



At the Bottom of the Abyss: The Health of LA Workers

Indisputably, Louisiana is the unhealthiest state in the Union. Apparently, we celebrate Fat Tuesday on every day of the year; and, it's been said that "whenever Louisiana gets the urge to exercise, it lies down until it passes." As a consequence of rampant obesity, smoking and general ignorance about health, the number of our citizens suffering from avoidable heart disease, COPD, diabetes and cancer is truly a national tragedy. As to the economic impact, the concomitant costs of medical care and lost productivity are immeasurable.

To remain prosperous, we need healthy, energetic and thinking workers. The difference between your business and your competitor's is not likely to be your products or your prices – it's your people. As the health of a population goes, so goes its commerce.

But, there is hope, a golden opportunity for us all. If you are an employer, you are uniquely bestowed with extraordinary influence over those you employ. (After all, where do people spend the majority of their waking hours?) Therefore, if employers would create a "culture of health" in their work places, radical improvements in our population's health could be gained. Some larger companies are already doing this. IBM, for example, pays cash awards to employees who exercise for 20 minutes, three times a week. Their analyses revealed that a person who exercises just one day per week, lowers his medical bills an average of \$535 per year. IBM's smoking cessation program garnered the participation of over 9,000 smokers. Importantly, IBM learned that passive, isolated health programs are ineffective, and, to be successful, participation at every level must be obtained (not just the executives).

However, it is smaller businesses that can have the greatest overall impact. Some are already trying. In Shreveport, businesses at the Remington Suites pay a professional trainer to provide on-site exercise and martial arts classes. The programs are designed to include everyone. Teams of workers (owners included) compete in fun-spirited athletic events; and, plans are under way to begin serving healthy meals on-site as well. Employees not only feel better, work better and are sick less, there have been several unexpected dividends – higher employee morale, greater teamwork and an increased sense of loyalty, to name a few.

Just imagine a new symbol applied to your company letterhead: "COH," meaning "Culture Of Health." The Proverb, "Where there is no vision, the people perish," could never be more meaningful. Let's do this.

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