



WORKPLACE WELLNESS

SHOULD YOUR BOSS BE DOING MORE?

With work absenteeism costing the Australian economy \$7 billion a year, perhaps on-the-job health programs are the answer. Alice Wasley investigates



We all know a sedentary lifestyle is bad for us, but life isn't a breakfast cereal ad, so how are we supposed to fit in that morning run on the beach when we have deadlines, meetings and long working hours? And even then, current wisdom tells us we can make regular exercise a priority, but it still won't be enough to counteract the damage that

sitting for long periods is doing.

Combined with lack of sleep, high stress levels and poor nutrition, this doesn't paint a glowing picture of health for working Australians. As a result, absenteeism is said to cost the Australian economy about \$7 billion a year, while "presenteeism" – showing up to work unwell and unable to perform your job properly – cost the economy an estimated \$34.1

billion a year, according to a study by Medibank and KPMG.

As most of us spend at least a third of our time at work, these poor working habits need to be urgently addressed. Workplace wellness programs can, if they're implemented effectively, provide the resources to help people make positive lifestyle changes.

A SLOW START

While the workplace health and



wellness industry is growing, Graham Fredericks, CEO of Workplace Health Association

Australia, says only 8 to 10 per cent of Australian businesses are currently committing to investment in workplace health.

By contrast, in the US, nearly 80 per cent of people who work for organisations with 50+ employees have access to a wellness program.

The programs appear to be working, too. A 2013 study commissioned by the US government found that “lifestyle management interventions as part of workplace wellness programs can reduce risk factors and increase healthy behaviors”.

Despite low engagement with these schemes here, Fredericks is optimistic about the future.

“There are now over 50 companies and numerous individual practitioners around the country delivering health services directly to workplaces,” he says.

“There’s a rapidly growing awareness of the benefits of a healthy workforce, which is reflected in the increased interest from both the government and the private sector.”

SHOULD IT BE COMPULSORY?

In 2011, the government rolled out the national Healthy Workers Initiative, with \$294.6 million committed to the scheme over six years. This aimed to prevent lifestyle-related chronic disease by providing resources to address risk factors like smoking, poor nutrition, inactivity and harmful alcohol consumption.

So should the government take it further and make it mandatory for employers to provide workplace wellness programs?

Physiotherapist Anna-Louise Bouvier doesn’t think so. “If

employers are doing it because something says you have to tick it off, it won’t work,” she says.

Bouvier says she’s worked with clients such as The University of Sydney and Optus in her eight-week program, Happy Body At Work, and they’ve been enthusiastic, invested and have seen great results.

“We know 80 per cent [of their employees] sit less, move more, are getting more sleep,” she says. “But the single biggest change is about two-thirds of the people we’ve surveyed say they’re coping better with workload and stress. They’re more aware of physical things that affect their mood.”

This is great news for the health of employees but it’s just as rewarding for employers.

“The majority of companies go, ‘Why bother?’ We say an investment in wellness is an investment in your bottom line, because if you’ve got happy, well, resilient employees, they deliver.”

Optus health and wellbeing manager Megan Kingham, who launched their current program in July 2012, agrees.

“If it was mandatory, you’d get token efforts,” she says.

However, as companies see the financial and cultural benefits of providing wellness programs, Kingham anticipates they’ll become more popular.

“If you get the word out, others follow. The challenge is for small to medium businesses and not-for-profits to be able to afford it.”

“I WAS SLEEPING BETTER IN ONE WEEK”

Minka Drew, an office services assistant at an Optus call centre

in South Australia, experienced the benefits of the workplace program first-hand. After taking time off work last year to care for her husband, who’d suffered a head injury, Drew, 45, returned to work stressed and unable to sleep. She’d also gained 13kg in a couple of months. “I was getting about four hours of sleep a night,” she says. “It makes you foggy, lethargic and unmotivated but the biggest thing that freaked me out was that I was having trouble remembering things.”

Participants are encouraged to choose to focus on improving either sitting, moving, stress or sleep. Drew chose sleep. “Probably a week into it, I was sleeping like a baby,” she says. “I just really put a lot of effort into it and was trying to go to bed early, whereas before I’d just stay up until I’d fall asleep because I’d go to bed and think about too many things.” The knock-on effect meant Drew made other healthy choices, such as competing in a workplace pedometer challenge, and lost the weight she’d gained. So, if she found herself job-hunting down the track, would she seek a company that offered a wellness program? “If I had two similar options, I’d go with the company with a wellness



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program," she says.

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