

# Fit For Duty



How companies are helping improve their performance by improving their workers' fitness



In a Medium post a few years ago, entrepreneur Ryan Holmes revealed a key secret that let him build tech start-up HootSuite from seven employees in Vancouver, B.C., to more than 1,000 around the world in its first decade. His secret, perhaps surprisingly, was yoga. "It gave me time to clear my head, unpack the volumes of new information I was absorbing each day and then come back with a new, clearer perspective on the problems at hand," he wrote. "On top of that, it's a great workout."<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, the HootSuite culture encourages employees to honour their lunch hour, get outside, take naps and eat healthy snacks.

"The benefits that Holmes experiences by practising yoga regularly and by promoting a balanced approach to fitness and work as part of his company's culture can be achieved to some extent by all employers," says Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International. "If workers are given the freedom and flexibility to invest in their fitness, the organisation will reap the benefits of a happier, healthier, more engaged workforce."

Research shows that regular fitness activity improves both physical and mental health. In 2008, researchers at Bristol University in the UK studied 200 workers

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at three separate organisations (a university and two private companies). The workers, who chose their own forms of exercise, completed questionnaires about their mood, workload and performance both on days when they were physically active and on days when they were sedentary. On exercise days, 72 percent of workers reported improvements in time management, 79 percent said their mental and interpersonal performance was better and 74 percent said they managed their workloads better. Exercise also helped them, albeit on a smaller scale, feel motivated, handle stress and concentrate on work.<sup>2</sup>



1: <https://medium.com/@invoker/why-it-s-time-we-paid-employees-to-exercise-at-work-a2e320626992>

2: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/3793791/Going-to-the-gym-in-a-lunch-break-makes-you-work-better.html>



“Critically, workers performed significantly better on exercise days and across all three areas we measured, known as mental-interpersonal, output and time demands,” said Jo Coulson, Research Associate in the university’s Department of Exercise, Nutrition and Health Sciences.

“Exercise also improves sleep and releases endorphins, the chemicals that make us feel good and boost our mood,” says Dr Stella George, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International. “Studies show that the real benefit comes from low-intensity exercise, such as walking, swimming or practising yoga, three to five times a week. This type of exercise promotes the growth of nerve cells — including those in the hippocampus, the region of the brain that regulates mood — which can help relieve anxiety and depression.”<sup>3,4</sup>

Dr George continues, “For employers, improving the physical and mental fitness of workers can help reduce both absenteeism and “presenteeism,” which means being physically present but less than optimally productive due to illness or stress.”

One study of 50,000 workers at 10 employers found that costs related to absenteeism and presenteeism were actually 2.3 times higher than medical and pharmacy costs. In 2002 Dow Chemical calculated the precise annual health costs for the average employee: presenteeism, \$6,721; direct health costs, \$2,278, absenteeism, \$661.<sup>5</sup>

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Beyond short-term gains, the biological events triggered by exercising also protect people from developing diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and musculoskeletal conditions. And that can pay dividends for employers and employees alike far into the future.<sup>6</sup>

Recognising that fitness programs benefit the employee and the enterprise alike; most major employers offer some form of wellness benefit. In the U.S., according to a 2012 survey by the RAND Corporation, “69 percent of employers with more than 50 employees offered a wellness program, and 75 percent of programs included incentives to encourage participation.”<sup>7</sup>

But even small employers can do something. In HootSuite’s early days, the company couldn’t afford a gym, so it hung a fingerboard on the wall for pull-ups and brought in yoga balls for chairs. “We encouraged employees to bike to work, even though that meant cramming our office entryway full of bikes because it was too sketchy to park outside,” Ryan Holmes wrote in his Medium post. “And we made it clear that anyone could block off an hour for exercise during the day, provided it didn’t conflict with meetings and they made up the time (by having lunch at their desks, for instance).”

3: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/exercise-is-an-all-natural-treatment-to-fight-depression>

4: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression-and-exercise/art-20046495>

5: <https://hbr.org/2010/12/whats-the-hard-return-on-employee-wellness-programs>

6: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/physical-activity-fundamental-preventing-disease>

7: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9800/RR9842/RAND\\_RB9842.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB9800/RR9842/RAND_RB9842.pdf)



As it grew, the company added a gym, changing room and showers at its Vancouver headquarters. It offers yoga classes before, during and after work. And it has a hockey team, a cycling team and even a Quidditch team. "I see employees return from workouts refreshed and better focused on their jobs," Holmes wrote. "Time lost on exercise is made back and more in terms of improved productivity."

Many of Aetna International's clients are experiencing similar results, according to Dr Mitesh Patel, Medical Director, Aetna International "We have seen a significant uptick in the number of our clients around the world who are expanding their health and wellness agenda for employees; many who have started with in-office health and wellness programmes and seen the benefits go on to build office sports teams, for example, or provide the time and means for employees to exercise during the working day," he says.

Such proactive measures are especially important for companies like those Aetna International serves. "Many of our clients' workforces are made up of large numbers

of expats, either local hires or people on international assignments. In both cases, the organisation has the opportunity to step in to the role of providing a supportive, encouraging, enabling community, breaching the gap left when people move away from their friends, family and community back home," Dr Patel says. "One of the roles of an international health and wellness benefits provider is to understand the particular needs of expat employees. A solid grasp of the factors that impact

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international workers helps organisations like ours develop in-office wellness programmes that resonate with people. It's about understanding what can influence, stress and motivate these employees, and then setting them on a path towards achieving their health goals."

Even the smallest steps can help workers along that path. For example, many companies now offer standing desks, which at least get people out of their chairs for much of the day. One expert told the BBC that standing for three hours a day, five days a week equates to running 10 marathons.<sup>8</sup>

"Some would argue that workplace fitness programs only benefit those who are already fit," says Dr Stetz. "But we believe it's important to join people where they are on their health journey. When working with employers to help improve the health and fitness of their workers, it's important to cater to employees of all fitness levels. Among our client base, we see many companies offering incentives to workers who commit to getting fit or developing healthier habits, such as free or discounted fitness trackers like Fitbits, which works well to engage people. The trick is to keep people engaged by building education and support into the organisation's approach and by making health and fitness accessible during the working day."

A 2017 survey of 2,000 employers found that 35 percent were using wearable devices as part of their wellness programs and that nearly half were considering doing so in the next 12 months.<sup>9</sup>

Many companies, including Aetna, also provide rewards to their workers who improve their fitness levels and overall wellness. U.S. employees of Chevron, for example, can earn up to \$750 annually to reduce their insurance premiums by undertaking a range of fitness activities.<sup>10</sup> And for the past two years the company has offered a unique incentive. Through its HealthTrails program, U.S.- and Canada-based employees earn "miles" when they walk, eat right and get enough sleep, and those miles get translated into food packets for children suffering from malnutrition. From 2017 to 2018, employees increased the number of miles they earned by 32 percent, perhaps indicating the value they place on helping others while helping themselves.<sup>11,12</sup>



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8: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/health-27939985/is-working-standing-up-good-for-health>

9: <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/35-of-employers-use-wearable-devices-for-wellness-programs>

10: <http://hr2.chevron.com/wellness/health-rewards>

11: <http://www.healthtrailsforgood.com/>

12: [http://hr2.chevron.com/Images/YHRN\\_Health\\_Jul2018\\_healthtrails\\_tcm36-9243.pdf](http://hr2.chevron.com/Images/YHRN_Health_Jul2018_healthtrails_tcm36-9243.pdf)

Aetna International's Health and Wellness Director Pamela Berger says, "We believe in joining people where they are, building up a rich picture of their lives and health to support them on the path to better health, keep them fit and well and help them heal if they're ill. Promoting fitness among employees will help them think, perform and feel better today, while avoiding conditions such as arthritis or heart disease in the future. And the return on investment to the employer? Well, a collection of healthy, happy, productive and loyal employees can only help the organisation keep its costs in check and achieve great things!"

## How you can introduce health and wellness into your workplace for free

Health and wellness programmes inspire loyalty. So says one survey of 1200 workers, which found that almost 48 percent of participants who regularly took part in health and wellness programmes were extremely likely to recommend their employer as a place to work. The Health and wellness programmes include fitness challenges, access to wellness coaching, disease care management programmes, biometric screenings and onsite medical clinics.<sup>13</sup>

We've rounded up five free or low-cost strategies you could implement today:

**1 Go for it!**  
Make sure your employees know they have your permission to take time out to exercise during the day, providing they make up the time. For example, by eating lunch at their desk. Encourage people to walk, swim or jog during their lunch break, get up and move around at regular intervals and stretch it out. How about introducing walking meetings?

**2 Get up, stand up**  
Cardboard standing desks sit on top of any normal 'sitting desk' and help workers avoid the health risks associated with sitting for long periods of time. Encourage workers to regularly switch from sitting to standing positions throughout the day.<sup>14</sup>

**3 Team up**  
Start a fitness club, such as a football (soccer) or netball team. Or start a step counter/activity tracker competition. Friendly peer-to-peer competition can spark a spirited atmosphere and will help people get moving and burn calories.

**4 Get involved**  
Commit to participating in a local sporting event as an organisation and rally the troops to train and take part. For example, a community walk or run, or even an environment clean-up drive. These will all get people out and about, socialising and building rapport with colleagues along the way.

**5 Talk about it**  
Promote a positive attitude around physical and mental health disorders. 1 in 4 people will struggle with anxiety, stress or even depression at some point in their lives. Letting people know that it's okay to talk about it and seek help is a great starting point for fostering a healthy approach to physical and mental health conditions in the workplace.<sup>15</sup>

### Need more information?

Read [Physical fitness improves mental health too](#) - our employee tips for incorporating some fitness activities into the working day. Share them with your workers.

You might also enjoy reading up on the latest health care industry insights in our health and wellness content library. For help choosing the right private medical insurance and health and wellness benefits for your workforce, feel free to call our [worldwide expert sales consultants](#).

13: <https://www.optum.com/about/news/engagement-in-well-being-programs-strongly-linked-to-greater-employee-loyalty.html>

14: <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/your-backbone-will-thank-you-6-great-standing-desk-designs/>

15: [https://www.who.int/whr/2001/media\\_centre/press\\_release/en/](https://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/)



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