

The economic benefits of health

Brendan Brazier on why there is no better health insurance than good nutrition, and why the best companies are doing enlightened things to look after the well-being of their employees.

In the early part of the 20th century, being overweight was a sign of wealth and, as such, a status symbol. Those who were able to afford excessive amounts of food wanted the world to see that they made enough money to overeat. Fortunately, times have changed, though today people showcase their wealth in other, no less health-damaging ways.

Now it is those at the other end of the income spectrum who are most commonly overweight or obese. According to studies conducted by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, low-income individuals and families are much more likely to be overweight than those earning middle and high incomes. Of course this is a generalization, but that's how these kinds of studies work.

As you might expect, low-quality diet is one of the main reasons for the increase in obesity among the poor. Many processed and highly refined foods (or, what in some cases are more properly referred to as "edible food-like substances") are cheaper than whole, fresh and natural options. And people with less money are more likely to buy the cheaper foods.

This is problematic for two reasons. First: highly-processed and refined foods generally have little to no nutritional value. As a result, you will have to consume considerably more food to satisfy the body's need for nutrients. Only when the body has the nutrients it requires does it switch off its hunger signal. The negative short-term effect is that more food will be consumed, which leads quickly to weight gain.

In addition, the digestion of this low-nutrient food robs the body of energy without providing much energy in return. The result is that the person feels less full and has to spend more money to buy additional food to stay satiated. If that person were to gradually switch over to a diet comprised of more expensive

whole foods, he or she would no longer be in a constant state of hunger and therefore would naturally choose to consume less. The financial saving gained from buying cheap processed foods quickly evaporates.

Second, the consumption of these processed foods contributes to long-term health risks. If a person has relied on processed foods to reconstruct the body day in and day out for decades, that body will falter later in life. Disease of some form will almost certainly be the result. Type II diabetes, arthritis, osteoporosis, and the many offshoots of cardiovascular disease are the most common ones to develop. The drugs used to treat these ailments can cost several thousand dollars per month. And that's just to alleviate the symptoms; the underlying disease continues to progress.

To put it simply, replacing refined, processed foods with natural, whole foods is a very effective form of health insurance. You will stack the odds in your favour and save money in the long run. In the short term, you will have more energy and greater mental clarity, both of which can significantly improve productivity. Some people may choose to put a dollar value on that.

We are beginning to experience a realization within corporate America that true, sustainable health can be directly translated into improved profits. The realization that healthier employees not only get sick less often, but are also more productive, has clearly begun to dawn.

As the health of the American people declines, so, too, does their nation's economy. This is not a coincidence. More people are developing disease earlier in life than in any previous generation. Those who aren't privately insured place a tremendous burden on the taxpayer-funded healthcare system, contributing to higher taxes, a decrease in spending, a sluggish economy, and even plays a role in the recession America is now experiencing.

While there are other contributing factors here, including the sub-prime mortgage debacle and war spending, a nation made up of unhealthy people is inevitably going to become an unhealthy nation economically. A company comprised of unhealthy people will never reach its full earning potential.

Large corporations are beginning to catch on. At the Googleplex in Santa Clara County, California, Google employees enjoy recreational facilities once the exclusive domain of high-priced



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resorts: a gym, two swimming pools, and a sand-volleyball court. But the Googleplex’s culinary options are where it shines the brightest. With 11 cafeterias, the selection of food is vast. And employees can request whatever they want, whether it’s on the menu or not. The cafeterias offer several balanced, plant-based options and a plethora of smoothies and raw foods.

Is Google going to this considerable upfront expense simply because they’re nice people? No. They are nice, but they also understand that the improved health and happiness of their employees will improve their bottom line. And it has, consistently, since the inception of this policy in 2003. The monetary return on

their investment comes in the form of employees performing at a higher level.

And consider the advantages that beyond-basic health can bring to a company. Employees who are on top form have a stronger immune system and are less likely to get sick and be absent from work. Companies who don’t embrace this holistic approach to well-being and productivity will not turn as great a profit and eventually will not be able to compete with the ones who do embrace it. Then they’ll have to answer to their shareholders.

I can relate to this first-hand. In 2003, I met Charles Chang, who had started a natural nutrition company called Sequel Naturals the previous year. At the time, his company included him and a part-time secretary. Sequel Naturals eventually became one of my sponsors, providing me with top-of-the-line maca (MacaSure) and premium chlorella (ChlorEssence) to blend into my recovery blender drink formula. I was immediately impressed with the results, which prompted talks between Charles and I about partnering and creating a commercially available version of my blender drink formula.

We turned discussion into action and a year later we launched the Vega brand in Canada and then in the United States the following year. As Vega continued to grow, Charles hired a staff and moved into a larger office. Once Vega developed a following, naturally the staff required to handle the demand grew steadily. Understanding the link between employee health, happiness, and performance, Charles equipped the new office with a state-of-the-art lunchroom. It is always stocked with fresh fruit, vegetables, leafy greens, nuts, seeds, and, of course, Vega for making nutrient-packed smoothies. The lunchroom is open to all the employees; they are free to eat as much as they want throughout the work day.

In 2008, *Profit* magazine listed the top 100 fastest-growing Canadian companies. With Vega soon to be four years old, Sequel Naturals was listed as the eighth fastest-growing company, with a growth of 3,730 percent. While the health and happiness of Sequel employees wasn’t the only reason for this unprecedented rate of improvement, it was undeniably a contributing factor.

The fact that “health and wellness” is beginning to be viewed as something that is of economic value is vital. And, in my estimation, this will eventually prove to be what turns our society’s health around and thereby will be responsible in large part for a resurgence in personal revitalized well-being. Rightly or wrongly, we are a society that bows down to the economy, revolves around it and is altogether controlled by it, so for the economy to value our health is of great significance. For it to have a vested interest in us is a nice change. ■



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is one of only a few professional athletes in the world whose diet is 100 percent plant-based. He’s a professional ironman triathlete, the bestselling author of *The Thrive Diet*, and the creator of an award-winning line of whole food nutritional products called Vega. In 2007, *VegNews* magazine named Brendan one of the 25 most fascinating vegetarians. For more information see brendanbrazier.com.