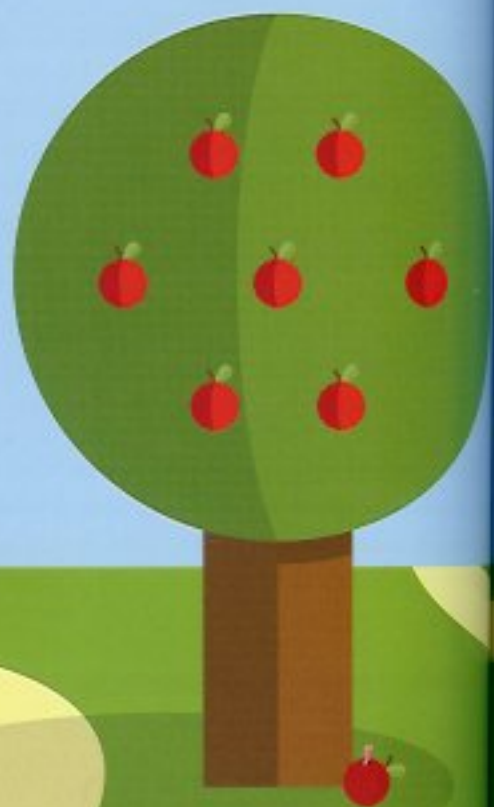




All well and good

The advantages of providing health and fitness benefits to your employees



By Ceren Senkul

When it comes to keeping a productive workforce there are a lot of things to consider. What type of desk do you provide? What type of chair? Do you encourage hot-desking? What colour should the walls be? A number of things can be done to keep your employees focused on the tasks they need to carry out in order to meet their targets as far as office environments go, but it seems that the most effective thing you can do is encourage them and help them to be fit and healthy.

According to Bupa's Fit for Growth study of 5,000 UK employees, 41% of employees feel that their company does not do enough for health and wellbeing, accusing businesses of being "all talk but no action". It also states that only 41% of employees are operating at their peak physical level with 29% being unable to concentrate at work due to poor health.

Patrick Watt, Director of Corporate at Bupa, says: "Successful businesses rely on healthy, active and engaged teams who are motivated to go the extra mile to help the organisation reach its full potential. But with one in four employees concerned that they will burnout, companies should act urgently to raise levels of staff wellbeing to counteract the ripple effect of poor health on the wider organisation – and the economy as a whole."

An investment into the wellbeing

"Companies should act urgently to raise levels of staff wellbeing"

of your employees is also an investment into the reputation of your company. If your employees feel as though they are cared about, they will have a stronger sense of loyalty and appreciation towards you as an employer but also as a brand.

Chris Andrews is Managing Director of Personal Touch Fitness, corporate gym specialists which help employers improve fitness in the workplace. She has seen first-hand the positive impact facilities such as gyms and fitness classes have on employees when they are available to them as part of their benefits package. She says: "It shows how important a company's values are because they are spending money and investing in people to see that they're happier. It's like a ripple effect, if people are feeling happy you go into work feeling happy. You go to the gym, you go to lunch and when you get back to your desk you're

happy and it then has a positive effect on the people in your team. When people are happier and healthy at work they are less likely to go off sick. You get increased productivity because you get a real feeling of being valued."

Companies have a responsibility to provide safe working environments to their staff to ensure their wellbeing at all times. It is also important for organisations to play an active role in the physical wellbeing of their employees as physical activity also makes for a healthy mind – something that is essential to being productive at work. When stress levels are high it can have a detrimental effect on the tasks being carried out by the employee, as well as that employee's morale and overall job satisfaction.

Hayley Fisher, People Director at Thomson Online Benefits, highlights the importance of physical activity among employees. She says: "When people are overwhelmed with feelings >>



of anxiety their home life can also suffer. Sleep patterns can be affected and problems suddenly seem insurmountable. Physical activity is a great way to step away from a problem, and returning to it from a different angle can be hugely beneficial. Beyond this, inactivity can lead to a loss of direct and indirect productivity. It can have a huge influence on how people feel about where they work, which in turn impacts on their engagement with the workplace and the work they are doing.

"Ultimately the employer brand can suffer. Word of mouth is a powerful thing and if employees are discussing their workplace in negative terms, employers will see a decrease in the number and calibre of those wishing to join their organisations."

Companies can really see the benefits when they support their employees in adopting healthier lifestyles. Mirka Slater, Head of Benefits EMEA at Expedia, talks about what Expedia does to encourage health and wellbeing and the positive outcomes it brings. "As our workforce are younger, very active and health conscious, they are very grateful and highly value the perks available to them. We have great premiums with our PMI and risk providers as we have a low claims history and low absence. When you are in good health you also become more productive and can manage stress levels better."

While many may think that

fitness is good for those with active jobs such as professional athletes or soldiers, taking care of your fitness is also important for your mental health as previously mentioned by Fisher.

Dr Andrew Jones, Managing Director - Wellbeing, Nuffield Health, also supports this: "I think most of us are aware that being active is good for our physical health and sense of wellbeing, but staying active is also good for our mental health as well. Exercise is important for both preventing and treating mental illness. It can help brain function and make us more productive and creative in the workplace. Employees who can exercise at work are more calm, productive and happy. Exercise is great for combating stress and depression - high fitness levels reduce risk of depression by 17%."

It is not essential that companies fork out hundreds of thousands on facilities such as gyms and fitness centres. Some organisations simply don't have the funds. But that

"Regular exercise also improves sleep, which is vital for a productive day at work"

doesn't mean that health and wellbeing can't be a core value of all companies. An organisation can still encourage its employees to take care of their fitness, even if they don't provide them with elaborate facilities. Instead, they can encourage people to make a conscious effort to incorporate their wellbeing into their manic to-do list.

Dr Jones adds: "Employers should encourage regular breaks that allow employees to move around - this might be as simple as walking around the park or standing up and doing a few stretches at their desks. Regular exercise also improves sleep, which is vital for a productive day at work."

Small things can always be done to encourage and enforce healthier lives as it is helpful to both employee and employer. Healthy eating, promoting a healthy work/life balance, allowing and encouraging employees to take five minutes away from their desks to go outside and get some fresh air or walk around the building to a breakout space, are all steps towards having a healthy workforce in body and mind, and this will also build a committed workforce who will feel valued on a personal level allowing them to take pride in their work and be more productive. As Andrews says: "If you have more positive feeling towards work, the company gets a positive influence from its employees." 

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