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Yoga for fitness, a healthy bottom line

Firms that invest in the physical and emotional health of their employees reap big returns

Brian Morton
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With heightened levels of stress a fact of life in many B.C. offices, more and more companies are trying new techniques to promote "wellness" in the workplace.

Flex-time, the availability of exercise facilities and programs, and the option of working from a home office are just some of the benefits that progressive companies now routinely offer employees to make their jobs more productive, palatable and less stressful.

How about yoga?

"It's becoming much more common," said Lynn Roberts, a yoga instructor and president of Vancouver-based Pure YOGA, which offers what she calls corporate yoga classes and wellness programs for companies in the Lower Mainland. "We've been doing it for over a year now and it's becoming much more common. There's lots of competition. Ten years ago, there was very little corporate yoga."

Roberts said that about 80 per cent of her yoga instruction is now in the field of corporate yoga.

She said that yoga not only makes people fitter, but boosts their immune systems and helps correct spinal problems, which often develop from sitting in front of computers all day.

"The beauty of yoga is you don't need weights," said Roberts. "You use your own body. I've had a couple of classes in schools for teachers, who are very stressed. And they love it. They're completely different people at the end of the classes."

Deborah Jones, an organizational health consultant who founded Vancouver-based Well-Advised Consulting Inc., said in a recent interview that companies that want to improve their bottom lines should actively promote such "healthy" workplace concepts as flexible working hours, respect for employees, and employee fitness programs, including yoga classes.

"It's all about creating a healthy culture," said Jones, who is also chair of the Health, Work and Wellness conference (HWW), a one-day seminar for managers and front-line supervisors that is held in many Canadian cities each year. "When you feel well, you're more creative and you want to give more to the workplace. Employees are also much more



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun

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Jones said it's important for employers to help employees stay physically fit -- including yoga breaks, which are often led by Jones at her forums -- but that the emotional health of workers is even more vital.

Neglect that, she said, and companies will have employees showing up to work who "aren't really there" and just want to get away from the office.

"Companies that take this seriously see a big return on their investment. It has a huge impact on the bottom line. There's far less turnover and absenteeism. The differences are just phenomenal."

That's no surprise to Roberts, who maintains that yoga programs such as hers can reduce absenteeism and health-care premiums, and increase productivity and morale.

"Employees are very valuable and companies are starting to realize that," said Roberts. "Companies will have no choice in a few years to turn to wellness programs in the workplace."

Isabel Harrison of the B.C. Cancer Research Centre organized a yoga class by Roberts for the centre's employees.

She said in an interview that up to 15 employees participate in the one-hour, once-a-week class. "I think it's important, because people like to be physically and mentally active. And it's working well. There's a demand to do yoga and people find it relaxing.

"People just want to keep fit and if it can be incorporated into the workplace, that's great."

Roberts said that, for companies, corporate yoga can not only reduce health-care premiums, decrease absenteeism and increase employee retention, but improve morale, help the company work more effectively as a team and show employees -- both current and prospective -- that the firm cares about them and their health.

For employees, she said, corporate yoga not only reduces workplace stress and increases energy, but improves productivity, concentration and memory retention.

As well, she said, it improves relationships between fellow employees and lowers depression and negative thoughts -- a common problem that costs companies billions of dollars per year in lost productivity.

Roberts cited several studies about the effects of stress in the workplace. Among them:

- Absenteeism costs Canadian employers an estimated \$8.6 billion annually.
- Job stress creates up to 60 per cent of workplace absenteeism.
- A study of more than 46,000 employees at six large companies found that costs linked to serious, persistent stress account for about eight per cent of the total health care expenditures of those companies -- about \$24 billion annually (American Journal of Health).
- For every \$1 invested in workplace wellness, a company can expect \$3 in cost savings or benefits (University of Michigan Research Centre).
- Lower back pain has been cited as the second most common reason for missing work.

- Vancouver Airport Authority has seen absenteeism rates of participants in its Workplace Wellness Program drop from 4.07 per cent to 2.56 per cent.
- A cost-benefit study in 1996 showed that BC Hydro's Health and Wellness program produced \$1.2 million in reduced sick leave costs annually.
- Canada Life in Toronto showed a Workplace Wellness program return on investment of \$3.40 for each dollar invested on reduced turnover, productivity gains and decreased medical claims.

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