

The Association Between Work Performance and Physical Activity, Fitness, and Obesity

Simple lifestyle risk factors that are classed as 'modifiable', meaning in our control, or at least within our influence, play a significant role in the performance and productivity of both our personal and our professional lives.

We know health is a big part of our lives, or at least should be. But so is work, and family and social settings like friends, colleagues and communities. Sometimes, when one is deemed more important than another, or just more '*pressing right now*', then it's easy for one or more of these other areas to take a backseat, and it is often health that hits the back seat first, particularly from those who have work at the forefront of priority.



Now this isn't to say that work shouldn't be a priority. Where would we be without a breadwinner for the family or a productive workforce for the economy? Of course it's important and should be one of the top priorities. But a very pertinent point arises when we consider the impact of health on work performance and how we should prioritise health for the SAKE of work, for we are doing ourselves a disservice if we let health slide by decreasing work productivity and increasing direct as well as indirect costs of low health, such as decrements in work performance, absenteeism and presenteeism.

It has long been known that healthier employees have improved productivity and reduced sick leave compared to unhealthy employees¹, and previously it had been shown by a separate study² that absenteeism has a moderate-to-high degree of association with a person's BMI, but what specifically, if any, is the impact of the very modifiable, lifestyle risk factors that are within our control (or at least influence), such as physical activity, fitness and obesity on work performance?

A team of researchers¹ set out to measure these exact parameters and the effect they have on not just performance of work (quality, work loss days and overall job performance) but also effort exerted to perform work and working relationships with co-workers.

They found that:

- Higher levels of physical activity related to improved quality of work performed and overall job performance;
- Higher cardiorespiratory fitness related to improved quantity of work performed, and a reduction in extra effort exerted to perform the work;
- Obesity related to more difficulty in getting along with co-workers;
- And severe obesity related to a higher number of work loss days.

So, to backseat health for the priority of work is counterproductive. Health should take priority, even for the SAKE of work itself, not to mention the flow on effects to family, community life and social life.

1. The health of Australia's Workforce; Medibank Private November 2005

2. Aldana SG, Pronk NP. Health promotion programs, modifiable health risks, and employee absenteeism. *J Occup Environ Med.* 2001;43:36-46.

3. Pronk et al. The Association Between Work Performance and Physical Activity, Cardiorespiratory Fitness, and Obesity. *J Occup Environ Med.* 2004;46:19-25