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## Company-sponsored yoga helps anxious workers breathe easier

San Francisco Business Times - by [Brendan Doherty](#)

Prashanth Ponnachath was, like yoga, born in India, but the software engineer never bothered with the ancient art until he moved to the United States and found it offered for free four times a week by his employer.

Now he's a big fan. A year into the practice, Ponnachath says that Siebel Systems Inc.'s classes help him gain mental clarity and reduce the stress caused by staring at a computer all day in a hyper-competitive field. He has also noticed that his chronic allergies have abated -- and his wife likes him more.

"I'm a happier person, whereas I used to be stressed, with my mind chattering all of the time," Ponnachath said. "Yoga teaches you to breathe right. Stress is all mental, and when you get stressed you breathe very shallow, but if you control your breath, you can control your mind and body."

### Bending over backwards

Despite general expense cutting and layoffs, yoga is on the rise. More than 15 million practiced it in the U.S. in 2001, double the number doing it in 1996. One of the places it's found greatest growth is in the workplace. It's cheap, requiring little equipment besides an instructor and a few enthusiastic employees. Five percent of companies provide yoga in the workplace, according to [yogaforbusiness.com](#)'s CEO and Bruce Van Horn, author of the book "Yoga for Men."

Dublin-based Siebel has provided yoga to employees like Ponnachath for nearly five years, and other companies large and small are finding a way to squeeze yoga into limited budgets for its employees. It's a stress reducer, it may lower health care costs, and it's a cheap way to fill a gym that was built as a part of those corporate campus-type buildings.

"When the dot-com thing happened, there was dry-cleaning, dog walking and yoga," says San Ramon-based Claire Rudholm, a management consultant-turned yoga instructor. "It's about streamlining time."

Rudholm notes a growth in the number of yoga studios in Berkeley, an increase in private instruction and more corporate work as indicators of yoga's benefits.

Among those bending over to let their employees stretch are San Ramon-based ChevronTexaco, San Rafael-based Industrial Light and Magic, Cupertino-based Apple Computers, the San Ramon office of Toyota of America, Emeryville-based caterer Paula LeDuc and the blue-collar sales and delivery office of Hayward-based Airport Appliances.

"Other than the standard reasons that employers do anything for their employees, it's selfish," says Don Van Eeghen of Airport Appliances, whose \$15 million company began paying for twice-weekly yoga sessions three months ago. "The healthier our employees are in mind and body, the better off we are for the portion of their life that they give to the workplace."

Van Eeghen, a 60-year-old self-described "type A" personality, doesn't look forward to the yoga, but 10 minutes into the session, he feels grateful; after an hour, he could do another 8-hour shift. At Airport, the group does sessions in one of the remodeled kitchen display showrooms, occasionally with shoppers still in the store. "We get some interesting comments, but they're all positive," said Van Eeghen.

### **A new position**

More than stretching out the kinks in one's body and untying the stressful knots in the neck, there is something to be said for having everyone put on their sweats.

Steven LaFrance began building **LaFrance Associates** in December 2000, and includes weekly yoga classes, spending about \$1,000 a month to keep its 10 employees stretching toward goals and balancing work and life.

"I held yoga as a personal goal, both for physical work and for team-building," said LaFrance. "I needed to find a way to balance stress and include the physical activity."

His interest in having classes in a convenient space, say yoga instructors, is how a lot of workplace yoga practitioners get their exposure. Since starting the free classes for his employees, more than half attend the classes, and most have noticed definite benefits in both work and life.

The company, which has done research assessments for The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Delancey Street Foundation and the city of San Francisco, is on track to book \$1.5 million in revenue this year. A big workload and a small staff often cause high tension. Yoga, says LaFrance, has helped.

"We drop the roles and it allows us to see each other outside our work relationships," said LaFrance. "This increases the communication and sense of community."

Yoga in fact helped set the tone for LaFrance Associates, which he formed with several former colleagues from another consulting firm. Some were concerned that the flavor of their former employer's work environment would take root in the new company.

So far it has not.

And it's a tone that a number of employees have continued after their initial exposure to yoga. Not only is their boss providing a free yoga class, but he's in there stretching as well, putting his knees on his elbows to stretch for "the crow" position or sitting lotus in his socks. "Participating in something other than work helps," said LaFrance. "The yoga is a constant, we root for each other to achieve their individual goals here."

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