

Physically Fit Employees **Fiscally Fit** Companies

By *Gina Mancuso*

Smart business owners are addressing increasing health care costs in a smart way - by promoting good health for their employees. They recognize that investing in their most important asset, their workforce, has a positive impact on their company's financial performance. But are employees taking full advantage of what their employers are offering?



We have all heard it before; engaging in regular exercise and healthy eating habits can decrease the risk of chronic health problems such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes. Having knowledge of this information and acting on it are two different things. Innovative employers see the connection between healthy employees and a healthy business. They are implementing wellness programs; making it easier for their employees to create life-time habits of exercise and healthy eating. Employers who implement wellness programs can see; an increase in employee productivity, a reduction in sick days, decreased employee turnover and employees who represent the company with a positive self-image. All this adds up to a significant return on investment.

All business owners want employees who bring their best to the job. When employees are in optimal health and physically fit, they enhance the value of a company. Not only are they less likely to take sick days; they are more energetic, more loyal and more creative. They are better at managing stress. They are productive, effective and efficient. They cost the company less in health care dollars. They feel good from the inside out and when employees feel good about themselves, they project a level of self confidence that is a priceless reflection on the company.

You may know of reports showing that healthier employees spend fewer days away from work due to illness, saving companies thousands and even millions of dollars on down time and temporary help. Consider these examples:

- At DuPont, each dollar invested in workplace health promotion yielded \$1.42 in lower absenteeism costs over a 2 year period. (American Journal of Public Health, September 1990)

- Johnson and Johnson reduced their absenteeism rate by 15% within two years of introducing their wellness program. They also cut their hospital costs by 34% after just three years. (Human Resources Executive, April 1993)

- To prevent back injuries among its employees, a county in California offered classes and fitness training to all workers. As a result, there was a significant decrease in sick days related to back injuries, producing a net cost-benefit ratio of 1 to 1.79. (WELCOA, 1999)

- Northern Gas Company employees who participate in the company's corporate exercise program take 80% fewer sick days than non-exercising employees. (Health Promotion and Education Programs, Riverside Occupation Health Services, 1991)

- Coors has saved over \$2.3 million in lost wages due to absenteeism. (Business and Health, November 1992) The challenge for business owners who recognize this connection between physical fitness and fiscal fitness is to help their employees understand it as well. Staff members may be aware of the fact that when they call out sick their work load responsibilities fall on a coworker or that projects will be delayed until their return. But what will really capture their attention is how their mental and physical health has a direct effect on their own personal finances, their relationships, their job performance and their job satisfaction. When employees connect their own health and fitness habits to tangible outcomes, they will be driven to action and both employee and employer will benefit.

We are bombarded on a daily basis with information about why we should lead a healthy lifestyle. But hearing about the importance of regular physical activity and healthy eating habits as related to chronic disease prevention is not enough to push most to action. People understand the idea that unhealthy habits today will have a detrimental effect on their health tomorrow, but habits are hard to break.

The key is being able to connect unhealthy habits to immediate concerns. Your staff needs to know how eating two cheeseburgers, large fries, a super-sized soda and a candy bar while sitting at their desk can actually cost them money, decrease their chances for a raise and have a negative effect on their interpersonal relationships. This is the kind of information that makes people listen and drives them to change.

Your employees need to know that when they are physically unfit they cost themselves money. How? As weight rises, so does health care costs. Overweight, obese and physically inactive individuals are losing money to medical spending even if they have health insurance. Hard earned money spent in doctor's visit co-pays, prescriptions, over the counter medications and time lost at work in sick days is money that could be saved by eating better and exercising regularly. Research shows that the average annual medical cost rises by \$450 for men who are overweight by 30-60 pounds. For men overweight by 60-100 pounds the cost rises by over \$1,000. (American Journal of Health Promotion). By maintaining a normal-range weight, employees could save \$450-\$1,000 a year. Talk about those numbers and people will start to listen and take action.

Maintaining a healthy weight is critical to overall health, this cannot be repeated too many times. Not only is being overweight linked to health problems of all kinds, it also has a negative effect on professional image. The power of appearance and attitude are undeniable and the power of self-image is equally as important. If one is feeling overweight, sluggish and run down, these feelings will be projected to clients, potential clients and co-workers. An employee who is health conscious, physically active and minimally stressed will project a positive image through their posture, their energy and their spirit that appeals to internal and external customers alike. Feeding a positive self-image through healthy lifestyle habits may be the characteristic that gives an employee the edge that gets them noticed and takes them to the next professional level.

When we think of reasons to focus on health and wellness, we may underestimate the positive effect that improved health has on interpersonal relationships. When you exercise and eat right on a regular basis, you have a positive self-image which gets noticed by others. You may find that others are drawn to you because of your positive attitude and your ability to get things done. You manage stress more effectively and your coworkers may feed off your energy. When your company has employees who "click", collaboration comes naturally. They work better together, solve problems more easily and become more productive in the workplace.

According to a study presented at the American College of Sports Medicine's Annual Meeting in June of 2005, researchers found that when workers exercised, they reported that they were

more productive and worked better with their co-workers. The study was done by Jim McKenna, PhD, MS, from Leeds Metropolitan University in England. Dr. McKenna reported that the ratings for mental-interpersonal performance, the ability to manage time, and productivity were significantly higher on the days the employees exercised. Workplace exercise programs, said McKenna, benefit more than just the workers. "Companies see more productive employees who also work better together. From the public health side, health care costs can be expected to go down for employees who regularly exercise at work. Think of it: fewer sick days, better attendance and more tolerant co-worker relations."

As a leader, it is your responsibility to promote the health and well being of your staff (yourself included!). Aside from the significant long term health benefits, a physically fit workforce will benefit through individual financial gains, professional growth and flourishing interpersonal work relationships. The corporation will benefit from a healthy work environment by having a staff that is united and works well together, takes less sick days and represents the company positively. Educate your employees about how to make healthy choices when dining out, how to sneak exercise into a busy work day and how good nutrition and exercise can reduce stress. Whether your company consists of one employee or one thousand employees, the health and wellness of each one is critical to the health and wellness of your business.



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