

CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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Meeting for meditation

Workplace yoga programs can help boost employees' well-being

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Michele Bayus admits she was a little uncomfortable when she made the calls to her law firm Tucker Ellis & West LLP's San Francisco and Los Angeles offices.

It's easy to understand why. Usually California is considered the trendsetter when it comes to benefits, not Cleveland, said Tucker Ellis' benefits coordinator.

She was calling to strongly suggest the California offices follow Cleveland's lead by offering on-site yoga classes.

Ms. Bayus had learned from her firm's program and others elsewhere that yoga can relieve the stress that people who work extensively with computers often feel, she said.

"A postcard came across my desk about the yog@work program (run by the Cleveland Heights-based Atma Center), and that is how we got started with this," Ms. Bayus said. "At first, we only had sessions every other week, but now we have them every week and as many as 20 employees come."

Martha Loughridge, who coordinates the yog@work program, said people quickly overcome any initial resistance they might have to yoga, particularly if they are with a group that is supportive and encouraging. And they feel more comfortable when they learn they can practice many poses in their street clothes and without breaking a sweat.

Luci Styles Payne, coordinator of wellness and work/life for the Beachwood-based Behavior Management

Associates, said the current interest in yoga is part of a national wellness campaign.

While her company, which sponsors employee assistance programs, does not offer yoga classes it does administer exercise and other programs aimed at reducing health care costs by preserving employees' well being.

"Nobody will give you a check at the end of the month because you enrolled your employees in a yoga program," Ms. Payne said. "But there are some definite long-term benefits. Yoga can help in managing chronic diseases like diabetes, back problems or high blood pressure. That means lower health expenses."

Buck Harris, owner of There's No Place Like Om yoga studio in Cleve-

land, said simple exercises can help people who work with computers to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome or eye strain. There are exercises that involve learning to channel energy towards potential "danger spots" and many can be conducted right at a desk.

And they can be as easy as just rubbing your hands together and then placing them over your eyes, Mr. Harris said.

"Yoga helps to eliminate stress hormones — cortisone or adrenaline — that can build up as you sit in front of a monitor," said Mr. Harris, who previously owned a restaurant. "That can prove harmful to people's health in a very direct way. Businesses are trying to combat that by having me come in and do yoga classes."

Mr. Harris started his studio three years ago and during the past two years, he said he has been doing workplace yoga at sites including MetroHealth Medical Center and Lakewood nursing home Ennis Court.

When Harriet Russell, director of Bhumis Yoga & Wellness Center in Cleveland, leads stress reduction workshops at local businesses, she uses a blend of her yoga expertise and her corporate work experience. She previously worked on Wall Street.

The sessions she conducts are customized to each client's needs. "I have had company presidents who take a break in their private office and practice some of these techniques," said Ms. Russell.

"That refreshes them and they come up with creative ideas they never would come up with if they just looked at a computer screen all day."

