



Nine ways to give your job a health makeover

BONNIE SCHIEDEL

YOU SPEND UP TO HALF OF YOUR WAKING HOURS and a great deal of your energy at your job. For far too many Canadian workers, though, work is not a healthy place to be, owing to inactivity, unsafe conditions or stress. “One of the biggest stressors in life is work,” says Dr. Larry Ohlhauser, author of *The Healthy CEO* and an Edmonton-based physician who runs a workplace wellness consulting company. “Without workplace wellness, we go to the grave far too early due to heart disease, stroke and cancer of the colon.” Read on to discover some easy ways to give your job a health makeover.

1. GET WALKING

If you're in a sedentary workplace, as at least 60% of Canadians are, walking is a quick way to boost your fitness levels and relieve stress. Go for a brisk stroll on your lunch break, hoof it down the hall rather than send an email, or check out a program such as the Public Health Agency of Canada's Stairway to Health, where, as the name implies, employees hit the stairs for a workout. Employees in an eight-storey building in Moncton, N.B., for example, created a fun challenge to walk as many stairs as there are in the 103-storey Empire State Building.

2. CLEAN UP

Surprise! Toilet seats, lunch tables and photocopiers are not a seething mass of bacteria because they are regularly cleaned, according to a study from the University of Arizona in Tucson. The dirtiest areas tend to be items in personal workspaces: phones, desktops and keyboards. (The average desktop in the study had 400 times more bacteria than are found in a bathroom. Yuck!) Other hot spots were water-cooler spigots and microwave door handles. Who had the germiest workspaces in the study? Teachers, accountants, bankers, radio DJs and doctors, according to study author and microbiologist Charles Gerba. Other studies have pointed the finger at those desk-bound office coffee mugs. The solution is simple: wash your hands often, and clean your personal workspace once a day with a disinfectant.

3. STRETCH AND RELAX

Six weeks of guided meditation and yoga in the workplace – for 20 minutes daily – cut stress

levels and improved sleep quality in sedentary office employees, according to a 2010 study from Ohio State University in Columbus. For Lynette Megchun, a consultant at a career and employment services office in Regina, hiring a local yoga instructor to come to the office once a week at lunch has been a huge success. “It's more of a workout than we expected, and you come back to your desk feeling like you've let go of stress,” says Lynette, who does an hour of yoga with about six co-workers in an unused meeting room they've dubbed the “wellness room.”

4. FIND FREEBIES

A number of municipal health units and regional or provincial health authorities offer free workplace wellness programs, ranging from pedometer loans to lunch-and-learn sessions about quitting smoking, introducing a walking program or making healthier food choices. For better psychological health, visit www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com to watch free online videos about strategies to improve mental health in the workplace. (Of course, your company may hire a workplace wellness consultant to offer workshops, too.)

5. QUIET DOWN

Two studies published in 2011 found that excessive workplace noise wreaks havoc on your health. A study published in the medical journal *Sleep* found that among workers exposed to the same level of workplace noise, those who had hearing damage such as tinnitus (ringing in the ears) had poor sleep quality, particularly insomnia, compared with those who did not

“Six weeks of guided meditation and yoga in the workplace – for 20 minutes daily – cut stress levels and improved sleep quality in sedentary office employees”



have hearing damage. A second study in the *British Medical Journal* had even more disturbing findings: workers in persistently noisy workplaces were two to three times more likely to have serious heart problems than those who had quiet workplaces. The researchers theorize that a long-term loud environment is a strong stressor that triggers body chemicals that constrict blood flow. If you're in a noisy workplace, talk to your employer about proper hearing protection and other measures to lower the decibels.

6. VENTILATE

See if your employer will allow you to open some windows to improve air quality. If this is not possible, take short breaks outside and breathe.

7. BE AWARE OF ALLERGIES

Do you work with anyone who has allergies or asthma? Are you sure?

Workers are often reluctant to speak up, yet nearly one in three Canadians has some form of allergic illness. You can take steps to help – for example, to find out how to develop a scent-free policy for your workplace, visit the Canadian Lung Association at www.lung.ca and enter “scent free” in the search engine. Your colleagues may have food allergies or sensitivities, too, so be prepared to offer separate allergy-friendly choices at office get-togethers or allow them to opt out gracefully.

8. REACH OUT

Sometimes a successful workplace wellness project means helping others. Last summer, workers at the Domtar pulp mill in Dryden, Ont., signed up for a weight-loss challenge. For every pound lost, the company donated \$2 to the local food bank. Participants lost a total of 305 pounds and also felt good

about their part in giving back to the community, says company spokesperson Bonny Skene.

9. FIND SOME ON-THE-JOB BUDDIES

Getting along with your co-workers can actually prolong your life, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. A 20-year study of 820 workers in Tel Aviv, Israel, found that people who had a good peer-support system at work tended to live longer than those who didn't, even after the researchers took into account such risk factors as blood pressure, cholesterol levels, alcohol consumption, smoking, past hospitalizations and body mass index. So throw a monthly healthy potluck lunch, ask your manager if petty cash can cover a Wii Fit in the break room, or go out for karaoke together. Your life may depend on it!