

## Healthy means wealthy

**A healthy workforce can be three times as productive as an unhealthy one, according to Mark O. Mathews**, registered osteopath and founder of the **Rêve Pavilion Natural Health Clinic in Guildford**. Workers in today's tough economic climate are taking less time off for sickness, as worries about job security make them reluctant to stay away from the office. Absence rates are at their lowest for 20 years and the cynical view is that business owners need to worry a lot less about the health of their staff and focus more on margins, turnover and, in some cases, survival.

### **But how can you ensure that your team is fit and raring to go?**

Success depends on your team being healthier than your rivals. Experts argue that with an ageing working population, where the skills of your workforce increasingly give you competitive advantage, employee wellbeing will become more, not less, important.

In two recent reports, *Healthy Work: Evidence into Action* and *Healthy Work: Challenges and Opportunities*, healthcare provider Bupa says that with 40 per cent of UK adults set to be obese by 2025, the number of workers suffering from obesity-related conditions will rise steadily.

**The reports also reveal that absence through sickness costs the British economy £14 billion a year; healthy workers, however, can be up to three times more productive than those in poor health. "So it will be the healthiest businesses that prosper," says Mathews.**

**There's plenty you can do to keep your employees healthy, but where to start? Mark O. Mathews explains how to keep your staff, and your business, healthy.**

### **Put a strategy in place**

"The logical starting point is simply to sit down and create a health and wellbeing strategy or framework that is going to work for your business," explains Mathews. "The organisations that tend to be most successful when it comes to health and wellbeing are those that link their return on investment to productivity and engagement, who manage to embed health and wellbeing into their culture. For that you need a clear framework or strategy that is aligned to your business objectives – a road map of where you are going."

### **Understand your workforce**

Mark Mathews says: "There are a number of core indicators you should monitor to understand the health profile of your employees and judge your wellbeing issues, using screening tools such as employee health risk appraisals (which can reveal levels of 'presenteeism' or the link between employee health status and productivity) and health assessments. Look out for lifestyle issues, such as smoking, alcohol, obesity and stress in your company, levels of physical activity, and specific medical conditions or injuries. Other indicators to monitor include absenteeism (in particular,

tracking reasons for absence), employee engagement (often through employee satisfaction surveys) and retention, recruitment and staff turnover rates."

### **Explain your goals**

If you suddenly start being proactive about health and sickness days, there's a risk that your staff will assume the worst. Without clearly communicating your motives and goals, employees may resent what they see as nannying interference, or jump to the conclusion that you're simply trying to weed out poor performers and crack down on those who take time off.

"Create an element of trust so employees understand why they are being asked to participate. You must be transparent about your motivations for bringing in this new focus and involve employees throughout - ask people what they'd like – what they'd be prepared to participate in."

### **Get managers involved**

Bring your workers with you, but any health and wellbeing strategy has to have, and be seen to have, support from the top down. Actions must accompany words. "If managers are talking about good health but then still working until 9pm, it's just not going to work".

### **Reduce your absence rates**

If you have high rates of long-term or short-term sickness, it is something that clearly needs to be addressed as a priority. This might mean simply being more proactive about people calling in sick or, for longer-term absence, taking a more case management-led approach to rehabilitation, perhaps through the use of a specialist occupational health provider. Smaller businesses often contract out or buy in such services on a piecemeal basis.

### **Manage your workloads**

"Just as athletes work up to their optimal performance, so it is important to be able to oscillate your own performance at work. Understand the times when you know you need to be working at 90 or 100 per cent – perhaps in the run-up to or during a board meeting or other significant event – and the times where, in reality, you can work at maybe 20 or 30 per cent and recharge a little. You don't want to be running on empty all the time. "

It is about planning your rest and recovery and being more in control of your working day.

### **Cover all the health angles**

"Encouraging people to take the stairs rather than the lift, get off a commute stop early or use gym facilities can all be helpful, but don't forget the importance of hydration, sleep and nutrition," says Mathews. "If you're tired, it's hard to perform at a high level. You have to work that much harder and it builds up cumulatively."

Dehydration can have a significant impact on productivity and can affect your mood or concentration. If you're thirsty, you're already dehydrated. So it's important to have facilities so people can drink lots of water and keep hydrated throughout the day.

Nutrition is important, too, so encourage people to eat regularly – and particularly not to skip breakfast – as well as healthily and with a balanced diet.

"You can also change people's habits in small ways. You could, for example, start to hold meetings standing up – which also often makes them shorter and more focused – or walking around. You could encourage people to sit on fit balls instead of chairs at their desks. What is important is that people identify means of exercise that will work for them, given their own lifestyle."

### **Measure your results**

"Whatever you do, it is vital that you measure whether or not it is working – this will help you prove that the financial or time investment is paying off," says Mathews. "It is important to be tracking your key metrics about levels of sickness absence, employee engagement, health and general wellbeing."

"There are lots of quick, short-term gains that can be made that will improve engagement and productivity. Just being proactive, communicating and having a strategy in place can make a big difference."

**MARK MATHEWS** BSc (Hons), DO, MRO



Mark graduated in Ecology from Edinburgh University in 1969 and was subsequently responsible for managing the set-up of the National Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales.

Mark qualified as an Osteopath in 1979 and then completed his first course in Applied Kinesiology in 1984. Mark continues to study with the world's most knowledgeable teachers of Applied Kinesiology and has himself published widely on the subject. He has also trained in Neuro-Linguistic Programming over many years and graduated from the Robbins Research International Mastery University.

In 1988, Mark established **The Rêve Pavilion Natural Health Clinic** ([www.revepavilion.net](http://www.revepavilion.net)), providing an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to the treatment of all kinds of health problems. **You can contact The Rêve Pavilion on 01483 579500.**

Being dyslexic himself, Mark has always had a special interest in helping children with learning difficulties. In 1995, he set up the **Sunflower Trust**. This is a registered charity with a key aim of making available the Sunflower Programme, a pioneering method developed by Mark at The Rêve Pavilion, to help treat children with learning difficulties. You can find out more about the Sunflower Trust by visiting [www.sunflowertrust.com](http://www.sunflowertrust.com).