

Corporate Wellness

Enlightened companies have sponsored sports teams and, in some instances, have provided sports fields at their worksites throughout much of the twentieth century. Such initiatives were viewed mainly as a method of building a team spirit and increasing employee morale. However, the proportion of employees who were actively involved in worksite sports teams was relatively small. Brief calisthenic breaks for all employees were introduced at some European worksites as early as the 1960s, and it was claimed that such programs enhanced the performance of both physical and mental well-being. In the mid-1970s, the Canadian government launched a similar plan, providing taped music and written instructions to volunteer exercise leaders in many large office buildings. Unfortunately, the concept that an entire working group could cease operations for 7-8 minutes of exercises twice each work day did not fit well with many modern industrial and business operations.

Nevertheless, the interest of the U.S. and Canadian governments in the promotion of health-related fitness developed rapidly during the 1970s. Government agencies still perceived the worksite as a favorable location for program delivery. Suggested advantages relative to community-based fitness programming included a discreet population of manageable size, with established channels of administration and communication, a strong potential for the recruitment of volunteer assistant exercise leaders, and peer support of those who were beginning fitness programs for the first time. Moreover, the introduction of a fitness program was seen as an important first step in the development of a healthy overall working environment ranging from a wise choice of canteen foods to a smoke-free worksite. Above all, no travel time was needed in order to attend a worksite fitness program, so that the usual excuse of the sedentary person (lack of time) was overcome.

Demonstration worksite fitness programs in Canada and the U.S. suggested that they held a number of important advantages for the sponsoring corporation. Program participants usually claimed to feel better, with an increased personal productivity. Objective comparisons with companies or worksites where programs had not yet been introduced suggested that companies with a worksite exercise facility: 1) recruited employees with a favorable attitude toward both work and health, 2) had a low rate of employee turnover among program participants, 3) experienced a small increase of productivity, and a small reduction in absenteeism, and 4) noted a trend to lower health costs. Participants also enhanced their physical fitness, with a reduction in cardiac risk factors and, thus, their risk of health problems as they became older.

Most commonly, corporations have introduced programs because of the favorable personal experience of a senior executive or a desire to offer an attractive benefit to employees, rather than as a means of improving corporate profitability. Nevertheless, the cumulative financial benefits listed earlier should be more than sufficient to cover the costs of providing and operating a modest fitness facility. Few studies have examined the optimal investment in facilities, but available information suggests that cost-effectiveness is greatest for a limited facility that offers enthusiastic leadership.

In small companies, the exercise facility can often be shared with other neighboring corporations, and if this is not feasible, much valuable activity can be gained by simply installing showers and encouraging employees to walk or cycle to work.

The big challenge is usually to sustain the interest and enthusiasm of employees over the long term. When a worksite fitness program is first launched, as many as a third of employees are likely to join, but up to half of these become non-compliant within a few months.

Attendance can be enhanced by the favorable involvement of senior management, the adoption of flexible class hours (to accommodate those who travel frequently for the company or are involved in car-pool commitments), the admission of family members, and the introduction of a modular program that addresses not only exercise needs, but also other aspects of health (nutrition, obesity, low-back pain, smoking cessation, pregnancy, etc.). However, as in any exercise program, strong, warm, enthusiastic leadership is the key to long-term success.

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