



Cubicle Karma

CORPORATE AMERICA IS EMBRACING ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE TO HELP EMPLOYEES STAY HEALTHY — OH, AND TO INCREASE PROFITS, OF COURSE BY MELISSA CHESSHER

A few months ago, a day like today would turn Diane Delia-Sumner into a frazzled, sweaty, annoyed mess. Just as the 53-year-old leasing manager for the Tower Companies, one of Washington, D.C.'s largest real-estate development companies, welcomed two new trainees, her colleague called to say she needed to stay home. This left Delia-Sumner juggling phones, educating the newbies, and attending to the stream of interested

customers who walked in and wanted tours of the property. The stressors continued. An unannounced representative from corporate headquarters arrived with instructions to observe the office. And she agreed to do an interview with a reporter.

"Any other time I probably would have been pulling my hair out," she says. "I would be perspiring. I would be calling someone else for help." Delia-Sumner credits her daily commitment to two, 20-minute

meditations for her ability to navigate the stresses work and life throw. "Meditation changes your quality of life. You can deal with problems," she says, noting that everyone comments on her coping skills and how young and relaxed she looks.

The seven classes Delia-Sumner took at the Peace Palace in Bethesda, Maryland, cost \$2,300, but she contributed not a penny. It was part of her benefits package with Tower Companies, which offers any employee with

three months on the job the chance to take company time to learn the technique. Of the 35 employees at the main office, 70 percent practice transcendental meditation.

“The employees are the most critical asset to a company. So any time you invest in your human resources, you improve their lives and you increase your own opportunities and grow your company,” says Jeffrey Abramson, one of the partners of Tower Companies, one of America’s top green commercial developers (real-estate ventures that address environmental and social concerns). Abramson added transcendental meditation to the healthcare package

because of the benefits he gained from practicing it and because of the scientific research that reinforced its credibility. Abramson readily cites the technique’s long list of scientific validation: stress reduction, increased longevity, decreased hospitalizations and doctor visits, improved clarity, reduction in cardiovascular disease and sleep disorders. “People felt I had invested in them,” says Abramson, noting that the technique is effortless and requires no philosophy or change in lifestyle. “The people who practice this are more available to their family, fuller and happier individuals.”

Meditation is just one of a growing list of complementary and alternative medicine practices (CAM) being offered by employers to combat staggering healthcare costs, which consume more than 15 percent of our gross domestic product, or approximately \$1.85 trillion, by shifting the focus to prevention and wellness and tackling things like stress, absenteeism, and injury in the process.

Stress earns a lot of credit for that tab.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health reports that stress-related ailments cost companies about \$200 billion a year in increased absenteeism, tardiness, and the loss of talented workers. Moreover, stress is considered the culprit in between 70 percent and 90 percent of employee hospital visits.

“Healthcare costs for many industries are the number-one supply cost,” says Robert Schneider, MD, one of the leading CAM researchers and director of the federally funded Center for Natural Medicine and Prevention at the Maharishi University of Management. Schneider

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has earned more than \$20 million in funding from the National Institutes of Health for research on alternative approaches to health. “Modern medicine is not particularly cost-effective. It seems like modern American culture has been focused on symptom reduction and a magic-bullet approach.” As an example, he cites coronary bypass surgery, which cuts out and removes a portion of a diseased artery, ignoring the

fact the remainder of the arteries in the heart are diseased.

“Healing from the inside out is not characteristic of the American approach to medicine, and I think that’s why we have the highest healthcare costs in the world and have among the lowest healthcare rating in the developed world,” Schneider says.

Companies credited with incorporating CAM therapies into an improved wellness program make an impressive list: Apple, IBM, General Motors, Google, AT&T, Chrysler, Johnson & Johnson, Coors Brewing Co., Citigroup Inc., Yahoo!, Texas Instruments, Deutsche Bank, Hughes Aircraft, and women’s clothing maker

Eileen Fischer, which offers employees wellness accounts that give them up to \$1,000 to spend toward massages, yoga, and reflexology.

"Most employers' healthcare costs are doubling every five years," says Joseph M. Henry, executive director of AstraZeneca's safety, health, and environment division. Henry says the pharmaceutical company spent \$120 million on healthcare for employees and their dependents last year. The company now offers seminars (such as a recent class on journaling), changed the offerings

in the 104 vending and soda machines at headquarters to 80 percent "healthy stuff" (sunflower seeds, cereal bars, water, juices), overhauled the nine cafeterias, which offer 50 percent healthful options (low-carb, heart health, vegetarian, and low-fat choices), offers free smoking-cessation therapies, and provides an on-site nutritionist and screening options (30 cancers have been detected since the program began in 1989). And when there's a big business meeting, chocolate chip cookies and brownies, the

previous standard food protocol, are considered a "special order"; the standard fare is fruit and yogurt.

"Increasingly, healthcare executives, healthcare management, employer groups, and medical academics understand that this is not a fad and it's not going to pass," says James Dillard, MD, clinical professor at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, author of *Alternative Medicine for Dummies*, and medical director of the complementary and alternative medicine program at Oxford Health Plans, one of the first managed-care organiza-

tions to offer an alternative medicine program. Dillard says some of his high-profile CAM friends such as bestselling author and integrative medicine pioneer Andrew Weil predict these low-tech, low-cost strategies will save American medicine, but he isn't ready for such a bold statement. What he will commit to is that over the next 20 years consumers and companies will increasingly incorporate evidence-based parts of these therapies, reject those that wither under scientific scrutiny, and find ways to use those that

are either neutral or cost-reductive.

Business futurist James A. Crupi, president of Strategic Leadership Solutions in Plano, Texas, identifies many social trends fueling individual and corporate interest: the baby boomer behemoth and its reputation for going outside the box and wanting to stay in control and young; the influence of Eastern holistic medical practices associated with the rise of China; the popularity of herbs and vitamins highlighted by the incredible growth of

stores like Whole Foods; and the growth of the Internet, which gives people information and serves as a catalyst to proactive healthcare.

"There is a growing 'quest for purity,' a search for meaning via increased spirituality that fosters looking inside and healing thyself," Crupi says, "and a growing notion that the holistic body and mind approach is good for the soul." ☺

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