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Pro stress-buster finds big market

Company offers yoga, other activities to improve productivity of workers

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HACKENSACK, N.J. -- Increasing worker productivity sounds mighty desirable. Mighty lofty, too.

But Tevis Gale said she knows her services help do the job, especially as the "24/7-ization of the workplace" edges ever closer to stressing out the American work force.

The former AOL employee and current work-life satisfaction guru brings yoga and other on-site stress-busters to workplaces.

"We create employees who thrive," said Gale, owner of Balance Integration in New York City. "All our programming is intended to unleash employee productivity and happiness, at the risk of sounding corny."

Gale said a "national crisis" is looming with less than 27 percent of U.S. employees viewing themselves as "truly engaged" at work, according to a recent Gallup poll.

"If we can help people feel better and think better, no matter where they are in the company chain, they're going to start to feel better and start contributing a lot better, and then the entire company starts to work better," said Gale, a former U.S. Army Reservist who holds a master's degree in business administration.

Gale spent 13 years working in marketing and business development for Fortune 500 companies, including IBM, Coca-Cola and General Motors before leaving AOL to launch Balance Integration in 2002.

She signed up AOL as her first customer after saying in her exit interview that stress drags on productivity and that she wanted to help "corporate people be able to enjoy work instead of just stressing until they're about to drop."

The company has grown to a staff of 15 directors and support staffers, plus 60 fitness and yoga teachers and a network of about 200 more freelance instructors. Its customers include large companies such as Yahoo, Google, Disney Publishing Worldwide, Bear Stearns and Deutsche Bank.

Fees are "several hundred dollars and up," Gale said, depending on what services are provided. These can include a one-time workshop, wellness newsletter and on-site classes. The company has expanded, with locations in Colorado, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

"You can go to Harvard Business School and learn how to be a fantastic businessperson, but no one ever teaches people how to better manage themselves through the course of a workday," Gale said. "It's all about learning techniques so that if a curveball comes your way, you know how to calm yourself in the midst of everyday chaos."

Edison, N.J., resident Linda Blank said she felt much better after pulling herself "out of the craziness of the workday" to take yoga classes from a Balance Integration fitness pro at the Manhattan offices of Yahoo.

"They asked if there was anything special that I needed taken care of and I said, 'Two tension knots in my shoulder,' " said Blank, a marketing associate. "I left the yoga class, and an hour later they were gone."

Blank said she was able to get back to work, unencumbered.

"The tension of the day is gone and you can just do whatever needs to be done," said Blank, who usually takes the on-site yoga classes at the end of her workday twice a week. "And being jammed with work, that's very helpful."

Jeannay Murphy, who works for Disney Publishing in Manhattan, said the on-site exercise helps her feel less "annoyed" during her daily commute home. She, too, takes yoga classes after her shift ends.

"On an average day, I get to the Port Authority, get on the bus and I'm stressed out from the workday," said Murphy, an assistant manager for print purchasing. "People talking loud on their cell phones, the traffic ... those things don't bother me as much. I just feel less stressed and I'm able to concentrate better."