

THE ANTIDOTE TO JOB STRESS

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Companies looking to align their business with the wellbeing of their employees would do well to invest in yoga classes, which have proven benefits in reducing stress



By Lim Sze Lin

IN 2012, the global economic slowdown caused massive shifts in the working sphere. As organisations restructured, consolidated and downsized, workers everywhere faced the imminent threat of retrenchment. On top of that, greater pressures were forced upon them to meet work demands and higher expectations.

The effects of these lean times took a major toll on the mental health of the workforce. A 2013 online survey conducted by global workplace provider Ergus showed 30% of Malaysians suffered from work-related illnesses, while 48% reported a rise in stress levels.

A pressured environment

Fast forward three years, and, instead of tailing off, stress is becoming increasingly prevalent in the contemporary workplace. With the rise in global competition and increasing labour market flexibility, job security has diminished as companies are inclined to replace staff with better talent, leaving many workers forced to juggle decreased financial stability and increased personal debt.

On top of that, modern technology has accelerated the pace of work by leaps and bounds.

Longer working hours and work-home inter-face are not uncommon, and workers are expected to have the knowledge, abilities and skills to cope with these changes.

Such factors are major contributors to a pressure-ridden work environment which, left unchecked, can harm both the business and its employees.

Excessive stress can cause great damage to an employee's mental and physical wellbeing. In the 2013 survey, over 42% of Malaysian respondents reported sleeping less due to work-related worries like work burdens, salary and job security.

In the long term, prolonged stress leads to a host of mental health problems such as anxiety and depressive disorder. It affects physical health, with cardiovascular diseases and musculoskeletal disorders being the most common ailments.

Workplace stress can also be harmful to the health of a company's balance sheet.

Productivity losses are the clearest measure. As stress-related absenteeism, sick leave and higher accident and injury rates escalate, all these result in higher medical bills to be borne by employees.

Workplace performance is also affected by excessive stress, since burnt-out employees are unlikely to spare much energy caring about the company's business. Research has shown that workers who are repeatedly



Lim (fourth from left) with Top Glove employees. The company believes in investing in staff health

“Yoga helps a person stay healthy, mentally and physically. It aligns well with our commitment to keep our employees in shape.”

— Lim

Wellbeing is a skill

WHAT if a person who is anxious, depressed or stressed out could intentionally activate other networks in the brain associated with happiness?

Last year, a team of scientists working at the United States National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health carried out a study of yoga's effects on the brain that was published in the ninth issue of *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, an open-access journal devoted to understanding brain mechanisms supporting cognitive and social behaviour in humans.

Besides a group of experienced yoga practitioners, the scientists recruited a separate control group that had no yoga background but matched the practitioners in sex, age, body mass index, education, and exercise level outside of yoga.

Using magnetic resonance imaging, the scientists tracked the effect of increasing yoga experience and weekly practice in several brain regions on both groups.

They discovered that increased training and performance of yoga could actually change the brain's anatomy, by increasing the volume

exposed to cycles of stress will become less capable of thinking creatively and generating profitable ideas.

Companies need a health strategy

Last year, a survey conducted by leading global advisory firms Towers Watson found that out of nearly 1,700 companies in 34 countries, 64% of employers rated stress as the number one workforce health risk issue in their companies.

However, while a majority of companies realised the implications of a stressed workforce to the bottom line, few had translated this into solid strategies to promote employee well-being.

In the Asia-Pacific, only one in three (33%) of the organisations surveyed had an articulated health and productivity strategy, though many planned to have one in place by 2018.

If companies are serious about wanting to improve the health and well-being of their workers, such inertia needs to be addressed. It is not just the company's productivity and business outcomes that are at stake. Financial considerations aside, the negative effects of workers who are consistently sick and stressed will spill over into society in the long run.

“Without health, employees cannot be assets to the company. Instead, we will become liabilities to ourselves, our families and the people around us,” says Tan Sri Dr Lim Wee Chai, executive chairman of Top Glove Corporation Ltd, a leading rubber glove manufacturer.

In the interest of creating a healthy psychosocial working environment, Top Glove has a corporate wellness portfolio that covers a range of stress-reduction policies, including quarterly body mass index (BMI) monitoring, a strict “no smoking” policy, monthly health talks and frequent sports activities.

Last July, however, the company took a

rather unconventional approach by adding yoga classes into the mix.

The classes, held weekly in an on-site gymnasium located in Top Glove's corporate office tower, are taught by external yoga instructors and all fees are fully sponsored by the company.

“Yoga helps a person stay healthy, mentally and physically. It aligns well with our commitment to keep our employees in shape,” Lim says, when asked why his company saw fit to provide yoga classes for its workers.

To date, the company has spent almost RM18,000 in instructor fees alone. That might seem like a hefty sum, but according to HR managers in other companies, the payoff is well worth the investment.

“Indeed, offering yoga classes at work brings many benefits, one of which is developing key skills to manage stress in daily life,” says Sherline Pang, group human resources manager at Hahli Jewels Sdn Bhd.

In her line of work, Pang often deals with employees' health and wellbeing concerns. She says job stress can strike employees at all levels, but pressure will mount the higher one climbs up the corporate ladder.

“Many workers, especially those at management level, face tremendous levels of stress. The higher you go up in the hierarchy, the more stressful it gets,” she explains.

With a staff head count of about 1,000 (over 300 are based at the head office), Pang is entrusted with the heavy responsibility to manage and mitigate the levels of workforce stress at Hahli.

Yoga classes had been offered to employees in the past, says Pang, who joined the company seven months ago.

“Back then, it [the company] thought of including yoga as part of the corporate wellness programme [sic] it wanted to

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