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WORKING LIFE

## Zen and the Art of Corporate Productivity

More companies are battling employee stress with meditation

For Dave Jakubowski, vice-president of business development for Internet service provider United Online ([UNTD](#)) Inc., the job isn't what it used to be. Instead of an unlimited expense account and stays at the plush Chateau Marmont, the 31-year-old Manhattanite now brown-bags his lunch and stays at a Hyatt when he's in Los Angeles on business. He logs 18-hour days to help his Westlake Village (Calif.)-based company hit its quarterly sales targets of around \$8 million. How to cope? Jakubowski is no breathe-like-a-tree kind of guy. "I'm in business," he says, "and I need results." So he recently turned to a mat and 60 minutes of silence. "It's amazing," he says of his new meditation practice. "I'm able to sort through work challenges in this state of calm much faster than trying to fight through it. And I make fewer mistakes."

Increasingly, the overstretched and overburdened have a new answer to work lives of gunning harder for what seems like less and less: Don't just do something -- sit there. Companies increasingly are falling for the allure of meditation, too, offering free, on-site classes. They're being won over, in part, by findings at the National Institutes of Health, the University of Massachusetts, and the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University that meditation enhances the qualities companies need most from their knowledge workers: increased brain-wave activity, enhanced intuition, better concentration, and the alleviation of the kinds of aches and pains that plague employees most.

It doesn't hurt that meditation has some high-profile corporate disciples, including bond-fund king William H. Gross, of Newport Beach (Calif.)'s Pacific Investment Management Co., who often meditates with yoga before a day of trading at his \$349 billion money-management firm. Tech outfits like Apple Computer ([AAPL](#)), Yahoo!, and Google, which already offers an organic chef and an on-site masseuse, are also signing up. So are white-shoe, Old Economy outfits like consulting firm McKinsey, Deutsche Bank, and Hughes Aircraft.

There are no hard numbers on how many companies have added meditation benefits, but the anecdotal evidence is mounting. And it's no surprise that more employers are seeking a new corporate balm. The National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health finds that stress-related ailments cost companies about \$200 billion a year in increased absenteeism, tardiness, and the loss of talented workers. Between 70% to 90% of employee hospital visits are linked to stress. And job tension is directly tied to a lack of productivity and loss of competitive edge. "Stress is pretty much the No. 1 health problem in the workplace," says Eric Biskamp, co-founder of WorkLife Seminars in Dallas, who has begun teaching one-on-one meditation skills to executives at Texas Instruments ([TXN](#)), Raytheon ([RTN](#)) and Nortel Networks ([NT](#)).

Meditation quiets mental chatter, explains coach Tevis Trower of New York's Balance Integration Corp., which develops meditation and yoga programs for large corporations. "It lays the foundation for better decision-making and communication," she says. Adds Viacom ([VIA](#)) International Inc.'s manager of work/life and training, Lisa Grossman: "These programs sound a little out there. But they have a positive impact."

Sometimes meditation classes are offered as a gesture of thanks for a job well done. Consider AOL Time Warner Inc., where the sales and marketing group was reduced from 850 to 500 people three years ago. Meditation classes were incorporated to help employees deal with the new 12-hour days.

Other companies have added classes to help break up the drudgery of day-long meetings. AstraZeneca ([AZN](#))

Pharmaceuticals in Wilmington, Del., now offers three meditation courses aimed at energizing its 5,000 employees during and after marathon powwows. "We usually had a coffee and a Danish on our meeting breaks and would go right into a sugar slump," says spokeswoman Lorraine Ryan.

The icing for companies is that meditation programs come cheap. "Everybody is dealing with limited dollars," says Grossman. "It's important to keep things going when times aren't so good." So employees can breathe easy: This is one perk that isn't likely to get axed.

By Mara Der Hovanesian in New York

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