

Corporate Fitness as Ergonomics

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, there are approximately 735,000 of these [1] and in the UK there are more than 100,000 of these annually [2]. These numbers do not represent low back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, or repetitive strain injuries. No, they represent myocardial infarctions. Many countries around the globe are experiencing a rise in obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and coronary heart disease, medical conditions can lead to myocardial infarctions.

Additionally, it is well known that work stress is also a factor in coronary heart disease [3,4]. In the classic Framingham heart study in the USA during the 1970's, researchers administered a 300-item psychosocial questionnaire to 1,674 45–77 year old coronary-free individuals. Subjects were followed for the development of Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) over 8 yrs. Type-A behavior was associated with a 2-fold increase in the risk of CHD in males and females aged 45–64 yrs. This association was found only among white-collar workers and was also independent of the standard coronary risk factors and other psychosocial factors. Results suggest that Type-A behavior and suppressed hostility may be involved in the pathogenesis of CHD in both sexes. It is interesting to note that the Type-A behavior associated with a doubling the risk of CHD in 45–64 year old males and females was found only in white collar workers [5].

So can employers help to lower the risk for CHD despite the standard coronary risk and psychosocial factors? Should they help to lower this risk? A resounding YES to both queries!

Ergonomics and wellness

Although preventive health management in businesses is an ideal tool for driving down high healthcare costs, many companies have so far neglected this important area. Both small businesses and multinationals often lack the essential knowhow for putting preventive health management into action - and that includes ergonomics in the workplace. (6) This neglect is many times attributed to corporations being busy “doing business”. Yes, many companies look at purchasing ergonomic tools and computer workstation peripherals, but why not employee wellness? Many times companies focus only on the employees on the manufacturing floor (who generally have a record of higher injury rates than their office colleagues) and forget about the managerial and administrative staff. An employee who has CHD has a greater

chance of catastrophic health consequences, including death, than the employee who may have a RSI. Is the prescription for wellness significantly different for the white collar cohorts?

A different prescription

Are safety training programs different for machine operators than forklift drivers? Why? Knowing that white collar workers do have different stressors than their manufacturing floor cohorts, shouldn't their “safety training” be different too? The different strategy utilized for the managerial and administrative staff is a reflection of the type of work and the setting in which that type of work is done.

This setting is usually physically sedentary, involving long periods of sitting in static postures coupled with mentally active processes tied to large volumes of work and tight deadlines. Sometimes the “shift” is longer than 8 hours and maybe work is done at home to meet the daily job demands. Where is the employee to go to get away from the tasks and demands then?

A different prescription is needed for these managerial and administrative employees. The production floor employee usually has rest breaks and a lunch break built in to their work day. The office crew may not. So then where can these rest breaks be added? A careful look at each employee's workday should give an answer. For those on computers most of the day, there should be, in addition to a 1-2 minute get out of the chair break every 30 minutes, a five to ten minute get out of the work area break at least twice a day. This affords the employee time to clear the mind. This break may be in conjunction with a colleague's and can help promote collegiality. In addition to these breaks, a bright and cheerful dining area for lunch time.

Long term solution

Healthy employees not only save on healthcare costs but also cut productivity losses since loss of productivity is three times greater than the cost of healthcare. There is a long term solution to improve health, lower healthcare costs, and raise productivity; Corporate Fitness [6-8]. Some companies have added this successfully to their facility in the form of a gym or workout space. This space is designed with the help of a health professional, such as a Physical Therapist, and the company administration. The employees are offered health screens by this health professional, directing them

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to the most advantageous form of exercise for their current physical condition, and then, if cleared by their primary care provider, begin their customized exercise program. The employee can be periodically rechecked by the health professional to assess the need for upgrading their exercise program and to monitor their progress to their goal, such as shedding excessive weight, lowering their blood pressure, or a drop in their fasting blood sugar level.

Getting started

It has been demonstrated that strong organizational program support and low employee co-payment were identified as drivers of employee participation in corporate health programs. A leadership team that not only encourages program participation through role model behavior but also establishes a corporate culture in which health is of high value is a key factor for program success. Several researchers who looked into the association between organizational level factors and participation suggest that manager and co-worker support has a positive effect on employee program participation [9]. The degree to which employees feel that a certain behavior is socially expected and encouraged at the workplace is predicted to have an impact on program participation [10]. Given the growing evidence of the positive effect of financial incentives on behavior change, it is no wonder that this topic receives great attention [11]. As with any ergonomic intervention, managerial commitment, coupled with employee input, can make corporate fitness a reality which can bring a host of benefits to any company [12].

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