

WORDS KAREN FITTALL

# TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

THE 'HEALTHY WORKPLACE' IS FAST BECOMING  
THE NORM FOR MANY AUSTRALIAN COMPANIES. ▷

UNTIL RECENTLY, ACCEPTING A JOB and negotiating remuneration was pretty straightforward: it was all about the money and... well, the money. If you were lucky, discussions might have stretched to a company car – and maybe even a space to park it.

These days, companies have a lot more to offer: yoga classes, meditation, health checks... the list goes on. Why all the trimmings? According to Michael Stone, Director of Operations and Client Relations at Holistic Services Group, a company dedicated to providing corporate health and wellbeing programs, we are realising that work can't just be about work.

"People are becoming more aware of their health and wellbeing; they're also spending much more time at work. So they're looking for ways to connect the two – going to work and looking after themselves," Stone explains.

"What that means is that people are looking for a lot more than a pay packet from their employers; they are in search of a company that's aligned with their values."

And employers are realising the importance of helping their employees get what they want; which, as far as Stone's business partner David Marks (the group's Director of Sales and Marketing) is concerned, just makes sense.

"I think companies are realising that people with balanced lifestyles are happier, and that benefits the employer," Marks says. "Having employees who [feel] their employer cares about them can only be a good thing – for the company as a whole, as well as its bottom line."

Statistics back up Marks's theory. According to US consulting group Hewitt Associates, Australian companies who are judged the 'best employers' are more than 40 per cent ahead in average profit growth. But the fiscal benefits run deeper than profit alone.

As Marks and Stone explain, the happier the staff, the more likely they are to stay with an organisation. Why does that matter? According to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, it costs as much as \$120,000 to replace a lawyer with four years of experience, and \$80,000 to replace a bank teller with 10 years on the job.

While the benefits of health and wellbeing programs aren't always as tangible as a growth in profits, many high-profile companies clearly believe they are a smart course of action.

Nestlé is well versed in the importance of encouraging a healthy workplace having established their WellNes program at the beginning of 2002. Masele Siatu'u, Director, Human Resources – Oceania for Nestlé, says it's one way the company has established itself as a responsible employer.

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their pay packet, so at Nestlé, we look at the whole person," explains Siatu'u. "The response to the WellNes program has been fantastic; both in terms of staff involvement, and the feedback we've received. From what we understand, this program is one of the reasons why people want to work at Nestlé."

Over at ANZ, the story is much the same. Considered one of Australia's most progressive companies in the area of employee health and wellbeing programs, ANZ is enjoying the benefits. In 2004/05, ANZ decreased its Lost Time Injury Frequency Rate from 6.1 (in 2002) to 4.3 injuries/illness per million hours worked.

Offering everything from free medical checks to tai chi classes, ANZ is an attractive choice for the potential employee. According to Siobhan McHale, who heads the company's



Breakout Cultural Change program, employers would be wise to follow ANZ's lead.

"I think we will see more companies realising the importance of offering these sorts of programs to their employees. It's a competitive employment market and people are beginning to become quite choosy in terms of who they'll work for. And these days, making that decision is about more than salary alone," McHale says.

"Matching a person's salary in a job offer is relatively easy, [but] once you get past that, you have to engage people by catering for the needs of the whole person. People want to work for what they consider to be the best employer, and are attracted by a [strong] company culture."

Michael Stone agrees: "It's a tight labour market out there and people know that, to a certain extent, they can pick and choose where they work."



“I think, when smaller companies see their big-business [contemporaries] employing programs that encourage work/life balance as well as a healthy lifestyle for their employees, they’ll start to think: ‘If they’re doing it, there must be something to it’. It sets a precedent.”

Deciding to implement an employee health and wellbeing initiative is one thing; getting it right is another. According to Nestlé’s Siatu’u, part of the reason WellNes has been so well received is because it’s site specific. Incorporating everything from heart checks and eye tests to financial seminars, employees at different venues are able to dictate the ‘wellness’ perks that would most benefit them.

“There’s no point offering employees something unless it’s valuable to them; otherwise it can wind up being a waste of everybody’s time and resources. To be as effective as possible,

you have to ask the employees what they want,” Siatu’u says.

This, according to Stone and Marks, is the key to getting it right. Before advising clients on services that will pack the healthiest punch, they chat to employers and employees; this enables them to tailor a package to suit everyone.

“There are so many options,” Marks says, “although most companies tend to go with a multi-strand approach.”

It sounds expensive, but it doesn’t have to be. “The cost of implementing a health program varies depending on how little or how much a company wants to do,” explains Stone. “But from our perspective, it can cost as little as \$250 per employee for a year’s worth of services.”

And that is a cost-effective way to increase productivity, reduce turnover, and create a happier workforce in anyone’s language. ☺

## MAKING FITNESS WORK

Lexus is very aware of the importance of helping its staff strike a work/life balance, and a company health and wellbeing program based on fitness has been in place for around five years. Ask a busy person if it’s hard to squeeze a trip to the gym into a hectic work day and the answer will be ‘near impossible’. But it’s a different story if you work at Lexus’ head office, where employees have a high-tech, fully equipped, on-site gymnasium at their disposal. And the best bit? It’s free. “The gym has been established for five years in some shape or form,” says Brad Taylor, Lexus’ Maintenance Manager, and the person responsible for the gymnasium. “But recently it underwent an upgrade; we now have the latest machinery – a lot of it – and have seen a 20 per cent increase in participation.”

Apart from a gym that’s staffed by qualified fitness trainers, Lexus also offers free fitness classes and runs interdepartmental sports competitions each lunchtime, featuring games such as volleyball, soccer, and netball. And what about getting ready to go back to the office after a work-out? No problem. The gym comes fully equipped with individual shower rooms. According to Taylor, apart from providing a much-needed service to employees, the gym is all about promoting a better culture in the company. “Particularly with the games that we play; they can get quite competitive, but are a great way to encourage people from different departments to get together. You wind up chatting to people you would otherwise not have had the chance to meet; and that can only be a good thing for the company’s culture.”