

How healthier and happier employees save your company money



How productive are your employees? It's a surprisingly tricky question.

In truth, most HR professionals and even business owners have no idea how much work their staff members are actually doing on a day-to-day basis. It's just not something they actively monitor. Many bosses simply assume that all is running smoothly within their ranks.

But the real numbers are surprising.

While many employees spend at least seven hours per day in the workplace, excluding breaks, much of that time goes to waste. In fact, the US *Bureau of Labor Statistics* reported that in 2016 the average worker spent just 3.61 hours of the day working productively. In other words almost half the working day is spent on other tasks or procrastination. It doesn't take a business expert to appreciate how detrimental this trend may be to companies and their profits.

So what's causing this general low level of efficiency and productivity in the workplace?

The undeniable link between health and productivity

In one word: health. This is at the core of efficiency and productivity. And according to the *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, the cost of health-related productivity is 'significantly greater than medical and pharmacy costs alone'.

The reason for this is simple. Those in poor health, either mental or physical, are less productive. If your team includes a number of employees in poor health, that could have a detrimental effect on your business. There are two key ways in which health issues impact productivity levels: absenteeism, or 'failure to attend work', and presenteeism, which is 'attending work but performing

at suboptimal capacity'. These two issues result in increased health insurance premiums as well as lower productivity.

Most of us understand the dangers of absenteeism and presenteeism, but what is causing them? Let's look at four important health areas that are often behind poor employee productivity:

1. Overweight and obesity – a health problem and a productivity problem: These are among the most serious health issues in the workplace. Just last year, the *World Health Organization* reported that an incredible 34.5% of UAE residents were obese and 70.6% were overweight. So it's no great leap to assume that in a typical UAE company a large percentage of the workforce may be dealing with these conditions.

2. How diabetes can impact the workplace: Not unrelated to obesity, diabetes may also be impacting your workplace and dragging your productivity levels down. The *American Diabetes Association* recently reported that this condition made men 7.1% less likely to complete their work and women 4.4% less likely.

What's more, 5.4% of men and 6% of women potentially had additional work limitations as a result of their diabetes. Given the condition is so widespread, it's crucial to acknowledge the impact diabetes may be having on your company.

3. Understanding musculoskeletal pain and what it means for employees: From arthritis to back pain, there are numerous ways that musculoskeletal issues can manifest themselves in people at work. By its very nature, the 'office job' lifestyle creates health problems, since workers often have no choice but to sit at a desk for seven or eight hours per day.

Many professionals overlook these kinds of problems and simply accept them as a part of modern working life. But the impact they are having is grave: one study in the *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* found that musculoskeletal problems presented a significant burden on businesses, and attributed very high levels of work productivity loss to them.

4. The danger of not addressing mental health issues: Mental health is often seen as a taboo in the workplace. It shouldn't be this way. While it is indeed a sensitive subject, failing to tackle mental illness in the workplace head-on is certain to cause more problems than it solves. A healthy employee is a happy one, and that is just as true when it comes to mental and emotional issues as it is physical.

In fact, according to research from the *American Psychological Association*, mental illnesses may have a deeper impact on our productivity than physical illnesses do.

In the section below, we will address what an employer might do to address this and the other three important areas we have outlined.

How to support your employees' well-being and boost their health

Once you appreciate the gravity of the situation (and just how much your company may be losing out), it's time to consider what you might do to prevent any further escalation of these health-driven concerns in your business. You may already have systems in place which serve to support your employees' health and wellbeing, but could you be doing more?

Stats from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* show that having a wellness programme can lead to a 25% saving on 'absenteeism, health care costs, and workers' compensation and disability management claims costs'. To illustrate, when multinational company Johnson & Johnson established such a programme they were able to save an impressive USD 225 per employee per year.

With that in mind, here are three wellness ideas you could consider implementing for your staff:

1. Encourage your staff to exercise and review their workstations: Starting an exercise programme could make a big difference to employee productivity. Research in the *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* a few years ago found that employees who spent 2.5 hours of their working week exercising (as opposed to behind a desk) became significantly more productive than their counterparts.

The notion of taking time out of the work day might seem strange at first. It feels counterintuitive. Yet, as the study shows, you can actually increase productivity across your entire workplace while effectively reducing the hours people work.

And today a wide range of ergonomic solutions are available to help deal with the musculoskeletal epidemic – from routine individual workplace assessments, to stand-up desks, to a whole array of ergonomically designed office chairs. Combined, they might just make the difference to the musculoskeletal health of your staff.

2. Support your employees' mental wellbeing: In a similar vein, making sure you support your staff members' mental wellbeing is an excellent way to boost their contentment and productivity. The psychological health of your team can completely transform the culture of your workplace, so having a suitable programme in place means you can help catch problems as they arise.

Research reveals how much people's mood affects their behaviour at work. A study by the University of Warwick found that 'happy' employees were 12% more productive than the rest of the staff. The takeaway is simple – assisting your team with any mental or emotional health issues can lead to greater employee happiness and productivity.

3. Introduce a 'self-monitoring' system: Finally, here's a simple way to ensure that your workers remain as productive as possible. If you don't monitor their levels of efficiency currently, it might be time to introduce a self-monitoring system into your business. That is to say, a programme that allows your employees to record for themselves how much they are able to get done in a day, and exactly what they are doing with their time.

Not only does this kind of programme encourage your team members to work harder, but it could also help improve their mental health. According to a study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, monitoring their own productivity can play a central role in helping patients recover from depression.

Implementing this programme, along with others aimed at maximising your employee health, could be a win-win solution.



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Nausheen Popat co-founded Lifecare 20 years ago with Alniz Popat, and is today responsible for managing and coordinating the operational running of the business across Dubai, Kenya and Qatar. Nausheen focuses on delivering Lifecare's operational excellence strategic initiatives. She has been integral in developing relationships with customers and major service providers in the market in order to promote strategic partnerships that serve our clients and promote the growth of the business. Nausheen is a graduate of the University of Northridge, California and holds a bachelor's degree in Hotel Management.