



Turning the workplace on its head **No longer considered hippie nonsense, yoga is restoring balance in business.** **Domini Stuart reports.**

Every year, Australian GPs handle almost 4 million work-related cases. According to a recent study for the National Health and Safety Commission, back and neck pain are two of the most common complaints, with psychological problems also featuring strongly.

It's statistics like these that fire Cate Peterson's passion for using yoga to change the way we work. With a background in occupational health and safety, Peterson spent many years working in occupational therapy, bodywork, mental health and community development. Then, in 1988, she started Yoga Solutions – a school which takes a range of yoga styles, massage and bodywork to workplaces and conferences, as well as offering traditional classes and retreats.

“Yoga provides a sustainable, do-it-yourself way for people to improve their physical and emotional health,” Peterson explains. “You work at your own your own pace, which means it can benefit everyone from an athlete to someone totally out of shape. And you don't need special equipment – you can do yoga anywhere there's space to unroll your mat.”

An unusual reception

For Eric Faulkner, that space was the reception area of his Faulkner Group media consultancy. It's now five years since he announced to a group of rather bemused employees that a yoga teacher would be holding classes there every week.

“I had been doing yoga for a while, and I could feel that it was helping me both physically and mentally,” he says. “I was definitely more flexible and more relaxed, and I noticed I was reacting more calmly to stressful situations.” When it came to helping his staff manage the pressures of work, yoga seemed an obvious choice. It also fit well with the company's corporate values of continual improvement, initiative, independence and, interestingly, team work.

“I was keen to provide a more ongoing sense of working together than the occasional burst of rock climbing,” Faulkner continues. “I also wanted to offer something physical that didn't favour the boys. Yoga it fitted the bill perfectly on both counts.”

At first some people loved the idea while others were more cautious. “But the classes have continued without a break,” says Faulkner. “Depending on who’s around, up to 8 of our 12 people are there every week. As far as I’m concerned, the fact that they keep turning up speaks for itself.”

Building physical strength

For the desk bound, yoga offers relief from tense muscles, hunched shoulders, stiff neck and back pain. For Gary Latham, partner in the multi-award-winning Wild Life Hairdressing in Sydney’s Milson’s Point, yoga is also about restoring balance.

“Hairdressing is one of the most physically gruelling occupations, and it’s also very emotionally demanding,” he explains. “We joke about our clients sitting in ‘truth seats’ because so many of them pour out their troubles while they’re here. That can really start to weigh you down after a while.”

Gary believes that weekly yoga classes, held either in the salon or the local park, are helping his staff to manage this emotional pressure. He’s also impressed with the effects the classes have on posture – a vital consideration for people who spend long hours on their feet. And he was surprised to discover how effectively yoga builds the physical strength needed to survive in a busy salon. “It literally turned one young girl’s life around,” he says. “Before yoga, she simply couldn’t take the pace. Now she’s flying.”

An expanding interest

Just a few years ago, most employers would have dismissed the idea of yoga in the workplace as some kind of hippie nonsense. Cate Peterson is pleased to report a major shift in this kind of thinking.

“Some of our larger organisations are starting to incorporate yoga and meditation into the working day,” she says. “This opens the door for smaller companies to do the same.”

It’s not just people in suits who are being converted.

“Last week I ran a health expo at a major brewery – a very ‘blokey’ environment,” says Cate. “As well as yoga, we demonstrated iridology, reflexology, spinal testing, aromatherapy, naturopathy and massage – and the interest was phenomenal. We were totally booked out. It was the first time many of the people there had experienced these kinds of approaches and they were thirsty for information.”

Peterson’s dream is to see yoga incorporated into workers’ occupational health and safety programs. As business owners continue to count the cost of work-related problems, it could soon be a reality.

Stretches you can do at your desk

Neck

Sit with a straight spine, feet flat on the floor, shoulders relaxed. Breathe in then, as you breathe out, drop your right ear toward your right shoulder without lifting your shoulders or turning your head. Hold the stretch for a few breaths, then repeat on the other side.

Shoulders

Shoulder rolls are great for releasing tension when you've been sitting in the same position for a while. With your shoulders relaxed, breathe in as you lift your right shoulder to your ear. Exhale as you slowly roll it around and back. Work both shoulders alternately, then roll both shoulders together. Repeat rolling your shoulders the opposite way.

Wrists and arms

Stand with your left arm outstretched as if you were stopping traffic. Grab the fingertips with your right hand and slowly pull them back towards your body. Hold the stretch for a count of three.

Back

Stand up, stretch your arms overhead and interlock your fingers, palms to the ceiling. Keeping your shoulders down away from your ears breathe in then, as you breathe out, move your hands to the right and push your hips to the left. Breathe in, stand up straight then repeat on the other side. Come back to centre then twist as far as you can to the right, then to the left.

Eyes

Sit upright and relax your facial muscles, jaw and tongue. Circle your eyes one way ten times, then ten times the other way. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Yoga Solutions: www.yogasolutions.com

The Faulkner Group: www.faulkner.com.au

Wild Life Hairdressing: www.wildlifehair.com