

Pedalling your way to good health

Former world champion cyclist Tony Doyle, MBE, advises how employers can support their employees' health and wellbeing without breaking the bank.



With health secretary Alan Johnson's announcement of a £372m anti-obesity strategy aimed at employers, communities and individuals last month, the pressure will be firmly on all UK employers to invest in new health policies that support their employees' health and wellbeing.

Statistics show that the growing obesity problem could cost the UK economy £50bn a year by 2050, which means that companies need to take action and start focusing more on health.

I am sure many small to medium-sized employers and over stretched HR departments will see these proposals as yet another financial burden they could do without. However, encouraging health and fitness in the workplace needn't be time consuming or expensive.

One solution is for employers to encourage their staff to take up cycling - it is a free, low impact activity, which offers a great workout and major health benefits and the good news is that UK employees are already taking up the sport with gusto.

Rising public transport and fuel costs, the desire to improve health, lose weight and to do a bit for the environment, are all reasons that thousands of UK workers have already ditched their cars and train journeys, in favour of cycling to work. In London alone, there was a 10 per cent increase in the number of cyclists on the road between April and September 2007 compared with last year, and an estimated half a million people are now cycling every day.

Top tips for road safety

- Always wear a helmet.
- Wear reflective clothing to ensure you are as visible to motorists as possible.
- Give your bike regular safety check ups – any good bike shop will provide a service, which is essential if you use your bike to commute.
- Pump up your tyres and check your oil.
- Always ensure you carry spare batteries for your lights.

As a cycling professional, I firmly believe that cycling can revolutionise the health of our workforce and reap many benefits for businesses across the UK.

Major health benefits

The good news is that cycling is not arduous and anyone can do it. It is not a challenging sport and it can be an extremely fun activity, which offers a great alternative to the monotony of gym visits. It also has major health benefits – cycling for half an hour, three to four times a week, can lead to fitness levels of someone 10 years younger and reduce the risks of heart attacks, according to the British Heart Foundation.

A 1996 study of coronary disease by the Free University Amsterdam of more than 30,000 people in Copenhagen showed that those who did not cycle to work experienced a 39 per cent higher mortality rate than those who did.

Most cyclists will burn between 190-415 calories cycling at a moderate speed of 10 mph in just half an hour, so cycling in conjunction with a healthy diet can have a major impact on weight loss. It is also cheap and a greener way of getting around. It uses all the major muscle groups so it gives an all round fitness.

Tax-free cycling schemes

With the pressure on to focus on health, why not include tax-free cycling schemes as one of your benefits for staff? There are many work-related bike programmes available including 'On your bike' and 'Cycle to Work', both of which offer tax incentives so that staff can purchase tax-free bikes and cycling accessories. Transport for London has also launched a scheme called 'Take a stand', where employers can apply for cycle parking for their staff.

Team building

Getting a group of employees involved in cycling can also be an effective way of promoting team building. They could all do the London Freewheel Mass Bike ride in September, for example. I entered last year, and was amazed at seeing the streets of London being taken over by huge volumes of cyclists of all ages basking in the great atmosphere. You could also encourage them to raise some money for charity and take on a new challenge at the same time, perhaps by entering the London to Paris bike race later this year?

Safety on the roads

As a responsible employer will know, however, there are some risks involved in cycling on the roads and these must be carefully communicated to staff. Having been in an accident myself, I wouldn't even cycle 200 yards to the local shops without a helmet.

With a greater number of cars on the road than ever before, there is no denying that, for some people, safety is a barrier to taking up cycling with many believing that cycling on the roads is dangerous.

Lighting on bikes is essential for safety and for this reason I campaign on behalf of Pedalite International Ltd, which offers battery-free 360 degree visibility pedal lighting for bikes which can greatly enhance cycling safety.

In a survey, conducted at the national UK cycle show in October 2007 by Pedalite, 61 per cent of cyclists complained that cars and lorries come too close to them, causing them to wobble or throwing them off balance and 51 per cent said that their biggest worry was not being seen. As an ardent safety campaigner, I would recommend that cyclists take every precaution including adding lighting which is 'always-on' to ensure they can be clearly seen at any time.

