



# Nice workout – if you can get it



Not many firms in Hong Kong have employee fitness programmes in place. But the situation is slowly improving, writes **Monica Proctor**



AIA workers take time for fitness (top); NBA Asia's Chris Lee (left) shows the pedometer he uses; AIA assistant vice-president Ping Wu (right) gets coaching from Bob Ngai; AIA staff stretch their potential (below).

Photos: Edward Wong



## 83

Percentage of companies in Singapore that have employee health-care programmes in place, according to a survey

After a stressful day at work glued to her computer or when a presentation calls for a clear head, Ping Wu heads to We Fitness, the corporate gym in her office building, for a run or dance class. "The fitness centre is a very convenient place to calm down, burn calories and feel good, so I am more energetic at work, in meetings and in my daily life," says Wu, the assistant vice-president of Group Customer Value Management at AIA.

The insurance company takes the health of its staff seriously. We Fitness is a state-of-the-art facility at the AIA Building on Stubbs Road, which occasionally introduces guest instructors to help employees develop an individualised fitness regimen. Health seminars on topics such as heart disease prevention, stress management and weight-loss strategies are also organised, and subsidised flu vaccinations are provided for staff and their family members.

"It's easy to exercise at AIA. We have a great gym," says Stella Chow, an executive secretary and single mother of two. "My supervisor is really supportive, as is the company."

AIA, however, seems to be in the minority of Hong Kong companies. According to results released in October of a poll of HR professionals by global professional services firm Towers Watson, fewer than one in three Hong Kong companies has a health-care strategy in place, while half of the respondents have no plans to adopt one.

This is in stark contrast to 83 per cent of companies in Singapore and 72 per cent in Shanghai that have health-care programmes in place, with the rest planning to launch one.

Hongkongers work among the longest hours in the world, largely because of a belief that more work hours means higher productivity. But a recent study by researchers at Stockholm University and Karolinska Institutet found the opposite to be true: that it's possible to use work time for exercise or

other health-promoting measures and still attain the same production levels or even higher. Two workplaces in dental care were asked to devote 2½ hours per week to physical activity, distributed across two sessions. Another group had the same decrease in work hours but without obligatory exercise, and a third group maintained their usual 40-hour working week. All three groups were able to maintain or even increase their productivity levels, while those who exercised also reported improvements in self-assessed productivity.

"This increased productivity comes, on the one hand, from people getting more done during the hours they are at work, perhaps because of increased stamina and, on the other hand, from less absenteeism owing to sickness," say Dr Ulrica von Thiele Schwarz and Dr Henna Hasson, the researchers behind the study, which was published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

Marcel Daane, a fitness trainer and director of Singapore-based Body-Brain Performance Coaching, which specialises in maximising





executive performance through health and wellness initiatives, agrees. He's worked with the executive teams of large multinational companies such as SAP, Google and Accenture in Australia, Singapore and New Zealand.

"Other than obvious benefits such as a reduction in absenteeism rates and medical costs, and increased health, I believe increased performance, productivity and positive effect are key results of wellness programmes," he says.

The good news is the corporate wellness trend is picking up in Hong Kong. This year, Community Business, a non-profit organisation aimed at advancing corporate social responsibility in the city, organised the first Work-Life Balance Week in October after three years of holding annual Work-Life Balance Days. According to the organisation, the list of participating companies has grown from 120 in 2008 to 178 this year.

During the week, companies simply have to roll out initiatives to help promote a better work-life balance for their employees.

Asset management firm



Workplace wellness is only going to work if companies are going to recognise that work-life balance is a serious and important consideration

ROBIN BISHOP, COMMUNITY BUSINESS

**Above: NBA Asia employees have a corporate wellness programme in place, including time off to play sports and to participate in the Just Walk 10,000 Steps a Day Programme.** Photo: May Tse

BlackRock Asia Pacific offered 26 different activities to help staff take charge of their well-being in a fun and engaging way. "We invited health and fitness professionals to discuss good posture and eating intelligently in Hong Kong, and offered yoga classes in Australia and in-office massages in Singapore, to name a few of the activities," says Catherine Barker, Southeast Asia director of iShares, which is under BlackRock.

Aside from this week, other companies have their own initiatives. Staff at NBA Asia, whose headquarters is in Causeway Bay, are encouraged to participate in the Just Walk 10,000 Steps a Day Programme. For eight weeks, they wear a pedometer and try to walk at least 10,000 steps a day, which is roughly equivalent to the recommended 30 minutes of daily exercise.

"The NBA has a strong commitment to the health and fitness of its employees," says Scott Levy, senior vice-president and managing director of NBA Asia.

Swire Beverages, one of the largest Coca-Cola bottlers in the world, works with local governments to encourage

employees and families to walk and sponsor corporate sports events, as part of its Live Positively campaign.

Clive Saffery, CEO of Swire Beverages China and an ultra-marathoner, is a keen advocate of keeping a balanced, healthy and active lifestyle. "All companies should do everything they can to get people away from their desks," he says. "It's not just about getting people to participate in sport; it's about the simple things, like taking the stairs not the lift."

Results of the annual work-life balance survey by Community Business, released in October, showed that 52.4 per cent of Hong Kong employees had felt overloaded at work in the past 12 months, but on a work-life balance scale of 0 to 10, where 10 was the best, workers rated themselves at 6.17, a slight improvement from the past five years (which had been consistently around 5.6 or 5.7).

So, there is progress being made, albeit slowly. "The long-term effects of this being overworked could be damaging both to workers' health and to overall productivity, as workers drive themselves too hard and become disaffected, depressed or even physically ill," says Hans

Leijten, regional vice-president of Regus, the international provider of flexible workplaces.

Employees are advised to find out if their companies offer wellness programmes, and if so, what kind of benefits, such as discounted gym memberships or financial incentives for staying healthy. They can make suggestions to their supervisor or human resources departments if there are no programmes in place. These can range from offering a yoga class in an empty conference room to sponsoring a dragon boat or basketball team to promote group wellness.

As for companies, the impact of wellness programmes can be assessed through the measurement of the company's internal matrix, asking questions to employees at exit interviews, absenteeism rates, staff engagement surveys and effective measures on productivity, says Robin Bishop, chief operating officer at Community Business. "Workplace wellness is only going to work if companies recognise that a work-life balance is a serious and important consideration," she says. [healthpost@scmp.com](mailto:healthpost@scmp.com)