

THINKING ABOUT PHYSICAL FITNESS

Are there more people on the local bike paths during lunch hour than during commuting hours? Do your employees talk about distances in “K’s” rather than in miles? Do they ever show up on Mondays with tales of their weekend kickball exploits rather than a recap of the NFL game they watched? You just might have employees who value physical fitness, and if so, you should encourage that.

Encouraging physical fitness in the office should be common sense for leaders. Too often, though, we tell employees to do that sort of thing on their own time. But there are benefits you accrue when your employees are physically active and in good shape, and you should consider investing in that.

First, there are the obvious financial benefits: lower health care costs, and less sick leave taken. Many insurance companies will offer you lower rates if you have active fitness programs. Also, the less your employees get sick and actually use their health benefits, the fewer increases you should see in your premiums. Healthy employees lower your costs, and since so much of modern “knowledge work” involves sitting around, then you can help improve their health by creating opportunities for activity.

For more qualitative benefits, consider how better physical fitness can improve your employees’ job performance. Physical activity can help recharge their batteries, providing a break away from work that lets them come back re-energized rather than getting bored by continuous work. Good work is often mentally taxing, and a break for physical activity helps your employees keep their edge. You also have the opportunity here for some bonding and team-building (but avoid making it mandatory or creating the sense that they have to be involved if they want to get ahead – “mandatory fun” reduces some of the benefits you’d otherwise get). It’s amazing how much those team practices or the shared experience of a marathon can bring people together. Finally, consider the effect on employee loyalty: they care more about a company that cares about them. Showing you have your employees’ health as a priority goes a long way toward increasing their interest in working for your company.

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So, how do you do this? The easiest way is to just make time available for your employees to engage in physical fitness. If you're in a traditional office setting, make it a policy that time spent on fitness during the day counts as part of their working hours. Some companies take that farther and subsidize gym memberships; check with your local gyms about corporate programs. If you have a snack room, make sure it's stocked with healthy fare as well as Skittles. Health promotion seminars and classes on smoking cessation and alcohol intake can help prevent problems that will be more expensive if they require rehab programs paid for by insurance. Speaking of which, talk to your insurance company about rate reductions in response to health promotion, and if they aren't willing to work with you, look for a company that is.

Taking things outside the workplace, look into sponsoring employee teams in community leagues. Consider annual community events like a dragon boat festival or AIDS Walk, something people can prepare for and accomplish together. Running and biking clubs provide an ongoing means of fitness with the occasional competitive event. At a minimum, it's nice to acknowledge employees' achievements outside the office, so congratulate people on events that are important to them.

Health promotion and physical fitness help your bottom line, so don't be afraid to put some time and other resources into it. Your employees are likely to turn in better work as a result, plus you may save some overhead costs, so don't force them to do it outside of work where they have other competing priorities. The benefits you gain from better health and fitness among your workforce should outweigh the costs you incur.