



# IMPORTANCE OF YOGA FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF IT WORKFORCE IN THE NEW NORMAL: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Lifestyle and workstyle in the new normal are taking a toll on IT workforce health and well-being, and productivity.

**Aim:** A brief narrative review of the existing body of literature summarizes the main findings on the health and well-being scenario of the IT workforce in the old and new normal and the benefits of organizing yoga programmes for the enhancement of the same.

**Method:** Literature searches were conducted in three electronic platforms, namely Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar, to identify the most relevant peer-reviewed research papers on “employee health and well-being”, “IT industry”, “yoga” and “COVID-19 pandemic”.

**Results:** Yoga sessions have become a crucial part of corporate health promotion initiatives, that are being organized with the purpose of reducing or preventing the causes of many severe health problems, reducing work withdrawal behaviours and accidents, increasing employee morale and productivity, leading to improvement of organizational efficiency and profitability, and hence generating economic advantages.

**Conclusion:** Yoga programmes are simple, cost-effective solutions for organizations offering numerous health and well-being benefits in a short span of time. IT companies should organize regular yoga programmes for their workforce, with the aim of improving their long-term well-being in the new normal.

**Keywords:** employee health and well-being, yoga, IT professionals, working from home (WFH), new normal

## INTRODUCTION

Industry 4.0 has been accelerating globalization, digitization and – a burnout culture. As in the last three decades global Information Technology (IT) sector has been rapidly increasing, so has the need of taking care of the health and well-being of its workforce. IT professionals across the world work long and erratic hours at an unsustainable pace (Ralph et al., 2020), usually across different time zones. Despite big salary packages and high social status, their health scenario is worrisome. This has

become especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the IT employees face various mental and/or physical health conditions, which can have a negative impact on their motivation and performance. The most common complaints range from occupational stress, sleep disorders, fatigue to chronic headaches, backpain, diabetes and hypertension. Due to social distancing, isolation and work-life imbalance, COVID-19 pandemic life- and working style have been taking a toll on employee health and well-being. Many IT companies have been



offering numerous wellness programmes, including yoga sessions, to their employees, in order to help them enhance their health and well-being. Still, there are many companies that need to follow their example.

## AIMS

This paper is a brief narrative review of the existing body of literature that summarizes the main findings on the health and well-being scenario of the IT workforce in the old and new normal and the benefits of organizing yoga programmes for the enhancement of the same.

## METHODS

Literature searches were conducted in three electronic platforms, namely Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar, to identify the most relevant peer-reviewed research papers on “employee health and well-being”, “IT industry”, “yoga” and “COVID-19 pandemic”. Searches were limited to the English language and publication date (2001-2021). Firstly, the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles were screened. Afterwards, the full text of the potentially relevant article was read. Authors have also used personal collections of important publications.

## FINDINGS

### *Health and well-being of IT professionals in the “old normal”*

The health and well-being status of IT professionals was alarming even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the IT industry is characterized by different nature of jobs, e.g. voice-based Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) employees vs. software developers, common causes and effects of poor employee health and well-being could be observed.

Occupational stress, the main characteristic of IT jobs, can cause depression, anxiety, poor performance, various health issues (Ninaus et al., 2015), such as backpain, gastrointestinal disorders, and burnout (Hartfiel, Havenhand, Khalsa, Clarke, & Krayner, 2011). If combined with a sedentary life- and work style, it could lead to diabetes, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases and eventually to “sedentary death syndrome”, i.e. associated mortality (Lees & Booth, 2004; Cheema, Marshall, Chang,

Colagiuri, & MacHliss, 2011). Due to the fast-paced work environment, repetitive and monotonous work-related tasks, or fear of losing a job amid a period of economic uncertainty (Gura, 2002; Savitha & Vijila, 2016), risks of mental and physical disorders among the IT workforce are likely to increase. Consequently, work withdrawal, such as reduced employee morale, absenteeism, increased employee turnover and reduced productivity, take place (Savitha & Vijila, 2016; Maddux, Daukantaitė, & Tellhed, 2018).

Besides depression and anxiety, sleep disorders are another common health condition among IT professionals (Padma et al., 2015; Prathyusha, 2019). As the majority of the IT workforce caters to domestic and international markets across different time zones, erratic office hours and “graveyard shifts”, i.e. regular night shifts, are quite typical. As a result, sleep disorders among the IT workforce range from 39.5% to 83%, Information Technology enabled Services (ITeS) industry and voice-based BPO industry averages, respectively (Raja & Bhasin, 2014). Chronic sleep deprivation decreases cognitive and executive functioning, causes fatigue and depression and weakens the immune system.

As IT professionals work long hours with computer terminals, various musculoskeletal disorders (such as a cumulative trauma disorder or CTD), headaches, eye and vision problems (also known as Digital Eye Strain or Computer Vision Syndrome) might develop (Pinto & Ulman, 2004; Telles, Dash, & Naveen, 2009; Raja & Bhasin, 2014).

### *Health and well-being of IT professionals in the “new normal”*

Besides working across different time zones, working style in the IT industry has been characterized by “remote teams” and “virtual working”, also known as “remote working”, “working from anywhere” (WFA) or “working from home” (WFH). WFH has gained its popularity due to various potential benefits for both the workforce and organizations, such as working time flexibility, increased job satisfaction, employee retention, and cost-effectiveness (Bao et al., 2020). Remote or virtual working improves work-life balance, creativity, positive affect, productivity, and at the same time reduces stress (Russo, Hanel, Altnickel, & van Berkel, 2020). On the other hand, remote



employees face collaboration and communication issues, loneliness, inability to switch off after work, i.e. a tendency to overwork, and stay motivated, distractions at home and even burnout (Bao et al., 2020; Neto et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2020)

In March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to adapt to a new way of living and working, i.e. to a “new normal”. During lockdowns and curfews, the physical presence of the majority of the workforce in the organization was removed (Sinclair et al., 2020). In order to perform the required work, working from home (WFH) was the only option for IT professionals (Ralph et al., 2020). WFH in the old normal and WFH in the new normal differ tremendously (Bao et al., 2020; Neto et al., 2020). Life and work in the new normal have been characterized by social distancing, work-life imbalance, a lack of proper ergonomics and remote work infrastructure at home (such as a suitable working station and internet connectivity), absence of child care, educational and fitness facilities (Ralph et al., 2020). Due to everything mentioned, higher rates of stress, depression, anxiety and sleep disorders have become frequent issues among the working population (Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, 2020; Neto et al., 2020). As organizations have recognized that only healthy employees stay motivated, engaged and productive, employee health and well-being have gained more attention (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). According to Russo, Hanel, Altnickel, & van Berkel (2020), continuous high levels of stress decrease employee well-being. With the aim of improving employee productivity, organizations should help them maximize their emotional well-being (Ralph et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2020). Various mindfulness-based stress reduction practices are recommended for the purpose of decreasing stress levels, and eventually the risk of work burnout, such as slow breathing exercises, mindfulness meditations and mindfulness awareness during yoga postures.

### ***Workplace health and well-being promotion programmes***

As employees spend most of their days working, employers are responsible for their health and well-being, especially because organizations control the conditions under which employees work (C. Chu & Dwyer, 2002). Workplace wellness programmes are the perfect

tool for influencing the long-term lifestyle choices of the workforce (Baicker et al., 2010) and successfully reducing or preventing the causes of many severe health problems. Half of all deaths in the USA were caused by modifiable behavioural risk factors and behaviour patterns (Goetzel & Ozminkowski, 2006). Adding to that, preventable chronic diseases, caused by stress, physical inactivity, obesity and smoking, cause 70% of the US health plan’s medical and pharmacy expenditures (Goetzel & Ozminkowski, 2006; Stokes, Henley, & Herget, 2006; Baicker et al., 2010). The importance of workplace wellness programmes in the IT and BPO sector is growing. The majority of the voice-based BPO workforce follow an unhealthy diet, excessive coffee drinking, smoking, alcohol, and even drug abuse, and find it challenging to achieve and maintain work-life balance (O’Donnel, 2006; Raja & Bhasin, 2014). According to Farrow (2006), workplace health and well-being promotion is a “combination of efforts to create and promote safe and healthy workplace environments, together with employees’ behaviour attitude and lifestyle improvements”.

Health promotion initiatives are being organized with the purpose of reducing work withdrawal behaviours (e.g. presenteeism, absenteeism) and accidents, and at the same time increasing employee morale and productivity, leading to improvement of organizational efficiency and profitability, and hence generating economic advantages. (Farrow, 2006; Baicker et al., 2010; Mokaya, 2012; Hesketh & Cooper, 2014). The main concerns that arise when organizing workplace health promotion programmes are low participation rates, the fact that most of the wellness initiatives are not used by the employees with health problems, but the healthier ones, and that eventually, employees’ health behaviours do not improve (Gibson et al., 2017; Pedersen, Halvari, Solstad, & Bentzen, 2019). Employers are trying to solve this problem by offering incentives to the employees who need help with their health, to increase their motivation for participation. The most popular workplace health and well-being promotion programmes among employers are stress management, sleep management, health coaching, weight management, cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation, meditation and deep breathing (Chu, Moy & Mueller-Riemenschneider, 2014).



## ***Yoga – history and importance***

Yoga is an ancient Indian science of balancing mind, body and spirit. The term *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning “to bind or yoke together”, usually denoting “a union with the divine”. It is considered to be 5000 years old, though its age cannot be exactly defined. Yoga consists of eight limbs, namely *yama* (“ethical standards and sense of integrity”), *niyama* (“self-discipline and spiritual observances”), *asana* (“physical practice”), *pranayama* (“breathwork”), *pratyahara* (“bringing intentions or attention inward”), *dharana* (“meditation, enhancing concentration”), *dhyana* (“meditation, uninterrupted state of focus to the point of union with the divine”) and *samadhi* (“meditation, focused on connection to the divine, experience of bliss or joy”) (Schmid et al., 2021). Over the past few decades, yoga has gradually developed from the counterculture into the mainstream (Jain, 2015) and has become a transnational global phenomenon (De Michelis, 2007). Today the term *yoga* refers to modern postural yoga (MPY), which prioritizes *asana* (physical posture) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques) and occurs in a classroom or sessional setting (Graham, 2014).

It is possible to show the benefits of yoga and the need of incorporating it into daily life to a larger audience, thanks to the significant increase in the number of studies on the clinical applications of yoga (De Michelis, 2007). Yoga works two-way: mind-body and body-mind. With the help of *asana* and *pranayama*, the mind relaxes, helping the body to get cured of numerous psychosomatic disorders. Somato-psychic mechanism occurs during the practice of *asana*, during which physiological changes in the body (e.g. the release of endorphins) induce a sense of relaxation and well-being (Bhavanani, 2018). Growing evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of yoga and pranayama, such as stress and tension reduction and sleep quality enhancement (Bankar, Chaudhari, & Chaudhari, 2013; Önder, 2019; Wang, Chen, Pan, Yang, & Chan, 2020).

The yoga industry, comprising of yoga classes and products, has been developing impressively – from the revenue of US\$ 5.7 billion a year in 2009 (Graham, 2014) rising to US\$ 9.9 billion in 2015. In 2016, 36 million Americans reported practising yoga, because of various experienced physical and psychological benefits, such as stress relief, injury rehabilitation and an increase in flexibility

(Francis & Beemer, 2019; Park, Quinker, Dobos, & Cramer, 2019).

Immediate improvement of life purpose and satisfaction, followed by a greater self-confidence during stressful situations, could be delivered even by a short yoga programme (Hartfiel et al., 2011). Prolonged regular yoga practice improves physical fitness, flexibility, strength and balance (Gura, 2002; Bhandrani et al., 2012), relieves physical tension, alleviates pain, improves posture and reduces risks of injury (Gura, 2002). Simultaneously, it enhances emotion regulation, mood and personal relationships. By combining all benefits, it assists in the attainment of optimum health. (Bhandrani et al., 2012).

## ***Yoga for Employee Health and Well-being***

Yoga has become a crucial part of workplace health and well-being promotion programmes. Yoga sessions in work settings usually teach only some of the limbs of yoga, i.e. physical postures, breathing techniques, relaxation and meditation. By practising yoga, working professionals can attain various benefits, from a stress and anxiety decrease to overall wellness and well-being increase (Gura, 2002; Maddux et al., 2018). Furthermore, it improves attention span and communication skills at work (Gura, 2002). As it decreases aggressive behaviour and increases positive affect, it is crucial for counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) (Dwivedi, Kumari, Akhilesh, & Nagendra, 2015).

The number of yoga programmes in the corporate sphere has been increasing rapidly during the last two decades. By 2008, yoga classes at the workplace were common for 5% of US companies (Hartfiel et al., 2011). Its popularity among the US workforce nearly doubled, from 6 to 11 percent from 2002 to 2012 (Ramesh, Joseph, Kiran, Kurian, & Babu, 2016; Kachan et al., 2017). Yoga-based programmes have become popular among employers and employees alike, due to their simple teaching process, minimal investments required for the execution, various health and well-being benefits provided, and an increase in job satisfaction and productivity (Cheema et al., 2011).

Various modes of delivery of yoga classes are available, from virtual and hybrid to on-site. As working has become virtual, so have most yoga programmes also. Sessions have been offered in different modes – through applications, pre-recorded materials or live on conferencing platforms.



## CONCLUSION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, IT professionals are forced to work from home. Conditions such as stress, isolation, business closures, and absence of educational, child care and fitness facilities are making working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic different from a normal WFH. Lifestyle and workstyle in the new normal are taking a toll on employee health and well-being, and hence on employee productivity. In order to help the workforce to improve their health and well-being, employers in the IT sector should organize various health

and well-being promotion programmes, including yoga and meditation sessions. Yogic practices can reduce stress, depression, anxiety, improve sleep quality, enhance memory, and therefore, improve IT professionals' well-being during the pandemic, especially during the lockdown. Yoga programmes are simple, cost-effective solutions for organizations offering numerous health and well-being benefits in a short span of time. Various modes of delivery of yoga classes are available, from virtual and hybrid to on-site, with the aim of keeping the workforce healthy, happy and productive.

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