 per cent for non-participants. B C Hydro employees enrolled in a work-sponsored fitness program had a turnover rate of 3.5 per cent compared with the company average of 10.3 per cent. The Canadian Life Assurance Company found that the turnover rate for fitness program participants was 32.4 per cent lower than the average over a seven-year period.

There are many types of fitness programs that a company can put into place with the assistance of qualified fitness instructors. An important aspect of organising a program is to find out what employees are interested in to satisfy their needs.

Good companies strive to work with their employees to achieve balance in their lives, not just paying them. Investment in the employees' health through fitness and health programs is "sweat equity" for the future success of your organisation.

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