

Stretching benefits Companies offer yoga as perk, curb on health costs

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By Kristi Ceccarossi, Globe Correspondent | January 26, 2008

CAMBRIDGE - For most of the workweek, Dong Li is shackled to her desk, a sedentary hostage to project deadlines, dressed in crisp business casual, and suffering an increasingly stiff neck.

But for at least two hours, Li, a senior program analyst at Abt Associates, a research and consulting firm, is liberated.

Barefoot and in sweats, every Monday and Thursday during lunch hour, she bends, breathes, and stretches on the industrial carpet in Abt's basement alongside a dozen or so of her co-workers.

The ancient Indian tradition of yoga has quietly become a \$3 billion a year business nationwide, and has made significant inroads in corporate America.

At Abt, corporate yoga is a benefit offered to the company's 400 workers. For \$6, employees can take a class. Abt provides the space, picks up the other half of the tab, and hires Diane Dymek, a certified instructor who operates Begin Within Yoga, of Waltham, to teach.

"I look forward to Mondays because of it," Li said.

Over the last 20 years, many employers have developed wellness benefits as a way to stave off rising insurance costs by improving worker health. Generally, they include discounted gym memberships, diet groups, or smoking-cessation courses.

But in recent years, many Massachusetts companies, including Stride Rite Corp., Tufts Health Plan, and Dunkin' Brands Inc., have incorporated yoga into the workweek.

It can be an odd fit, given that yogic philosophy emphasizes relaxation, peace, and spiritual oneness, not exactly the mantras of the corporate world. But benefits coordinators say the practice of meditation and balance is useful in the workplace.

"Yoga has helped people take a step back and look at a problem from a different angle," said Patricia McIntyre, who heads the wellness program at Abt.

While the benefit of corporate yoga for employees is a subjective matter, the benefits for yoga instructors dozens of whom are graduating from Boston-area studios each year are undeniable.

According to Toby Kumin, co-owner of Boston Yoga, an online business directory, there are more than 40 studios in and around the city. Despite the \$500,000 to \$1 million cost to get a studio off the ground, new practices are opening regularly and existing studios are growing, she said. This month South Boston got its first studio, Somerville-based O2 expanded to the South End, and Prana Power Yoga, in Newton, opened a Cambridge location. Prana plans another in Winchester next month.

But, Kumin said, a lot of studio owners can't rely on class fees alone to pay the bills. Corporate yoga, which she also practices, is a reliable supplement. Dymek, whose entire livelihood is generated by her corporate yoga practice, said she earns about \$1,000 a week. "It's really the only way to make an income doing yoga," she said.

Practitioners say healthier, happier employees are more productive. On that premise, starting as early as the 1980s, wellness advocates began introducing physical activities into the workplace. But it wasn't until advocates could start selling wellness as a way to improve the bottom line that fitness centers and weight loss programs became a mainstay at large corporations.

"For years we had to talk companies into this idea," said Iris Sokol, owner of Fitness Works at Work, a wellness-management firm in Sherborn that works with Genzyme Corp., Papa Gino's Inc., and Dunkin' Brands. "Now, not a week goes by that we don't get a phone call from an employer who wants to bring us in."

As of 2005, more than 81 percent of businesses with 50 or more employees had some form of health-promotion

program, according to Wellness Councils of America, a nonprofit based in Omaha.

The organization also reported about 50 percent of corporate healthcare costs are lifestyle-related and, therefore, potentially preventable. With health insurance premiums rising 15 to 20 percent annually, many companies view spending a fraction of that on wellness programs as a reasonable investment.

Yoga is especially useful in terms of preventive care, said Dee Greenberg, owner of Om City Yoga in Cambridge, because it promotes harmony of the mind and body. "A lot of what people hear on the job is 'work harder, stay longer, be more productive.' Yoga is giving them an opportunity to de-stress," she said. "When they go back to their desks, their heart rate is changed, they're breathing different, and they're focused."

At Abt, McIntyre said, the firm has spent less than \$5,000 each year since 2005 on the yoga program, as well as on workplace massages and Weight Watchers discounts. She said she hasn't evaluated what, if any, related savings there are on healthcare. Judging by input from employees, she said, it's working.

"If people are well, they're going to utilize their health insurance less. That means our claims are lower. Over time, it may even reduce our rates," she said.

At least in one secluded spot, the yoga benefit is already transforming the feel inside Abt.

On a recent Thursday in a basement room there, Dymek, the yoga instructor, shut off the overhead fluorescents, lined the room with Christmas lights, sprayed the air with a lavender mist, and put on a CD of New Age music.

At noon, workers streamed in and spread out their yoga mats in two neat rows. When everyone was quiet, Dymek opened the class: "Let us allow our ego to leave the room. Let go of our tension, our concerns and create a space where nothing else matters but listening to our own breath." ■