

‘Take a Deep Breath’

Employers Strive to Reduce Work Stress

By Charlee Beasor

“I’m just so stressed out.” You’ve undoubtedly heard or spoken those words before. Stress is an unavoidable part of life and may spring from a number of sources: finances, a mental health issue, marriage or parenting crises, or job/career worries, to name a few.

While stress can come from many different areas, the American Psychological Association reports that 65% of U.S. employees cite work as a significant cause of stress and almost half of respondents report feeling tense or stressed out during the workday.

And employers take note: The World Health Organization estimates that employee stress makes an impact on American businesses to the tune of \$300 billion per year due to increased health care costs, absenteeism, worker’s compensation claims and lower productivity.

Diane Sieg, a Colorado-based keynote speaker, book author, life coach and yoga instructor, worked in an emergency room for over 20 years and saw firsthand how stress can affect the human body.

“It’s the way we’re living. It was really difficult for me to put people back together again and (watch them) not make any changes and come back for the same thing on a different day,” she reflects. “We are our own worst enemies; the whole more, better, faster thing doesn’t work.”

To combat this trend, businesses are assisting employees with their stressors – both job- and home-related – by providing healthy outlets at the workplace.

Living in the present

Sieg teaches the practice of mindfulness, which is a state of being awake and aware in the present moment. In her book, *30 Days to Grace*, she discusses meditation, yoga, journaling and deep breathing as ways to achieve that state of mind.

“With mindfulness, we get to choose (how we feel). We just have to access it,” Sieg contends. “We forget that we can pause, that taking a deep breath – it’s a big deal. I used that term in the ER more than anyone can imagine. Everybody can take a deep breath, and the effect is immediate.”

The corporate mindfulness movement is growing in America, as companies such as Google and General Mills offer formal programs.

Sieg emphasizes, however, that expecting these simple techniques to be a quick fix to rising health care costs is a mistake.

“Deep breathing, meditation, walking, journaling, movement – it’s all so simple. It’s accessible to all of us,” she observes. “But, (employers) want to see numbers and return on investment. If the only reason they’re doing this is to save money, it’s not going to work.”

“When people that practice mindfulness actually have more compassion, more focus, more productivity, more joy, more happiness – do you think that affects the bottom line? Of course, but it’s not going to show up on your insurance claims in three months.”

Investment management firm The Capital Group Companies offers a hearty wellness program, complete with an on-site café (stocked with organic food), an outdoor walking trail, biometric screenings and an employee assistance program. The Carmel-based company provides these offerings without a formal stress reduction initiative.

Client services director Jeff Schlick notes that there is an educational component to the wellness program that includes information about breathing and stress reduction.

“Breathing can create a healthier lifestyle; there is an awareness of that. It just introduces that something like your blood pressure can be lowered through deep breaths,” he maintains.

Walking away the stress

The Capital Group Companies recently converted its fifth floor from a storage area to an

Employees at The Capital Group Companies in Carmel take a break in the workday to walk around the new indoor track on the fifth floor of their office building.



indoor walking track that is open to its 850 employees throughout the year. About 150 people have taken advantage of the track each day since it debuted in January.

“When it’s windy, cold, snowy or icy, nobody wants to go outside. (The indoor track) is a great place to walk. People had been walking through our hallways and it gets kind of crowded. Having a destination to do that is a pretty cool thing,” remarks senior vice president and general manager Chris Trede. “We were surprised how many people used it for something as simple as that.”

But he expresses that it takes more than just offering an employee assistance program or wellness initiatives to make a difference. Team supervisors are encouraged to get to know associates, build a rapport and offer guidance and assistance when needed.

“Not to get into their personal issues, but if they’re seemingly really challenged or have changed quite a bit for some reason, we need to talk to them. It’s the small team size that is important here,” Trede maintains.

‘Squirrels are unpredictable’

There are industries that face busy periods throughout the year, such as tax time in the financial world. But in other industries, like technology or energy, stressful times are constant or erratic.

“In our jobs, there’s a challenge with work-life balance, which creates stress,” shares Holly Boeke, manager of health and welfare plans for Evansville’s Vectren, which delivers gas and/or electricity to more than one million customers in Indiana and Ohio. “The weather is unpredictable. There are power outages. Squirrels are unpredictable. There are just unpredictable circumstances that come up, and regardless, we have to be available and ready to respond.

“A normal amount of stress is natural. Then you can have employees really bored in a job, and there is low stress, or in burnout mode with high stress. The goal is to have people be in a neutral stress level, which allows them to work at their peak performance level.”

At Interactive Intelligence, an Indianapolis-based call center software and solutions provider, global wellness and benefits specialist Jenny Burke notes that a lot of job stress is due to team members navigating a new career.

“There are a lot of stresses associated with their first job, being in a new environment and being used to working in a corporate structure,” Burke offers.

“The technology industry is always changing and evolving. They (employees) have to quickly and diligently make sure a project is updated and gadgets are updated. . . . Stress from the employee population is related to work-life balance and learning



Vectren employees are often subject to unpredictable hours; by providing two on-site health clinics and a health coaching staff, the company removes several barriers.

work-life balance for the first time. It’s a different skill.”

Make it easy

Striving to remove as many obstacles for its employees as possible, Interactive Intelligence provides a number of on-site amenities, including a 24/7 fitness facility and exercises classes, a café, health care center, ATM, game room, weekly massage therapist – even a rock climbing wall in the gym.

“We have flexible work hours and work-from-home options for certain team members. And we have no dress code for members, so that’s one thing you can take off your plate in the morning,” Burke comments.

“This all started because we take value in our team members and we want to provide the best place to work for our team members to make sure we’re keeping employees healthy for their own sake and for our own work-life balance as well.”

Vectren also provides two on-site health clinics, which offer free primary care services, medications and lab work. Additionally, two health coaches

are available to employees.

As an employer, providing outlets for stress reduction and wellness are a huge part of the equation. But Boeke notes that employees have to take responsibility as well.

“The more barriers we take away, the more likely we believe they’ll participate or make some sort of change,” she acknowledges. “When they are ready, at some point, something will happen. We are here to support them.”

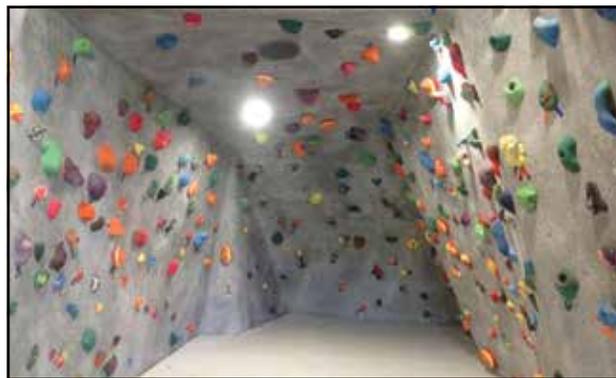
INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Diane Sieg at www.diansieg.com

Chris Trede and Jeff Schlick, The Capital Group Companies, at www.thecapitalgroup.com

Jenny Burke, Interactive Intelligence, at www.inin.com

Holly Boeke, Vectren, at www.vectren.com



Physical fitness is just one outlet to relieve stress. Interactive Intelligence offers employees a unique feature in the workplace: a rock climbing wall.