

Teaching Yoga in the Workplace

BY JODI MARDESICH | AUG 28, 2007

Successful yoga teachers balance earnings from multiple income streams from the different studios in which they teach, from gyms, from private students, and from other sources. One of the more lucrative of these “other” endeavors is teaching in corporations. While teachers may make as little as \$30 per class in gyms and in studios, corporations may pay upwards of \$125 per class. Workshops and specially designed courses can pay even more.

Of course, the economics depend on the arrangement as well as the health of the company. Corporations flush with capital, like Google and Apple Computer, fund ongoing classes as a basic benefit to keep employees motivated, healthy, and productive. For example, Google offers several weekly classes before work, during lunch, and after work, according to Megan Quinn, media relations specialist at the Mountain View, California-based company. “Google is committed to promoting a work/life balance and believes that great things happen more frequently within the right culture and environment,” she says.

Finding Your Niche

Although yoga is catching on in large corporations, when you’re going after corporate gigs, think outside the box. These classes provide an opportunity to teach yoga in the workplace any workplace not just within a specific corporation. Your students might not be in a big company; they could be in a doctor’s office, an elementary school, a law firm, or a nonprofit organization.

Or you may find that you can provide a profitable one-time service. Tevis Trower, founder of New York-based Balance Integration, designed a unique tool for a company that was undergoing restructuring, cost-cutting, and layoffs. Her job was producing a recorded meditation. “People can access it any time they need it. It was a one-time effort for us, and it’s infinitely scalable for them,” she says.

Depending on what you offer and the company you’re working for, yoga classes may be accounted for as a benefit, with the company footing the bill. In other situations, employees themselves will pull together to organize classes and pay you directly.

Teaching Challenges

Corporate classes come with unique challenges. For starters, there’s the classroom location. While large corporations may have fitness centers with rooms meant for exercise, smaller companies make do with what they have classes may be held in the lunchroom or conference room. When teaching at Silicon Valley start-up Agami, “stacking conference tables on each other and rolling chairs out of the room is part of the drill,” says Kim Marinucci, a yoga teacher and executive coach in Palo Alto.

In the workplace, students have a limited amount of time, and they’re at different levels. Some show up late. It can be challenging to get them to leave pressing deadlines behind.

But bear in mind that classes that start small may grow over time. Marinucci has been teaching at Google for more than two years. Linda Black, who owns Corporate Yoga of Salt Lake City, also has clients who have stayed with her for years. It

helps to gain employee support for the classes, teachers say. Black sends emails to all new students to welcome them, ask if they have any questions, and offer to address their concerns.

In addition, consider showing the value of your classes to company management. Trower fashioned periodic anonymous surveys to track employees' progress and attitudes. "Our real hope is to create something that we can measure and be able to give back to the company that shows this was a really great investment," she says. "At the end of the day, most companies are measuring that."

Market Yourself

To land gigs in corporations, invest in marketing materials, suggests Black. Depending on the size and culture of the company, you may interact with human resources, senior management, or the employees themselves. "Usually, I'll try to get to the HR people, because they are the ones trying to offer benefits for employees. They understand why it's beneficial to have healthy environments," says Black, who worked in the corporate world for 15 years before becoming a yoga teacher.

To appear more professional, Black hired a marketing firm to create brochures and a Web site. She sends out marketing brochures to potential clients on topics that would concern human resources staff issues such as RSI (repetitive strain injury) or relieving headaches. "I get an interview or appointment with HR and talk about what the company's most prevalent health issue is, then come at it from that standpoint," she says. For AT&T, she developed a program for call-center workers. "It's a high-stress job, dealing with unhappy customers, so I highlighted the benefits of yoga for breathing and helping people to release tension in their shoulders and their posture."

Marinucci took a more laid-back route, letting her clients find out about her through word of mouth. One of her classes is a group of women who teach in an elementary school, who pool their own money to have her come teach during lunch.

Growing a Yoga Community

Teaching in corporations and other businesses enables you to reach out to students who have never set foot in a studio. They may not believe they have time to travel any distance to take a yoga or meditation class. But when the company is footing the bill and even encouraging them to take a healthful break, they might walk as far as the conference room, where they can learn ways to cope with job-related stress. "You catch a whole different set of people," Marinucci says.

Marinucci herself became a yogi after attending classes in the workplace. Her teacher, Ben Thomas, an Iyengar teacher and engineer, taught weekly classes at the engineering firm where he worked without remuneration. "It was an intimate group of about 12 people who simply showed up," she says. "He did it out of his love of yoga. He just shared it."

Yoga came about to help provide balance to a body out of balance. Work easily throws many people off balance: Office workers, for example, tend to sit hunched at a desk all day, working without breaks and breathing shallowly. The workplace is arguably where yoga is most needed, and it's in the workplace that many people can best afford to take yoga.

"If we're teaching yoga at work, you know we're teaching more than Downward Dog," Trower says, adding that yoga and meditation tools help people see their work in a new way. "How do you deprogram what our culture has told us that we should feel about our jobs? When we talk about our work life, it's almost a given that work is a burden, an obstacle. According to the mystics, work is the ultimate expression. It's how we connect to the community."

Yoga may not make people love their jobs, but it can give them tools for accepting their work and coping with stress. As a yoga teacher, you may find that holding classes in the workplace brings you additional satisfaction as well as extra income.