



HITTING THE WALL

CBD workers are finding new ways to get fit at the office, everything from rock-climbing to boxing.
Annie Lawson reports.

IF ALIENS were to visit Earth, they would observe a society filled with cars, remote controls, computers and escalators — all devices geared towards physical inactivity. If it was a Tuesday in Melbourne they would also see a group of normally sedentary white-collar workers leave their desks to climb a steep, rubber mountain-face in the heart of the CBD.

Such contradictory images could be puzzling to an outsider. That is, until they noticed the obesity epidemic that has gripped much of Western civilisation. It helps to explain why a growing number of companies are offering fitness programs for their staff. Workers can spend their lunch hour at a dragon boat race, boxercise class, yoga, or rock-climbing.

"If someone came from space and tried to work out

what earthlings were doing, the one thing they would conclude is that the objective of human beings is to stop moving," says Dr Paul Magnus, medical adviser at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. "But if the whole of society has been about saving ourselves movement, how easy is it now to suddenly turn around and ask them to go up flights of stairs or walk to school?"

Dr Magnus' pessimism is understandable given the average office worker takes about 3500 steps a day, well below the recommended 10,000-plus steps. However, there is a growing trend in corporate Australia to educate its workforce about the benefits of even moderate exercise, encouraging workers to replace the traditional boozy lunch with an hour of tai chi or a jog. And this push is not all about health; there is strong evidence that active workers are better for the bottom line. So

while it might seem like a waste of precious office time to scale dizzying heights during the lunch break, the rock-climbing administrative assistant is going to perform much better than a junk-food eating manager who is chained to the desk.

"We know that obesity and being overweight is adversely associated with productivity," says Professor David Dunstan, a VicHealth public health research fellow at the International Diabetes Institute in Melbourne. "Anything that can maintain weight or lead to weight loss is going to lead to productivity. There's also positive psychological benefits associated with exercise — increased awareness, reduced risk of injury through having adequate strength, increased energy, and alertness."

Cricket, football, netball and other staff team sports are growing in popularity, particularly among companies in the



financial services sector. Less common are the extreme sports, such as the contingent of city “rock climbers” who work at National Australia Bank’s Melbourne headquarters. “We have a couple of people who are keen on extreme sports so there’s a bit of high-altitude mountaineering and there’s a local rock-climbing gym nearby,” says NAB spokeswoman Felicity Glennie-Holmes.

NAB’s Leanne Harvey, 32, started rock-climbing about the time she joined the bank two years ago, and now climbs indoor during her lunch hour as well as going on camping trips to climb real rocks. She says rock-climbing during the working day helps her focus at work and is good for the work-life balance.

“It ensures I get out of the office chair and exercise, and keeps things in perspective. When all you have is work it can mean you take situations and difficulties at work personally, rather than the little hurdles that they are, which you can eventually move past,” Harvey says.

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As well as NAB’s in-house massage and relaxation classes, the yoga sessions and gym membership discounts at the YMCA are in high demand. “Healthier employees will be more productive. Happy employees feel their employer values them,” says Glennie-Holmes. “Work stress is a leading cause of illness in Australia and work has a tendency to crowd out leisure time and exercise. If you run a wellbeing program, your business can help mitigate some of these negatives.”

Over at AMP, staff have embraced charity events, such as the Mother’s Day Classic fun run and the BRW Triath-

lon. In the Australian Corporate Games more than 9000 employees from 300 organisations compete in events such as badminton, basketball, cycling, indoor karting, and poker.

Such is Telstra’s dedication that it recently appointed a “health and wellbeing” group manager, a role focused on raising mental and physical health levels among its workforce.

“Often companies forget about presenteeism — we are getting people there but they are not performing to their best,” says Karen Oldaker, Telstra’s head of wellbeing. “They are tired, unfit and eating unhealthily, which makes us lethargic.”

The telco has staged 42 “resilience” workshops over the past 12 months that encourage staff to map out a plan aimed at improving their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Good Health Network, Peak Health Management and Executive Health Management, are all businesses devoted to keeping the corporate workforce fit, healthy and happy. They are all champion spruikers of that annoying, new-age noun, “wellness” — some offer corporate massage, most do employee health assessments and devise nutrition and fitness programs that address staff’s niggling health issues.

Good Health Network has about 500 clients, up to 30 of them in the top 100 corporations including Boral, Commonwealth Bank and ANZ. Dr Lang says anywhere from 50% to 70% of a company’s workforce will agree to a voluntary health check-up. “We assess people’s risk and lifestyle factors and stage of readiness to change those,” he says.

He says the biggest cost to business is not absenteeism but presenteeism. Those with five or more health factors, including smoking, obesity and being unfit, high blood pressure and cholesterol, spent almost a third of their day being unproductive. “We know with our healthier clients, the presenteeism goes down,” says Dr Lang.

Meanwhile, Professor Dunstan warns that prolonged periods of sitting might undo



the benefits of a 30-minute burst of exercise. While he still encourages people to do purposeful exercise such as jogging, taking regular breaks and standing up while on the phone also has health benefits.

"People who have more breaks in their day — that is, going from sitting to standing and moving around, have a better health and cardiac metabolic profile than those that don't break up their day so much," he

says. "You expend more energy when you are standing than when you are sitting because your muscles need to contract to keep you upright. There's metabolic processes that are switched off when we are sitting for a long period."

So are businesses doing enough?

"Businesses have made an important

step towards getting a healthier workforce by incorporating exercise," says Professor Dunstan. "But if we want to look at the full picture of health, we have to consider what we are doing in the times they are not exercising. We may find that prolonged sitting is a cardiovascular risk factor."



Working on fitness: NAB workers rock-climbing (above); Pricewaterhouse's running group (left). PICTURES: EDDIE JIM