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22 February 2016

## Investing in happy, healthy workers

Business topics

By Business View

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**The health and wellbeing revolution is sweeping through workplaces, with forward-thinking companies making an effort to promote healthier lifestyles, more flexible working conditions and better work-life balance. We discuss some simple ways SMEs can get on board.**

Some companies have gone all out to create a healthier workforce, planting workplace community gardens and running healthy-eating seminars (Qantas); providing low-GI breakfasts and slashing the amount of sugary foods available in their offices (Lendlease); and allowing staff to bring their pets to work (Melbourne Theatre Company). And at RØDE Microphones, staff on the manufacturing line stop for 10 minutes twice a day to carry out an exercise routine designed to keep them nimble.

More on that shortly, but first, some background. A recent survey of almost 30,000 workers conducted by the Workplace Health Association paints an alarming picture. Half those surveyed were physically inactive, 40 per cent overweight and 20 per cent obese. Sixty-five per cent reported moderate to high stress levels. Forty-one per cent had psychological distress levels that placed them in the 'at risk' category.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this rampant ill health, the cultural obsession with 'wellness' has never been more intense. Kate James is a coach and mindfulness teacher who runs meditation classes for organisations ranging from advertising agencies to major banks.

She observes, "As a society we're becoming more conscious of our wellbeing. We're realising that it's the critical thing that determines the overall quality of our lives. If a business wants to attract top talent, they have to provide what people are looking for, and that's a great culture. And a great culture is at least in part about a company valuing its employees' wellbeing."

### Lifting the bar on employee health

Workplace health initiatives aren't new. Businesses have long provided subsidised gym memberships, winter flu shots and employee assistance programs. But companies such as fashion business Cotton On have now lifted the bar sky-high.

Six years ago, Cotton On asked personal trainer Luke McLean to train some of the executive team. These days McLean is the company's Health and Wellbeing Manager, and oversees seven full-time personal trainers and wellness coaches, a full-time osteopath and a part-time beautician. He's introduced initiatives ranging from 'Bring your dog to work' days (it lightens the mood) to free car washes, manicures and osteopath consultations during business hours. Not having to worry about these chores in their downtime means staff are "able to devote their time to the things they value, such as spending time with their families", he says.

McLean's fact-finding missions overseas have convinced him that Australian companies are workplace-wellbeing laggards. "Some of the bigger international companies have decent programs, but Australia is five years behind mainstream America and 10 years behind Silicon Valley," he says. "In the US, wellness programs are taken for granted as part of the offering that's used to attract the best people."



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## How SMEs can benefit

At this point, time-poor, resource-constrained SME owners might be asking themselves two questions: What's in this for me? and Do I really want to monitor the BMIs, stress levels and even sleeping patterns of my staff?

The answer to the first question is: plenty, if you go about it the right way. The success of companies at the forefront of the employee wellbeing movement, such as Google, speaks for itself. And sceptics might like to consider Cotton On's trajectory: in less than a quarter of a century, it has gone from a small Geelong-based business to a company that employs more than 20,000 people and sells eight brands in 1300 retail stores in 17 countries.

"There are major payoffs, such as increased productivity and reduced absenteeism and employee turnover," notes McLean. "But focusing on those metrics can be counterproductive. The companies with the most successful programs don't do that. They approach funding programs with a mindset of, 'Let's do what we can to energise people and help them perform at their best, and the company will benefit in all sorts of ways.'"

As for the second question, how do employees react to their bosses encouraging them to adopt a healthier lifestyle? Gratefully, most of the time.

"People are spending more time at work," notes James. "A lot of wellbeing initiatives are about making things – such as an opportunity to exercise – available in the workplace for employees who aren't otherwise going to find the time to do those activities. I've never worked with an organisation that applied pressure to employees to participate in programs – I doubt that would be an effective strategy. But when companies offer to assist employees to improve their health and feel better, that offer is, for the most part, perceived very favourably."

## The modern workforce

Mark Watkin, Managing Director of BWM Dentsu Melbourne, considers fostering a healthy workplace to be part and parcel of the modern workforce. A former athlete, his introduction to meditation came through visualisation techniques used while playing sports to maximise performance. He'd worked with Kate James previously (she'd been his career coach) and offered free meditation training to the whole agency under her guidance. About 12 of the 62 staff members participated in the six-week program, and their feedback was so positive that Watkin is now considering offering it on an ongoing basis.

"We work in advertising, which is high pressured, fast moving and very agile, so anything we can do to help people have a little bit of calm and balance is a good thing," he says. "We try and focus on the smaller things – the 1 per cent that will make a real difference to the health and wellbeing of our staff. Part of this is offering a degree of flexibility, something that's particularly important for those of our staff who are parents with young children."

Having an open-plan workplace has also made it easier for staff to connect. As well as offering boot camps, Friday massages, staff breakfasts every six weeks with awards for outstanding teams or individuals and a day off on their birthday, BWM Dentsu's management leads by example when it comes to personal fitness.

"I cycle to work," says Watkin. "There used to be two or three of us who cycled in, but now there are more than 15 bikes in the office most days. Once people see it's possible, it catches on. Rhythms and rituals are really important, as they give people something to work towards and look forward to, but it's also important to promote balance and flexibility. We don't clockwatch. If someone's worked long hours, and they can go home a bit earlier, then so be it."

## Four ways to create a healthier workplace

### 1. Pick the low-hanging fruit

"There are plenty of things SME owners can introduce quickly and easily that will yield impressive results," says McLean. "My first three suggestions would be having walking rather than sit-down meetings, so physical exercise is built into people's day; declaring an email blackout from 8pm to 6am, so people can truly unwind away from the office; and investing \$100 in a blender and \$30 a week in fruit and vegetables, so staff can make themselves a smoothie rather than using coffee or a chocolate bar to boost their energy levels."

### 2. Work out what works for your workers

Pre-dawn boot camps might be a hit if your workforce is made up of childless twentysomethings, but lunchtime yoga sessions are probably a better bet for an office full of fortysomething parents. Present your staff with a range of options and determine which ones generate the most interest. Then monitor how well patronised or widely used your workplace health and wellbeing initiatives are – especially after the initial burst of enthusiasm has dissipated – to determine which ones you should continue investing in.

### 3. Accept that wellbeing programs alone can't transform the broader workplace culture

It's no coincidence that the organisations that have had the most success with workplace wellbeing programs are the ones that walk the talk when it comes to treating employees as their most important assets. If you're taking a 'churn and burn' approach to your staff the rest of the time, then providing massages on a Friday afternoon isn't going to suddenly make you the employer of the year.

### 4. Be zen about measuring ROI

A range of factors affects employees' health, attitude and productivity. Many of the world's most successful

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companies believe that encouraging their workforce towards better physical and mental health pays dividends, but it's not something that can be reduced to a simple formula. "In my experience, if organisations introduce programs with the transparent aim of, say, reducing sick leave, employees smell that a mile off and respond accordingly," says McLean. "The aim has to be providing people with a better quality of working life. If that's the sincere motivation, the benefits will materialise soon enough."

*This article was first published in Business View magazine (Summer 2015). For more articles and interactivity, download the iPad edition of Business View for free [via our app, NAB Think](#).*

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