



CORPORATE HEALTH CHECK

A look at the nation's health statistics is a sobering reminder that, unless changes are made, Australia is heading for a health breakdown. **HC** takes a look at why it's never been more important to invest in corporate health programs

In 2005, an Access Economics report estimated 3.24 million Australians were obese. By 2025, if current trends continue, this is likely to stand at 4.2 million (16.7% of the population). Perhaps more worrying for business and government is the total financial cost of obesity in 2005 – including health system costs, welfare, productivity losses and carer costs – estimated at \$3.78bn.

Clearly, the time has come for proactive measures to be taken. Fortunately, it appears that Australian businesses are responding. Yet while most companies believe they offer at least some concessions to work-life balance, the reality is there are times when the balance tilts dangerously towards the ‘work’ side of the equation. Overtime becomes the norm, staff are tied to their desks, stress levels fire up and tempers flare.

“The fact is everyone is cutting resources but expecting bigger outcomes, so the pressure on the average employee is greater now than at any other time in history. I think we’ve got to teach people to work smarter, not harder,” says Dr Adam Fraser, workplace performance consultant.

Corporate strategies

How are organisations dealing with the nation’s worsening health crisis? For many, the answer lies with corporate health strategies. However, it is wrong to believe it is as simple as ‘rewarding’ employees with gym memberships and then forgetting the problem exists.

“One of my criticisms of corporate health programs is they usually don’t address the major issue – how do you change behaviour? That’s the real crux. You can throw someone a gym membership, but most people who have a gym membership don’t go,” Fraser says.

Fraser believes there are practical steps organisations can take to improve the health and wellbeing of employees, which go well beyond mere lip service to the principles of work-life balance. “Firstly, you can set up the environment to support employees tackling health and wellbeing. For example, a company may say they support work-life balance and provide gym memberships, but when you go for a workout at lunch you get a hard time when you return because you’ve been away from your desk. There’s no congruency between the message and the practicality of it,” he comments.

“One of the biggest problems is that if you decide to look after your health, it takes thought, planning and mental space. The problem is we have information obesity – we’ve got too much information on the ‘right’ diet and the ‘right’ exercise.

“Our lives are so busy and the exercise program has to compete with everything else that’s happening in the day to get front of mind. Companies need to help with behavioural change in employees by supporting their goals and even facilitating those goals.”

Fraser, who regularly gives talks on corporate health, says education can play a key role in shifting mindsets and changing entrenched behaviour. “Good, practical education is really important – it cuts through all the old wives’ tales and hype and mixed messages. Part of the process is encouraging people to set goals and making them accountable for those goals,” he says.

Complementary approaches

Of course, no one is going to knock back the occasional massage or gym pass – and any organisation offering flu vaccinations is at least thinking along the right track.

In her role as a remedial therapist and owner of Blue Lizard Office Massage, Janet France has seen a huge growth in demand for her services. “It seems work-life balance has become a catch-all phrase and does not really describe what’s happening in the workplace,” says France. “Companies are really treating this area seriously with most reputable companies offering a large range of health related add-ons, from massage to gym membership and even flu shots.”

Blue Lizard provides an on-site remedial massage service. “It’s a serious massage that will address problems such as headaches, arm and wrist pain, as well as sciatic nerve pain,” France explains. “We aim to help the client understand why it’s happening and work out ways to stop it coming back.”

France notes that there are benefits for both employees and employers. “It helps companies fulfil their OH&S regulations in a tangible way, and it shows staff that they are serious about their health,” she says.

“For employees, the obvious benefit is the immediate relaxation that happens when tight muscles are squeezed and stretched. Once that happens, the deeper effects such as reduction in muscle pain and headache

abatement occur, and a feeling of calm sets in. Massage has a calming effect on the nervous system so the whole body begins to unwind. Staff report fewer headaches and wrist pain, and a feeling of wellbeing.”

Stress busters

Prioritise your exercise like you prioritise your clients: Regular exercise can help you handle stressful situations, so prioritise exercise in your weekly schedule. Use your diary and book in regular times for exercise. Treat these times like an appointment or a meeting with an important client. If you can’t make the time then re-schedule but never cancel.

Technology timeout? Next time your laptop crashes or you are experiencing networking issues, make use of the downtime by going for a quick walk. The exercise and fresh air will clear your head and you will be de-stressed and ready to get back to work when you return. Even small amounts of exercise contribute to your overall wellbeing.

No time? Kill two birds with one stone by reading a report or research paper while on the stepper or the bike. Organise to meet a friend at the gym – that way you can fit both exercise and catching up with friends into your busy schedule. If you find you get caught up at work, go to the gym in the morning, before the day has a chance of getting away from you.

Put your mind at ease: The controlled and meditative moves of mind-body classes allow your mind to expand and you learn to let your frustrations go. Participating in Pilates, Yoga or Tai Chi will help you develop a more relaxed and happy outlook, which is great in times of stress.

Sleep well: Exercise will increase the chance of sleeping soundly as the body has more reason to shut down and rebuild. Try to avoid thinking about work, and wind down and relax before getting into bed by reading, having a warm glass of milk or meditating.

Source: Zest Health Clubs

There are countless ways for workers to improve their health, France says, and it need not be an expensive undertaking. “The number one tip is to move! During the day instead of e-mailing each other I tell staff to get up and walk. I’ve also been encouraging staff to put a 30-minute stretch alarm on their computer. I’ve sent them some desk stretches to do, which take less than a minute to complete.

“Another huge area is what they eat. We encourage staff to think about the food they eat, and have suggested they form lunch groups where one person brings in or cooks the lunch for a group of five and they all take turns. Walk clubs are another good idea, as are one-off lectures on things such as meditation, winter warming foods or even a fun self-defence session. All these things help to boost morale and get staff thinking about their bodies in a healthy way.”

Health at CBA

Commonwealth Bank (CBA) is one organisation that has taken a multi-faceted approach to corporate health. “Australian businesses have been very good at improving productivity in recent times, and part of productivity is having more people available, and having people away from work less,” says Terry Mason, executive general manager, talent and development people services at CBA. “So of course you look at

the whole question of absenteeism through the productivity links – but given that the population is ageing and there is a genuine shortage of talent emerging – you’ve got to ask what sort of organisation people really want to work for.”

CBA has recently re-energised its corporate health strategy by reviewing its leave policy. In addition to annual leave, career break, carers’ leave and long service leave, the company has introduced a policy enabling staff to buy extra leave as required. “One of the core things for us is work-life balance, but people must not only be able to balance their work with life but to feel like they can balance it. It’s important for us that people have access to things that allow them to balance correctly and hopefully manage the stresses they face,” Mason says.

CBA has a long-standing employee assistance program which provides assistance with mental and physical health issues. This year, for the first time, the company also introduced a voluntary flu immunisation program. In addition, although CBA executives have had regular medical checkups for some time, for the first time checkups are being provided for all staff. “We’re talking about 30,000 employees, so it’s very comprehensive,” Mason notes. “What we’re trying to do is make it easy for people, so we’ve engaged experts to go to every location we have and do it in the workplace.”



Janet France

However, Mason concurs with Fraser in his insistence that corporate health policies must go hand-in-hand with education. CBA runs workshops and seminars on healthy living, including sessions on nutrition, fitness and managing stress.

A health and wellbeing website and a regular newsletter also serve to get the message across.

Case study: Flight Centre



Healthwise is a wholly owned division of Flight Centre, dedicated to developing and maintaining the company’s corporate health policies. “We try to be a one-stop health provider for any health-related issue that

any employer around the world would be looking for,” explains Tod Horton, Healthwise’s global strategic business leader. “It’s about making sure employees get the opportunity to have a healthy balanced lifestyle, and making it as easy as possible for them to achieve that lifestyle.”

Horton explains the process step-by-step: “Every single person in the company gets a health consultation – there is no hierarchy. Our Healthwise staff go out

to the shop wherever they are around the world and provide a full health check for employees – blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol, heart rate. Then we go through the nutrition side of it – we healthy eating.

“Then we look at the emotional side of things, so stress management, and making sure people are taking holidays. Finally, we talk about ergonomics, how people actually work – their desk set-up. From all that, we get a Healthwise index to report to senior management.”

Employees can then choose from a variety of services, from masseuses, personal trainers and nutritionists through to group classes, including healthy cooking and stress management seminars.

In terms of take-up rate, Horton says the company uses a ‘touch percentage’, which measures how many people in the company have been touched by

Healthwise’s services per month. Currently this sits at around 55%, which means every month 55% of the company’s employees are utilising some aspect of Healthwise’s services.

Even more noticeable is a marked reduction in absenteeism. “We’ve seen a 26% reduction of sick days, which is essentially saving Flight Centre over half a million dollars a year,” Horton notes.

He offers the following advice for companies looking to kickstart a corporate health program. “Have an activity or group session that people can take part in, such as the City to Surf run, and leading up to that provide training sessions – something where people have a goal at the end of it. There are so many little ways you can chip away at it. Most importantly, don’t let it wane! It needs sustained effort and buy-in from management.”

National health report

A 2005 Medibank Private report on the health of Australia's workers found the following:

- **28%** are clinically obese and a further **34%** are overweight
- **53%** report feeling overwhelmed with pressure and stress 'a significant amount of the time'
- **21%** smoke daily

- **46%** of Australian workers have high-fat diets
- **62%** do not do the minimum amount of exercise recommended by the Australian National Activity Guidelines
- **29%** suffer back, neck or spinal problems
- **12%** suffer depression

The research also found clear links between a person's health and productivity. According to the report, workers with good health and lifestyle habits take less sick leave, are more satisfied with their performance and perform more effective working hours each month.

The health of Australia's workforce
November 2005

Coaching for life

Whatever option is taken, Fraser warns that the use of scare tactics usually backfires.

"A common mistake is to use guilt and scare tactics," Fraser says. "If such tactics worked, no one in the world would smoke," he adds.

For Fraser, it is not a case of what is taught but rather how it is taught. "Most people, when they go to a course, take the notes, shelve them and never look at them

again. But within that session, if you factor in goal setting, behavioural change, practical steps forward, then at the next session check in with people – that's a way to get results.

"People need to be coached more than told. Where most people make mistakes in corporate health is that they walk in and tell people what to do, and it doesn't work.

"You need to coach people through it and actually ask people what they want to do. It's not a one-size fits all approach."

Mason freely admits that a healthier workforce is a more productive workforce, but he says a corporate health strategy goes beyond business interests. "The sad thing about the health issues we have is that it impedes people from really enjoying life to the fullest. Large organisations are often seen as faceless, inhumane places, but the reality is an organisation is a series of people, and people like to have positive, healthy environments." **HC**



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