



Celebrating Christie Digital Systems' on-site fitness centre.

Working In

An on-site gym isn't wishful thinking. Consider the following factors when making a business case for on-the-job fitness.

by **Veronica Marsden**

In 2000, Christie Digital Systems Canada, Inc. opened a 400-square foot fitness room, home to regular exercise classes, wellness clinics, health fairs and stretch breaks. Eight years later, the programs are still popular, benefit renewal costs are low and employee turnover is less than 3% a year, according to Kimberley Hogan, the Kitchener, Ontario, company's vice president of human resources. To celebrate, Christie recently opened a new, expanded facility.

The Christie employees have what many employees want. A recent Angus Reid poll reveals that fitness and wellness programs are among workers' top three requested benefits. But how feasible is it for a company to set up its own gym?

Business case boot camp

Before building a fitness room, organizations must put together a business case that demonstrates its value. But to do so, companies should address common questions and issues around facility size, costs, liability and management. Consider the following questions and answers to develop a compelling and well-researched business case for fitness at work.

The benefits of an in-house fitness facility range from decreased healthcare costs, absenteeism and injuries to enhanced productivity. A summary of the research on work-site exercise facilities points to a savings of \$500 to \$700 per worker per year.

With employees spending up to 50% of their day either at work or commuting, organizations can have a significant impact on the health and fitness of their workers.

Another study by a consortium in Atlantic Canada—including Aventis Pharma, Atlantic Blue Cross, Atlantic Health and the Wellness Institute—found rates of return close to \$4 for every \$1 invested in wellness programs designed to reduce cardiovascular disease risks among blue-collar workers.

But if you build a company gym, will they come?

Do my employees want an on-site fitness centre?

Start by surveying your employees. Ask them how often they would use an on-site centre, when they would use it, what kind of programs they'd want and how much they're prepared to pay. Using an on-line survey tool will generally generate the greatest response rate and is easy to send out. In manufacturing environments, where employees may not have access to a computer, a paper and pencil survey will work best.

Should I charge a membership fee? If so, how much?

Most organizations charge a membership fee. The amount charged should reflect the size and scope of the facility, type and variety of

equipment, level of professional support and hours of operation. Typical membership fees for workplace facilities range from \$10 to \$25 per month.

How can I minimize liability?

Your liability exposure with an on-site fitness facility is low, provided that you put measures in place to ensure member safety. Have employees complete a waiver of liability. Engage the services of a fitness consultant to conduct fitness assessments, demonstrate proper use of the equipment and prescribe a program suited to employees' fitness levels and goals. Also ensure that access to the facility is controlled. Most companies use a computerized card access system, which also helps monitor use and prevent vandalism.

Work with a reputable fitness equipment vendor to advise you on equipment selections that minimize liability exposure. Review your company's liability insurance policy to ensure that adequate coverage is provided.

If you use an external vendor to manage your facility, ensure that they have at least \$4 million in general commercial liability insurance coverage as well as \$1 million in errors and omissions coverage.

How much space do I need?

The amount of space depends on the number of employees, anticipated use during peak times and the types of programs offered. For example, if you are planning to have group exercise classes, a separate space is required. Workplace fitness centres range from 1,500 square feet to over 30,000 square feet.

What should the facility include?

Your facility doesn't have to be elaborate to provide a valued benefit. The equipment area will form the hub of your facility. A space for group exercise classes including yoga, Pilates and martial arts programs is also recommended.

If supervision will be provided, include a room for fitness assessments and individual counselling as well as a small office. Locker rooms with showers are a must.

What type of equipment do we need?

Your equipment complement should include a wide range of cardio and strength training equipment. If classes will be offered, budget for steps, stability balls, small hand weights and Dynabands.

Select commercial-grade equipment that is suitable for heavy use. If the facility will have minimal or no professional supervision, opt for selectorized weight machines and minimize the use of free weights, which are more likely to cause injury. A reputable supplier will be able to recommend an equipment

complement suitable to the size of your facility and employee demographics.

What participation rates can I expect?

This will largely depend on whether the facility is professionally staffed, and whether programs including fitness classes, personal programs and incentive challenges are offered. If the facility is unsupervised, you can expect a usage rate of 5% to 10%. With professional support, you can expect anywhere from 25% to 50% usage.

When Staples Canada built their new headquarters in Richmond Hill in 2005, the company included an on-site fitness facility to encourage and support the health and well-being of all associates. Today, 50% of its home office employees are members of the company's In Motion Fitness Centre.

Do I need to staff the facility?


A professionally managed facility will minimize your liability exposure and maximize utilization rates. A variety of programs, regular member follow-up and ongoing marketing campaigns are critical to the success of your facility and program.

Higher participation rates translate into a greater return on investment. Consider, at minimum, part-time supervision.

Although there are no hard and fast rules on what goes into a typical facility, here are a few guidelines to get you started:

Number of employees	Square footage guidelines	Minimum Level of Professional Support
100 - 250	1,500 - 3,000	1 - 2 days/week
250 - 500	3,000 - 5,000	2 - 4 days/week
500 - 1,000	4,000 - 6,000	Full-time
1,000 - 2,000	5,000 - 10,000	2 full-time staff
≥ 2,000	6,000 - 12,000	2 full-time staff

Often, a move to a new building is the impetus for an on-site facility. Recently, Cara Operations Ltd. moved their employees to a new head office in Vaughan, Ontario. The new building includes a 3,000 square foot facility for their 400 staff members. Other organizations find empty building space to accommodate a proposed facility.

Organizations often worry about what will happen once the novelty of an on-site fitness centre wears off. The opposite is true if your facility and programs are well planned, supported by the organization, professionally managed and aligned with your company's business strategies. Over time, participation rates will continue to grow. 

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