

## **Massages Rubbing off in the Workplace**

Sabrina Jones, of the Washington Post

*A few decades ago, Linda Penkala earned her living as a jockey, riding horses at speeds of up to 40 miles an hour around Belmont Park. But after the Long Island, N.Y., native gave birth to her first child, she decided to look for another lucrative way to use her hands.*

*"I have strong hands. The only other thing I wanted to learn was massage, Penkala, 46, said. "Now, my ministry is to touch people, not horses."*

*After taking classes to become certified in massage therapy, Penkala started Corporate Pit Stop out of her Laurel home, offering stress-relieving massages in the workplace. Penkala and her two part-time employees visit businesses, such as Sandy Spring National Bank in Olney and the Columbia marketing research firm Arbitron, to provide 15-minute chair massages.*

*Corporate Pit Stop is part of a growing trend of companies catering to employers who are looking for ways to reduce workplace stress and reward employees with something other than a traditional gift certificate or a bonus.*

*In Ellicott City, a certified therapist offers on-site sessions in shiatsu, a Japanese style of massage akin to acupuncture but without needles. At Baltimore-Washington International Airport in Anne Arundel County, a massage stand offers passengers a respite from long waits.*

*More than 140,000 therapists give massages and other relaxation treatments, according to Associated Bodywork and Massage Professions, a 35,000-member industry organization in Evergreen, Colorado.*

*Penkala said she has six corporate clients across the region. She charges \$70 an hour, with a minimum visit of two hours. She and her employees use a cushioned, wooden massage chair. In short sessions, she kneads, rubs and presses the backs, shoulders and arms while acoustic jazz and other soothing music plays.*

*"It's a great perk," Penkala said. "Most people are behind phones and the computer. People who really value their health, they'll jump on the chair in a heartbeat. It takes you out of the [rat] race for 15 minutes."*

*Rita Woodward, benefits manager for the corporate office of Sandy Spring Bank, said the bank started offering massages in 1998 after officials met Penkala at a business function. Now, once a month, a Corporate Pit Stop representative gives massages to more than a dozen employees in a dimly lit conference room at the bank's corporate headquarters.*

*Corporate Pit Stop also visits bank's branches in Howard, Prince George's, Anne Arundel and Montgomery counties, Woodward said.*

*"Everybody's rushing these days. This is a way to do something nice for the employees to show that we are concerned about their well-being," Woodward said. "Everybody just raves about it. We never have trouble finding people to fill up the [massage] time slots."*

*In 1994, Jackie Hoerichs, of Ellicott City, started her therapy business; known as Shiatsu With Jackie, after graduating from the Ohashi Institute in New York, which specializes in Asian therapies. Four years later, she changed the name to On-Site Shiatsu, to help her focus more on business clients. She said she has about 50 to 60 active individual and corporate clients. Of those, 20 are companies, accounting for 60 percent of her income.*

*"I realized that if people can relax at work, they can relax anywhere," Hoerichs said.*

*She has held sessions for workers at the Howard County Health Department, Howard County Community College and Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in Laurel. Hoerichs will soon start seeing clients at Farmers & Mechanics Bank. She charges \$75 an hour.*

*In Hoerich's sessions, employees lie down on a shiatsu mat or sit in a chair while she leans on them with her hands to relieve tension.*

*Companies "are looking for a way to reward employees that has residual benefits in the workplace," Hoerichs said. "If you give them time off, you're shooting yourself in the foot because they're not there to work. Most companies are very eager when they realize that this is an option for them, and it's financially viable."*

*Recently, executives of EpiTech, a nine-employee corporate training company in Columbia, schedules a visit from Hoerichs, said co-owner Suzanne Menard. The company plans to offer shiatsu sessions monthly to workers, who spend most of their time typing on computers, Menard said.*

*"It was a very great stress-reliever. I think it's definitely something that our employees will like," Menard said. "How could you not?"*

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