

Poor employee health means slacking on the job, business losses

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Unhealthy habits are causing a drop in workplace productivity, according to a new BYU study.

(Phys.org) -- Expanding employee waistlines could be shrinking company bottom lines, new research out of Brigham Young University shows.

The study, led by BYU [health science](#) professor Ray Merrill, finds that

employees with [unhealthy habits](#) are causing substantially higher levels of lost workplace productivity.

Researchers believe the study to be one of the most comprehensive efforts to date on “presenteeism” – the idea of being present at work, but not performing optimally. Researchers collected data on 19,803 employees from three large, geographically dispersed companies.

Findings indicated that employees with an unhealthy diet were 66 percent more likely to report having a loss in productivity as opposed to healthy eaters. Likewise, employees who only exercised occasionally were 50 percent more likely to report lower levels of productivity versus their exercising colleagues.

“Total health-related employee productivity loss accounts for 77 percent of all such loss and costs employers two to three times more than annual healthcare expenses,” said lead-author Ray Merrill, a professor in BYU’s Department of Health Sciences. “This research provides guidelines on how employers can modify the work environment to improve productivity.”

Some other basic findings include:

- Employees who had difficulty exercising during the day were 96 percent more likely to have increased productivity loss
- Smokers were 28 percent more likely to report suffering from a drop in productivity
- Employees who rarely eat fruits, vegetables and other low-fat foods at work were 93 percent more likely to have a higher loss in productivity
- Those who didn’t believe their workplace would support them in becoming healthier were more likely to have a drop in

productivity.

“This research certainly suggests the value of health promotion programs in workplace environments,” Merrill said. “Making fruits and vegetables available to employees in the workplace and having leadership who play a supportive role with employee wellness is critical to office productivity.”

Merrill conducted the research in conjunction with researchers at the Health Enhancement Research Organization and the Center for Health Research at Healthways.

Co-author Steve Aldana, a former BYU health professor who now runs wellness company WellSteps, said the study provides solid data to back up what health professionals have assumed for years.

“Employees today have obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases more than they have in all of history,” Aldana said. “In terms of companies, businesses and employers, that trend has a very clear impact on their ability to get things done. Productivity is not what it used to be.”

The study, which appears online in the academic journal *Population Health Management*, also found that the age group most likely to suffer a drop in productivity was the 30 to 40 age group. Meanwhile, those 60 and older were the least likely to report productivity losses.

Additionally, workplace [productivity](#) was more prevalent among women than men and among those separated, divorced or widowed versus married individuals.

“With presenteeism going up nationally – which is related to higher levels of obesity and poorer [health](#) – and healthcare costs skyrocketing, employers need to look at ways to curb these costs to avoid major losses

at their companies,” Merrill said.

More information: online.liebertpub.com/toc/pop/0/0

Provided by Brigham Young University

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