

Fit for purpose: how to be healthy at work

There's a holy trinity to staying in good shape in an office: *Chloe Cann* talks to Ian Freeman, director of Health Matters 360, about wellbeing in the workplace

With the annual cost of sickness leave nudging almost £30 billion for UK organisations, it's clear that employee illness can lead to an unhealthy business.

But while sick leave may be merely a frustration for some bosses who are left in the lurch, Ian Freeman, director of Health Matters 360, points out the more serious everyday effects that a lack of concentration, and consequently output, can have on a workplace.

It's high time employers started devoting more funds and resources to staff wellbeing, he says. "Companies are always putting staff through training as it benefits the company, but what we do also benefits the staff. Those that invest will reap the rewards of fewer sick days and increased productivity," he says.

According to Freeman there are three key elements to overall wellbeing: the right diet, exercise and mindfulness.

Nutrition

Aside from the physical benefits of eating well, a good, balanced diet is also imperative to mental agility, says Freeman. "If you're not fuelling your body properly that will influence concentration and productivity."

While the average working day for a travel agent may be frenzied, with little time to prepare meals or go out in search of a healthy lunch, Freeman says that there are simple changes agents can make to have a more balanced diet.

"Take lunch to work," he says. "Not only do you save money but you know what you're eating."

He warns against the ubiquitous low-fat foods that line most supermarket shelves, which often have a high sugar content, as sugar can play havoc with your mood. "What happens is the wave effect of energy for your body. It will kick-start metabolism but insulin production will result in a crash when you'll reach for the chocolate. [The result is] low patience and tolerance levels with customers in the dips."

Grabbing a sandwich on the go is also a no-no. "The majority of fast food lunches are wheat and bread-based," he says. "Even if you're not a coeliac, it slows down your digestive



Freeman: changes will make a big difference

system and makes you feel sluggish."

Instead, he recommends meals that are high in protein and include good fats, such as those found in oily fish, avocado and nuts.

Freeman adds that there's nothing wrong with snacking, as long as it's with the right kind of food. He recommends keeping healthy options to hand. "Stowing a bag of nuts and seeds in the glove compartment of your car and desk drawer will help you maintain a nice even keel throughout the day," he says.



Walk and stretch at work whenever possible

Exercise

The typical agency environment means agents are largely sedentary during the working day, leading to less than optimum circulation. As a result less oxygen reaches the brain and you're more likely to suffer from headaches and fatigue.

To combat slow circulation Freeman suggests getting up and about whenever possible. "Walk or cycle to work. If there's not a customer in front of you stand up and walk around with your shoulders back. As soon as you hunch forward you're collapsing the diaphragm, which means you are not breathing properly."

Leaving the office for a brisk walk is another of Freeman's suggestions. While agents are typically very busy at lunchtime, he argues that a lunch break could be staggered to work around a busy schedule.

Positive mind matters

With streams of customers flowing in-store and a lengthy list of enquiries to follow up it can be hard for agents to focus on any one task at a time. Freeman says that taking just a few minutes out of the day to centre yourself can pay dividends in terms of concentration.

"Five minutes of silence, grounding yourself, allows you to get on with your day better," he says. He adds that another trick to focus your mind is to always have paper at hand to scribble down thoughts. "It helps you focus on the customer in front of you rather than worry about what you're having for tea."

With difficult customers Freeman says focusing on breathing can help stress levels. By exhaling for longer than inhaling, the brain drops into "calm mode" he says, but when you need to streamline your thoughts, breaths in and out should be of equal length.

Making an effort to take on any of the suggestions above will yield high returns, says Freeman, though for optimum results agents should take a comprehensive approach to the advice. "All of these things in isolation are beneficial, but only when you bring all three together can you maximise your health."