

Special COVER

Work up a *sweat*

Workplaces are introducing fitness programs because healthy employees are better value.

Words Lissa Christopher

Your employer's efforts to improve the bottom line could wind up improving your bottom.

Spurred by experience from the United States, where employers pay for their employees' health insurance and are thus particularly keen to promote good health, Australian employers have started to take more seriously research that says fit employees are better value than unfit ones.

Fitter employees generally take less sick leave, are more productive and less likely to sustain work-related injuries.

Enter workplace health and fitness programs.

General public health messages about the consequences of a sedentary lifestyle – among them obesity, heart disease, diabetes, grunting in an unseemly way when you stand up and *premature death* – are having limited success. More than 60 per cent of Australians still don't get the recommended minimum when it comes to exercise, says Dr John Lang, the managing director of Good Health Solutions, a provider of work-based health services (and adviser to the TV series *Honey We're Killing the Kids*).

Workplace programs – with inducements such as being subsidised, being initiated and organised by someone else, and the fact that they usually come to you – may get a few more idlers moving, but it's no simple task.

Providing on-site gyms or gym memberships, lunchtime aerobics classes and other huffing, sweaty options have tended to attract those already committed to exercise and left the idlers unmoved.

"The first people queuing up . . . would still be wearing their leotards from their gym sessions before work," Lang says.

Mark Cudmore, manager of exercise and health at the UNSW Lifestyle Centre, says more easygoing forms of exercise cast a wider net.

His organisation runs a lot of work-based tai chi and pilates classes. These gentler forms of exercise, which nonetheless improve strength and balance, and may reduce stress, "cater for a wider range of people".

From tragic to magic

Giovanna Walker, 36, says her fitness levels were "pretty el tragico" before she completed a 12-week Energy4Life program with her team at Westpac.

"I hardly did anything at all, to be honest . . . I had moved down to Melbourne, been here for two years, a few things hadn't quite gone so well in my personal life and I put on about 10 or 15 kilos . . ."

The program was primarily about "ingraining a lifestyle change, not a diet. It was about changing your habits – things such as having breakfast, getting into a routine and including some exercise, starting off slowly and working your way up.

"At the end, you were assessed to see how far you had come. We looked at heart rate, cholesterol, weight and eating habits. They gave you an actual age and an 'apparent age'. One fellow here whose actual age is 40, he ended up being 30, so he was excited.

"Now I go to the gym regularly. I have lost a bit of weight and am feeling much happier. I am fitting into clothes and it's nice to have compliments, too, of course.

"[Exercise is] definitely a part of my life now."



Photo: Gary Medlicott

"Fitness is a dirty word now," Cudmore says. "It's a bit like 'diet'. People think fitness means you've got to go out and work up a sweat, run around the block and do high-energy type of things, but it doesn't."

Some corporate fitness businesses, including Lang's, focus less on providing actual exercise classes and more on health checks, education and motivation. The aim – though it may wind up putting them out of business if successful – is to encourage employees to become self-sufficient, lifelong exercisers. And it's first and foremost a mind game.

"If you want to change the way you live, then you need to change the way you think," says Dr John Tickell, another provider of workplace programs, on his Energy4Life website (www.energy4life.com).

Good Health Solutions uses a model established by the psychologist James Prochaska, which works on the basis that there are five stages of readiness to change – pre-contemplation (not even thinking about it), contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance, and various techniques to get people moving through them.

Lang says one of the biggest challenges is getting

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Steps to a healthy worklife

Write it down

"One of the biggest barriers to exercising is time. You've got to sit down and plan your exercise. Find 30 minutes in a day. Once it's in writing, people are more likely to stick to it."

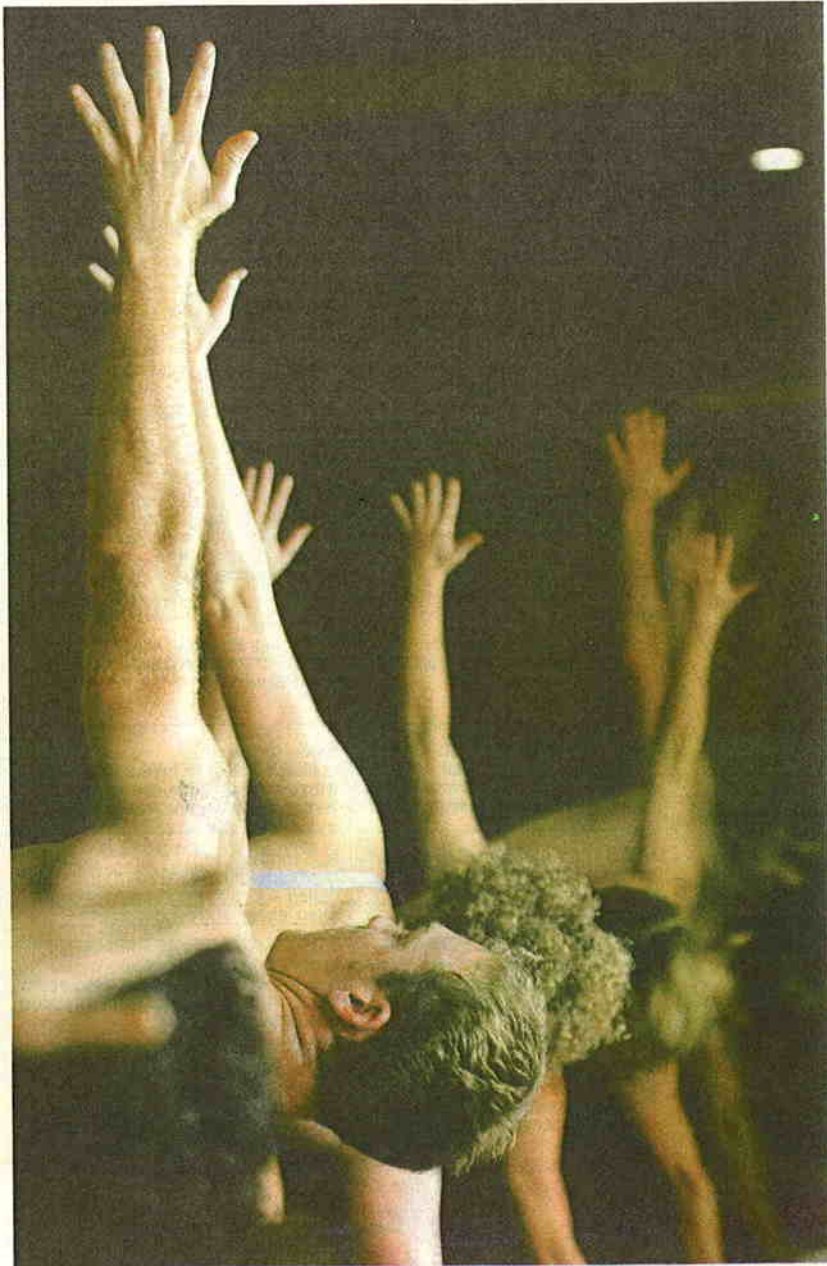
Vary what you are doing

"Your body gets used to exercise quite quickly. After a four- to six-week period, you're not getting that much out of it. You need to make changes but they only need to be subtle. Incorporate a hill if you're walking, change the repetitions if you're lifting weights; alternate your speed. Add different activities. Walk in different places."

Find something you enjoy

"It's far better to do something you enjoy than to force yourself to do something that you don't like. You are more likely to stick to something you like. See a GP before you start. It's always better to find something out too soon than too late."

Exercise tips from Mark Cudmore, University of NSW Lifestyle Centre



Time is relative ...

- The National Physical Activity Guidelines say: "put together at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days".
- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, lack of time is the most common reason people cite for not being more active.
- You can expect to spend about five days in hospital following an uncomplicated acute myocardial infarction (heart attack), according to the *Archives of Internal Medicine*.
- It takes, on average, between 60,480 and 80,640 minutes to return to a full range of everyday activities after open-heart surgery.
- "We keep on considering the time we spend exercising as a cost," Lang says. "And cost has all these negative inferences. But time spent on our health is an *investment* and not a cost. It grows over time. The return on investment from exercise is to look good, feel good, live longer, be more productive, have greater energy levels, sleep better, avoid osteoporosis and heart disease."

Photo: Adam Hollingworth

pre-contemplators out of their "nice little reclusive spot". This often takes "a magic moment or a cathartic experience" and workplace health checks can provide one such magic moment.

"If you find your blood pressure's 190 over 110 and your [total] cholesterol is 8.5, you're likely to turn into a contemplator pretty damn quick," Lang says.

Moving from contemplation to maintenance involves overcoming obstacles such as injuries and misconceptions that you lack time and energy (see box), and getting past dependence on motivation.

"At times you will become motivated enough to overcome obstacles but it means you will succeed when you are motivated and you will fail when you are not," Lang says. "That is why people get in and out of exercise."

"Motivation cannot be guaranteed to be there for you from the next day or week or month to the next."

"The only way you can get lifelong success – in other words, maintenance – is to overcome the barriers. Once you come up with constructive solutions to lack of time, lack of energy and all those sort of things, you don't need to be motivated to succeed any more. You become independent of motivation and that, by definition, is what we call a habit."

Does work help or hinder your fitness? Tell us at www.smb.com.au/essential.

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