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Managing Stress at Work: The UC San Diego Library's Employee Yoga Program

By Kymberly Anne Goodson

Introduction

Originating from ancient Indian disciplines, yoga is a 5,000 year old mind-body practice combining physical postures with breathing and meditation. Once obscure yet growing, a 2007 national survey found yoga among the top 10 alternative medical practices, with roughly 6% of U.S. adults using it for health purposes in the past year (National, 2012). Another study showed 4 million American yoga practitioners in 2001 growing to nearly 14 million by 2011, with half practicing at least once a week (May, 2012).

In 2007, the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Library began offering yoga classes for its employees. Aware that private companies were introducing health club memberships or classes to employees to improve wellness and consequently attendance, the Training Coordinator proposed the idea for yoga classes to library administration. Recognizing the library's limited budget, she explored options like yoga, aerobics, and kickboxing through the nearby campus athletic center. Yoga worked best because it could be accommodated in an existing library space, required little equipment, and wouldn't disrupt patrons.

Health Benefits

Offering myriad health benefits, yoga can be a cost-effective way for employers to lower their healthcare costs, offer employee preventative care, and reduce absenteeism. As such, yoga is often among multiple activities included in a broader employee wellness program. Related to the workplace, yoga can improve focus and concentration, increase morale and productivity, and help alleviate eyestrain, carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain, and other ailments related to computer work and prolonged sitting. It can help employees cope with emotions, deal with tension between co-workers, and relax during business travel. Some of yoga's many health benefits include:

- Reducing stress & anxiety
- Increasing physical flexibility, strength, and balance
- Improving muscle & joint conditioning
- Promoting relaxation and combatting depression, fatigue, and insomnia
- Lowering blood pressure & heart rate
- Easing arthritis, back, muscle, and other pain
- Increasing energy & mental clarity
- Managing chronic allergies & diseases like diabetes, asthma, heart disease

Overall Employee Wellness

Public libraries sometimes host community yoga classes or demonstrations. Less common is libraries of any type offering yoga classes for their employees. Alternately, examples abound of yoga's inclusion in corporate employee wellness programs. Despite limited budgets,

expense cutting, and layoffs, workplace yoga has significantly grown in the past decade.

According to yogaforbusiness.com's CEO, 5% of U.S. companies provide yoga classes for their employees, hoping to reduce employee stress and lower healthcare costs (Doherty, 2002). Yoga can contribute to efforts to promote employee wellness, disease prevention, and physical activity and encourage employees to take personal responsibility for their health and healthcare decision-making. A National Institutes of Health deputy director who also teaches yoga classes for NIH employees encourages providing as many stress management techniques to employees as possible (Shepherd, 2009).

Examples of employers of all sizes offering employee yoga are found nationwide.

Smaller companies include Plexis Healthcare Systems, Hospice of Arizona, Industrial Light & Magic, Airport Appliances, Applied Signal Technology, Citizens Gas & Coke Utility, and Roche Diagnostics. Larger corporations offering employee yoga include:

- Apple Computers
- ChevronTexaco
- Dow AgroSciences
- EATEL Corporation
- HBO
- Kaiser Permanente
- Kraft Foods
- Nike
- PepsiCo

- Prevention Publishing
- Sony Corporation
- Toyota of America

When employed at Princeton University, one UCSD employee previously participated in its lunchtime yoga in a library conference room. However, that program wasn't funded by the library and participants were charged to attend. Like at UCSD, sessions were taught by someone affiliated with campus recreation services. Ohio State University's employee wellness programs stem from its mission to improve OSU employees' physical quality of life. Health screenings and exercise classes complement teaching of yoga exercises, stretches, and postures to do at one's desk to release stress and improve circulation and posture (Narita, 2005).

Technology firms Google, Asana, and Twitter offer yoga to their workers in support of employee well-being. The ubiquity of technology, smartphones, and social media can lead to burnout and the need to unwind and refresh. New Mexico's Sandia National Laboratories offers onsite yoga to increase relaxation, renew energy, reduce stress, and clear the mind for its 8,300 employees. Siebel Systems Inc. offers yoga to employees 4 times weekly. One participant says it helps him "gain mental clarity and reduce the stress caused by staring at a computer all day in a hyper-competitive field" (Doherty, 2002, 3). Recognizing its inability to offer high salaries, environmental charity Eden Trust provides onsite employee yoga through a 'total reward approach'.

An Airport Appliances administrator admits that offering twice-weekly yoga to employees is selfish. "The healthier our employees in mind and body, the better off we are for the portion of their life they give to the workplace" (Doherty, 2002, 3). LaFrance Associates spends \$1,000 monthly offering weekly yoga to its 10 employees to support work-life balance and reduce employee tension (Doherty, 2002). Homebuilder Shea Homes is considering lowering health insurance rates for participants of its employee yoga program, as it did for employees who quit smoking (Natale, 2007). The wellness program at Central States Health & Life Company of Omaha, which includes yoga, has resulted in "stronger morale, higher levels of productivity, and reductions in healthcare expenditures" (Schott, 1992, 98). Market research firm SalesQuest's mission includes promoting employee health and productivity while striving for fewer employee absences. Rather than onsite yoga, it funds unlimited employee attendance at nearby a yoga studio. Its director appreciates that companies understand how yoga can increase their bottom line while keeping employees fit physically and mentally. Explaining its offering of yoga for stress reduction and relaxation, an occupational health nurse at Citizens Gas & Coke Utility recognizes that regular exercisers are healthier and have less sick time (Weaver, 2001).

Benefits Beyond Health

Yoga offers workplace benefits beyond employee health as well. Explaining the team building and other reasons for implementing its employee yoga program, Maureen Harden, the UCSD Library's AUL/Administrative Services, wrote to the author, "Staff from all levels of the organization participated and built interesting bonds." She notes that yoga was successful in getting people to talk to each other and fostering new social interaction. Other benefits include:

- Building teams & relationships
- Allowing staff to meet each other and interact outside traditional work relationships
- Increasing employee creativity & productivity
- Refreshing workers midday
- Providing a sense of community
- Promoting a positive self-image & a person's sense of well-being
- Improving morale

Workplace Yoga

Yoga suits the work environment well for several reasons. Participants can wear street clothes if they prefer not to change into workout gear. Gym memberships can be costly and some dislike the atmosphere of a gym. Other reasons supporting workplace yoga include:

- Accommodating a variety of age, flexibility, and fitness levels
- Being convenient and easier than visiting the gym
- Participants not smelling badly or needing to shower afterwards
- Being relatively inexpensive
- Requiring little administrative overhead or equipment for company or participant purchase besides an instructor
- Working in a space most organizations likely already have without modification

UCSD Library Yoga Program

Recognizing yoga's myriad benefits, the UCSD Library established an employee yoga program in 2007 after its Training Coordinator investigated options and introduced a proposal to library administration. Though unfamiliar with use of yoga in other libraries, the library's Maureen Harden embraced the idea and was instrumental in identifying needed funding. In a recent email, Harden listed reducing stress and improving staff well-being among primary motivations for supporting staff yoga, though she recalls being met with skepticism when sharing UCSD's plans with fellow LLAMA administrators and others at ALA.

Logistics

The UCSD Library program was arranged through UCSD's Campus Recreation. Its FitLife program supports convenient, affordable fitness and wellness activities for UCSD personnel. FitLife Mobile offers customized classes led by qualified instructors and taught on campus, but outside of Campus Recreation facilities. Examples of FitLife classes include core conditioning, pilates, yoga, meditation, and relaxation massage.

Library classes are taught by a FitLife Mobile instructor who is also an academic counselor for Computer Science & Engineering. She completed Campus Recreation's Yoga Teacher Training in 2006 and occasionally teaches other university fitness classes.

The library pays \$40 per yoga class through a separate budget established for health & wellness events. Expenses to this account include yoga, CPR certification, Rape Aggression Defense training, and other occasional events. Though separate from money funding more traditional training activities, the budget is managed by the library's Training Coordinator because of associated learning components.

Sessions are offered in a multipurpose room in the public area of the building housing the most library staff. Classes are held Tuesday and Thursday year-round from noon to 1:00 pm. Some participants change clothes for the class, while others don't. Participants use and store their own yoga mats. At the instructor's suggestion, library training funds were used to purchase specialized equipment like foam blocks. Extra yoga mats were purchased for employees who forgot theirs or want to try yoga before buying one. These blocks and mats are stored in the multipurpose room.

Yoga classes are restricted to library employees, with no sign-up needed to participate. Campus Recreation requires participants to sign in at each class, which serves as a waiver releasing the instructor, library, and university from liability in case of participant injury. No reports of injury to library yoga participants have ever been reported. Storage of attendance records from these classes, split between Campus Recreation and Library Human Resources, are incomplete. If attendance statistics are important for justifying on-going program support, other libraries are advised to maintain such records within the library.

Since its inception, several dozen library employees have taken part in the yoga program, with just over a dozen attending regularly at least once weekly. Some attend every class; others go when they can. Every department is represented in the classes. In its first year, the library offered 96 yoga classes, followed by 99 in 2008/09. Typical attendance was 10-15 per session both years. The number of classes has remained roughly the same over the years. Despite regular staff turnover, participation rates from 2007 through 2012 have also remained consistent.

Participant Feedback

Six UCSD employees were interviewed about their yoga program participation. Interviewees most praised the library's program for being convenient and free, saving them time and money. Several thought it preferable to visiting the gym before or after work and so convenient it's hard to make excuses not to attend. Others appreciate that yoga provides welcome personal time separate from that devoted to family, work, or other commitments. Two interviewees commented that they find it incredible to forget about stresses and focus on one's immediate state rather than work while at yoga.

Interviewees also appreciate the program's support from library administration, quite different from the individual choosing to visit the gym at lunch. One offered, "The idea that my employer pays for and supports yoga is a huge benefit." Another agreed, "I feel like it's OK to take that break in the day, since it's offered by the library."

Interviewees appreciate the break from sitting at a desk and in front of a computer. One interviewee described feeling more chaotic and disorganized when she hasn't been to yoga. All mentioned feeling better after attending yoga, even when reluctant to take the time to do so. One noted that attending yoga even once weekly reminds her to breathe correctly, stretch, and move her body over the rest of the week. Other health benefits of yoga participation mentioned include:

- Reducing stress, tension, and fatigue
- Feeling more mentally alert, focused, creative, and productive afterward
- Feeling renewed and refreshed
- Providing relief from feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling more positive about the working environment
- Gaining perspective
- Staying calm and balanced
- Interacting with co-workers from other areas of the library
- Centering oneself
- Staying healthy and in shape.

Several interviewees who began participating shortly after their hire liked meeting colleagues across the library and sharing camaraderie by attending yoga. One commented that yoga participation has broadened her social circle in the library and translated to deeper and broader working relationships. She explained feeling more comfortable approaching and

working those she knows from yoga and making the time productive by chatting about work before or after class.

Barriers

Despite its convenient location and time, interviewees still mentioned difficulty getting away from work regularly, particularly between frequent meetings. Some noted feeling awkward wearing workout clothes around colleagues or feeling guilty for taking additional time away from work to eat after yoga.

Having attended yoga only once, one interviewee explained that she doesn't participate because she found it more stressful than stress relieving. While she enjoys yoga, she finds it awkward and difficult to pull away from work in the middle of the day. Special Collections interviewees mentioned the difficulty of accommodating both yoga and lunch midday. While other staff can attend yoga, eating at their desk before or afterward, food restrictions in Special Collections eliminate that possibility for those staff.

Program Success

The UCSD Library yoga program has been a strong success, enjoying wide support from library administration and regular participation by a core group. One program devotee returned as a volunteer following retirement and selected his workdays specifically to permit continued yoga participation. Even staff who don't attend mention appreciating that the library provides

and supports the activity. Staff interviewing candidates for open positions proudly mention the yoga program and candidates are excited to hear about the unique offering. One interviewee who joined yoga after her hire said hearing about it in her interview impressed her and she appreciated that yoga classes were supported by the library.

Recent years, marked by new strategic initiatives, significant annual budget cuts, and a complete organizational restructuring in the library, have been particularly stressful as employees have continued to provide quality service with reduced staffing and resources. Yoga's calming effect proved welcome and beneficial in the stressful times for library employees since the program started in 2007. Noting her added stress from the library's ongoing reorganization, one interviewee looks forward to yoga and uses it to maintain a positive outlook.

Maureen Harden described being proud of library administration for supporting the program and strongly recommends it to other libraries. Participants frequently told her, even after her retirement, that they enjoyed and appreciated the yoga program. She often received positive comments about it and said staff were concerned yoga might be cut during the budget constraints of recent years. The library hasn't performed a staff survey about the yoga program, but all interviewees said they would be disappointed if it were ever eliminated.

Starting a Program

Libraries considering establishing an employee yoga program should keep several considerations in mind, beginning with offering classes for free or at a low cost to participants.

Yoga need not cost the library a great deal. Shea Homes pays an average of \$85 per class, charging employees \$5 per class. Citizens Gas & Coke Utility charges employees \$2 per class, with the company paying the remainder. Others, like UCSD & Sandia National Lab, don't charge participants. At \$40 per one-hour session, the UCSD Library pays roughly \$4,000 per year for nearly 100 annual yoga sessions - a quarterly program cost of less than a single trip for one to ALA. In addition to keeping participant costs low, other tips include:

- If you plan to charge employees, offer free trial sessions & ensure a positive experience so attendees are comfortable and interested in returning.
- Create a supportive and encouraging, rather than threatening or competitive, class environment.
- Ensure support within library administration so staff are comfortable taking time to attend.
- Alert employees that all age and fitness levels can be accommodated.
- Despite its Eastern spiritual beginnings, exclude any spiritual component from workplace yoga.
- Though some organizations offer one-time or periodic workshops as part of a larger wellness program, offer classes at least once weekly for maximum benefit.
- Identify the best class time (before/after work, during lunchtime).

Surveying employees in advance isn't essential, but may lend support or build enthusiasm for a yoga program. Employee input can provide insight on preferred program logistics, such as class timing and frequency. Healthcare corporation Kaiser Permanente

surveyed employees for ideas on its employee wellness program. Suggestions included herbal medicine, meditation, stress reduction, relaxation therapy, low-fat cooking, physical flexibility, self-defense, weight management, women's health, aerobics, and yoga.

Conclusion

The UCSD Library's employee yoga program remains a clear success after 5 years. Employee yoga classes in a wide range of workplace settings offer numerous benefits to participants and the organization. Further, such a program can be replicated to suit a spectrum of library environments and budgets, for a relatively low cost and with little overhead, through a variety of implementation options.

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