

Can firms foster fitness?

If you're not healthy, you should be doing something about it. But should your employers help you take the initiative? Kate Lovell investigates

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There's more to healthy living than watching Jamie's School Dinners and buying the odd slice of organic carrot cake, and our lackadaisical attitude to health is making bosses think more laterally about how to keep productivity up and absence levels down. Last year, UK businesses lost £12.2bn through absence - that's 168 million working days - so it's hardly surprising that a survey by Business in the Community (BITC) has found that employers are now ranking staff's health and wellbeing as a top priority.

But how should businesses address the problem? If gym memberships and free fruit aren't helping, should they go down the Japanese route of t'ai chi for all at 8am in the company car park? Given our miserable climate, probably not. So could health and wellbeing programmes, with their "prevention's better than cure" methods, be the answer?

When London Underground found that one of the main reasons for employee absence was illness, they put together an all encompassing health plan. Since implementing the programme, they have seen a huge decrease in sick days, and the scheme has been endorsed by the BITC's "Big Tick" for good practice, and has been shortlisted for the UnumProvident Healthy Workplaces award, announced this July.

A major chunk of London Underground's plan focuses on stress, which is the chief cause of absence. They developed what they unimaginatively titled a stress plan, using observational techniques to identify troublesome hotspots and put specific interventions in place to alleviate them. These included providing managers with a toolkit complete with guides on how to identify and deal with staff stress, informative relaxation CDs, and advice cards. They also rolled out a stress reduction programme aimed at building employee resilience and protecting against future absence.

It seems to work: the programme alone - which sees staff attend a weekly two-hour group session over a period of six weeks - saved London Underground 1,362 days (the equivalent of £239,000 in extra staff costs) despite the fact only 56 participants took part. What's more, staff feel better equipped to deal with pressure.

"It combines a psychoeducative approach with awareness techniques," says Emerald Jane Turner, managing director of EJT Associates, which runs the stress-reduction programme. "It also aims to interrupt the stress cycle by helping people react to triggers and make positive lifestyle changes in their diet, fitness regimes and relationships."

"Rather than dwelling on why we were stressed, we looked at what we could do about it" says Neasha Watts, a customer service assistant who took part. "We realised we have choices to make: we can either react (get upset by public abuse) or respond (telling yourself that it's not the end of the world)."

These skills are so practical, they've even helped Watts keep her cool when confronting the weekly horror of shopping with her children. "It completely changed my life at work, and how I feel about things," she says. "I'm much happier and confident now."

Health and wellbeing is a cyclical process: work problems feed into home-life creating a negative cycle that feeds back into work. Using this kind of logic, Tameside council in Ashton-under-Lyne aimed to improve the overall health of their borough. It was a rather ambitious goal, not least because the diversity of their workforce - from refuse collectors and lollipop

people to IT specialists and social workers - meant that reaching them all in the same way would be impossible.

Rather than grapple with the task alone, the council enlisted the help of Vielife, a company which specialises in improving health and wellbeing, using interventions that cover the "four pillars" of wellbeing: fitness, nutrition, sleep and stress.

In conjunction with Vielife, they then ran healthy big breakfasts and roadshows, distributed newsletters, put up "use the stairs" posters and, as part of a campaign to encourage staff to drink more water, mounted coloured "pee charts" in bathrooms showing varying levels of hydration. They also used Vielife's online assessment tool which, while giving employees confidential health scores and advice on how to improve, aggregated statistical data for Tameside to identify areas needing most attention.

The results were excellent. "Our absence levels have improved for five years running now" says Mick Forrest, HR manager at Tameside. "You can actually feel and see a healthier workforce developing."

"From a macroeconomic point of view, you can't afford to neglect the wellbeing of your people," says Clive Pinder, managing director of Vielife. "From the companies we have worked with over the last 18 months, we know we've reduced absenteeism, improved health risk scores by 20% and increased productivity by up to two days a year."

If you do the maths, that's quite a saving. "For us, health and wellbeing was an important part in improving our company's profile as a good place to work," says Vince Mewitt, Head of HR at Standard Life Healthcare. "We had already managed to gain high degrees of trust from our employees through our efforts in staff training and career development and wanted to widen our focus. Although initially sceptical of how a health and wellbeing programme could actually work for us, we did see measured results."

The effort paid off. Productivity at Standard Life rose by 5%, stress levels dropped by 14% and there was a 60% improvement in the number of people eating the recommended daily portion of fruit and vegetables. But employers can't rest on their laurels once progress has been made. Sustaining health and wellbeing requires constant innovation, and those that have witnessed the changes are the first to agree.

London Underground, for example, has a wider health plan which includes staff guides to good posture, free membership to a health website, and "waist management" groups run by trained local station staff. Meanwhile, Standard Life Healthcare has introduced lunchtime walks led by managers, yoga and martial arts classes. After all, says Mewitt, "exercise isn't just about slipping into lycra and rowing 2,000m."