



“Approaches to Obesity in the Workplace”: A Summary

Experts from a range of industries came together for an in-depth discussion on “Approaches to Obesity in the Workplace” last week, which was co-hosted by SB Seating and COSAFE LIMITED and took place at the Clerkenwell showroom of Scandinavian Business Seating. Professionals working in physiotherapy, facilities management, nutrition and healthcare, ergonomics, health and safety and manufacturing heard from panellists on ways in which extreme obesity can be tackled from the outset and what can be done to remedy it in a workplace environment.

Attendees heard from Professor Gillian Leng CBE - Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Health and Social Care at the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), Kevin Charles – Director and Barrister at Crossland Employment Solicitors and Erlend Weinholdt – Lead Ergonomist at SB Seating, with Xenia Koumi of COSAFE LIMITED chairing the discussion.

Two parallel debates ran through the discussion as common themes. The first was the prevention versus remedy debate, the former being something that NICE has been actively promoting through a myriad of publications, pathways and guidance – all of which can be found on its website. The second debate focused on to what extent individuals and employers are responsible for employee wellbeing. Some may argue that as employees spend more and more time at work, their employers should do more to encourage a healthy lifestyle. Others believe that employer interference in their employees’ personal lives is both unwarranted and unwanted, so the focus should be on messaging for individuals.

Professor Gillian advocated NICE’s stance on the importance of ensuring that individuals do not become overweight in the first instance and as well as campaigning among the general public, NICE is also working closely with employers to combat the rapidly increasing rate of obesity. After all, with a large proportion of the working population in the UK spending most of their waking hours at work, a comprehensive approach is required if it is to be successful. The physical environment, according to Gillian, has a notable impact on physical health and workplaces can be designed to encourage wellbeing and habits beneficial to health. Gillian also spoke about the work that NICE is doing in promoting to employers the cost-benefits of proactively tackling obesity. In the long run it is cheaper to address the issue at its source than to pay for it later down the line through lost working days due to related illness and expensive custom-made furniture.



Almost half of UK employers are less inclined to recruit an applicant at interview stage if they are obese, according to a study carried out earlier this year by Crossland Employment Solicitors, which asked a thousand employers across the UK about their attitudes to obesity. Kevin Charles told attendees that his firm has seen an increase in obesity-related enquiries from employers in recent months and that while there is no specific law relating to obesity in the workplace, recent landmark cases are setting a new precedent. These high-profile cases show that while the effects of obesity can mean that an employee can be protected by the law, obesity in and of itself does not inherently justify any legal protection. NICE's cost-benefit approach would, it seems, hit home with employers, with Crossland's survey showing that 61% of them worry about the potential cost to the business to accommodate the side effects of severely overweight staff. According to Kevin, the law regarding obesity and specifically obesity in the workplace is not likely to change any time soon, despite this issue evidently becoming more of a concern for UK employers.



The place of a chair manufacturer in this discussion is two-fold: as a promoter of 'active sitting' (designing chairs that encourage small movements while sitting) it contributes to the preventative aspect of obesity in the workplace and at the same time, offers solutions for those who already have bariatric requirements (including chairs with a high weight rating). Erlend covered both points of view during his presentation to attendees, explaining that SB Seating aims to create chairs that are comfortable to sit on, but not so comfortable that an individual would want to sit all day without having to stand up. It's important that users incorporate frequent movement into their tasks, whether it is a conscious effort (i.e. standing up and walking around) or subconscious (fidgeting or rocking in their chairs while sitting). These small movements, he believes, though they wouldn't prevent someone from gaining weight or help them to lose weight, can help improve general wellbeing and productivity. The phenomenon of sit-stand desks was also addressed by the panel, as they have been hailed in recent times as a way of reducing the harmful effects of prolonged sitting. The panellists were in agreement that this is again an employee versus employer question, as even if an individual is provided with a sit-stand desk, it doesn't necessarily mean they will stand while working. Nobody wants to be the sore thumb standing up in the middle of an open plan office when everyone else is seated, so it is a question of incorporating healthy habits and making them the norm and not the exception. Erlend also spoke about the British Standard 5459-2: 2000, which is the highest standard for testing all office pedestal seating for use by individuals weighing up to 150kg (23.5 stone) and for use up to 24 hours a day. With the incidence of morbid obesity going up and fast, perhaps it is only a

matter of time before industry standards will need to be revised to promote safer seating for heavier users.

The insights offered by all three panellists from their respective professions were fascinating and generated several discussion points among the audience. The panel discussion was followed by networking and refreshments, which furthered the discussion about approaches to obesity in the workplace and what can be done now in order to address this growing trend, as it becomes increasingly more prominent in the years and decades to come.



Scandinavian Business Seating is a global manufacturer of office chairs and furniture, headquartered in Oslo. COSAFE LIMITED is a health and safety consultancy specialising in the prevention and management of musculoskeletal disorders and offers the full range of services relating to health and safety at work.

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