

TACKLING THE OBESITY TIME BOMB

IS YOUR ORGANISATION READY?

Made possible



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One of the most important emerging risks facing businesses today is increasing obesity in the workplace. Shockingly, at least one in four adults in the UK are obese, the highest level in Western Europe. The NHS says more than half the population could be obese by 2050.

Obesity costs the UK nearly £47bn a year and it puts a massive strain on the NHS, which spends £5bn a year on illnesses linked to obesity, such as diabetes.

Obesity and its consequences are rarely out of the headlines. This year alone, the government has unveiled a so-called 'sugar tax' on soft drinks in the 2016 budget, vocally supported by Jamie Oliver. In April, The Telegraph reported that leading judge Philip Rostant had called for discrimination against overweight employees to be banned to "bring the issue into line with other equality issues".

In late 2014, an EU ruling declared that obesity could be considered a disability if certain criteria were met. While uncertainty prevails as to the UK's ongoing relationship with the European Union, organisations nevertheless need to be aware of the new responsibilities

the ruling raises and their vulnerability to being sued if they fall foul of the rules.

That's why we have carried out research with a selection of HR professionals across a number of sectors to determine their awareness of the ruling and whether they monitor employee obesity levels; whether they have ever discriminated against a candidate on the basis of their weight; and details of any wellbeing schemes they have put in place.

The findings make interesting reading - for example, 34% of companies say that a candidate's obesity has influenced their decision to reject them for a role. Companies list a range of reasons, from concerns over potential sickness absence to fears around health and safety.

Despite relatively high levels of discrimination during the recruitment process, the picture for current employees

was more positive. For example, organisations are taking a wide range of steps to help employees get healthier, including providing gym memberships and running healthy eating campaigns.

However, 60% of companies do not record the obesity levels of employees that are involved in workplace accidents.

The key message is that companies must face the obesity issue head on and take proactive steps to manage it, minimising their risks and helping employees improve their health, resulting in positive outcomes for all - no means least in reducing absence rates and associated costs. A key benefit that this should bring to companies is a reduction in claims arising from incidents where obesity may have played a role

Rosie Hewitt
Rehabilitation Manager
QBE European Operations

Key findings

54% of companies do not monitor levels of obesity

60% of companies do not record the obesity levels of employees that are involved in workplace accidents

34% of companies say that a candidate's obesity has influenced their decision to reject them for a role.

Companies offer a range of services to help manage obesity, including

- subsidised gym membership 44%
- cycle to work schemes 34%
- and healthy eating campaigns. 34%

Defining obesity

The NHS says that the most widely used method of defining obesity is measuring body mass index (BMI). BMI is calculated based on a person's height and weight, and a BMI of more than 30 means that you are considered obese.

However, BMI is not a fool proof method of measurement - particularly for people who are very sporty and carry a lot of muscle. Measuring waist circumference is another useful measure for determining whether a person's weight may put them at risk of developing health problems.

A range of impacts

Obesity has a range of consequences that can be split into three main categories:

Physical - being overweight or obese increases the risk of many serious illnesses, including:

- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Coronary heart disease
- Certain types of cancer (breast and bowel)
- Strokes
- Obstructive sleep apnoea
- Infertility

On average, obese people take four extra sick days each year¹. A person who is moderately obese (BMI 30-35) has a lower life expectancy of between two and four years; a severely obese person (BMI 40-45) can cut their life expectancy by a decade².

Psychological - studies have shown that obesity can lead to psychological problems such as anxiety, lack of confidence, depression and isolation - all of which impact on a person's ability to perform at or even attend work.

Social - obese people are more likely to suffer from discrimination in certain situations, such as at work or when travelling. They are also likely to have fewer qualifications and lower levels of employment.

¹National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Workplace Health 2012

²National Obesity Observatory

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Severe obesity can
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by up to **10 years**

An increasing problem

By 2008, the UK had the highest level of obesity in Western Europe at 24.9%, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation. The NHS says that obesity levels have more than trebled in the UK in the last 30 years and that more than half the population could be obese by 2050.

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges' Measuring Up report describes the obesity epidemic as "the greatest public health crisis facing the UK". It's easy to see why when around 30,000 deaths in the UK are thought to be related to obesity every year, 9,000 of which take place before retirement age.

Obesity is not just taking its toll on individuals. It is costing the country nearly £47bn a year, according to a McKinsey & Company report which shows that obesity has the second-largest economic impact on the UK after smoking, generating an annual loss equivalent to 3% of GDP.

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The EU ruling and what it means

In December 2014, the European Court of Justice ruled that obesity may be considered a disability if it causes physical, mental or psychological harm that may hinder a person's participation in professional life.

One of the things that we were interested in when we carried out our survey was how aware employers are of this ruling. Thankfully, a healthy 68% of those surveyed are aware of it and can prepare themselves for its possible ramifications.

So why is the ruling important? Essentially it opens UK businesses up to being sued as an obese employee could be deemed to be disabled – and then be protected by disability legislation. Under disability discrimination law, if a person knows or senses that they have been turned down for a job or dismissed because they are obese, they can sue the company in question.

The EU ruling also means that employers may have to take wide-ranging measures to protect their employees and cater to their individual needs, such as:

- Encouraging healthier lifestyles
- Making adjustments to chairs, desks and flooring
- Improving access to buildings
- Providing nearby parking
- Allowing additional time off for medical appointments
- Ensuring that screens and other IT equipment are appropriate (because diabetes can affect eyesight, for instance)
- Ensuring that they provide a clean, hygienic space for diabetics to take their insulin injections

Tackling prejudice towards obese employees in the workplace is also a key responsibility. In many cases, it will require significant cultural change and strong leadership from senior management to ensure safe places of work and address any prejudice.

The result of the June 23rd referendum certainly calls into question the level of application any EU ruling will have in the UK going forward. Uncertainly around the future legal landscape notwithstanding, the measures listed above to safeguard employees' wellbeing are all valid steps to take to create a more inclusive working environment.



Discrimination around recruitment

The most contentious question in our survey centred on whether a candidate's obesity had ever influenced an employer's decision to reject them for a role. More than a third of those surveyed said that it had, and 6% said they would prefer not to answer.

For those who said a candidate's obesity had played a part in a recruitment decision:

65% were concerned about the candidate's ability to perform

47% were worried about health and safety risks

35% were concerned that it would increase the candidate's absence rate

24% felt the candidate's obesity would be in conflict with their organisation's culture

The fact that more than a third of employers are saying that they have discriminated against an obese person as part of the recruitment process is a real concern and leaves companies wide open to being sued by candidates who feel they have been unfairly treated.

34% of companies say that a candidate's obesity has influenced their decision to reject them for a role

How companies can help

The good news is that there is plenty that organisations can do to help ensure the wellbeing of their employees. Of course, not all employees want to lose weight. Even among those who do want to lose weight, the impetus has to come from the individual – and it isn't easy.

Helping employees to get healthy

There are a range of practical initiatives that employers can put in place to encourage employees to manage their weight and health.

These include:

- Providing discounted gym memberships
- Running cycle to work schemes
- Running healthy eating campaigns
- Providing healthy snacks such as fruit
- Encouraging employees to take a full lunch hour and exercise
- Providing shower facilities
- Providing fitness trackers or pedometers
- Making someone a wellness champion to motivate colleagues to exercise
- Educating employees about the links between weight and chronic disease
- Running training programmes to combat discrimination against obese people in the workplace
- Introducing regular health checks

Providing genuine support is often about being flexible. For example, if an employee says that they want to take up their gym membership, but that they feel too self-conscious to go during peak hours, their employer could allow them flexible working hours so that they could go during other hours of the working day.

What companies are already doing

We asked organisations how they encourage employees to get fitter and healthier and found that they provide the following:

Gym membership	44%
Cycle to work scheme	38%
Healthy eating campaign	38%
Employee counselling line	30%
Flexible working environment	28%
Free fruit	22%
Walking clubs	12%
Alternative duties	6%
None	14%

We were surprised to see that 14% of organisations are not taking any action around this important topic. However, the overall picture was good, with providing gym memberships, cycle to work schemes, healthy eating campaigns, employee counselling lines, flexible working environments and free fruit all scoring relatively highly.

What we do at QBE

We have a number of initiatives in place to help ensure the wellbeing of our employees at QBE, including:

- Subsidised gym membership
- Shower facilities
- Cycle to work campaign
- Healthy eating campaign
- Employee assistance programme

Making the most of your employer's liability cover

Many insurers offer free risk management and rehabilitation support as part of their employer's liability cover. Therefore, organisations concerned about obesity in the workplace should seek guidance from their insurer around risks relating to employee wellbeing and obesity – as well as how to manage them.

If there is an accident at work, you should work closely with your insurer and make the most of any rehabilitation services they offer to help your employee access the right treatment and return to work promptly.

Monitoring obesity

In the survey we also asked whether employers record the obesity levels of employees that are involved in workplace accidents. This is important because there is evidence that obesity increases the risk of certain types of injury, such as musculoskeletal disorders, heat stress and vibration-induced injuries. Of those surveyed, only 30% currently record this information.

Those that do not currently record it may wish to consider doing so as it will equip them with the information they need to prevent future occurrences, as well as enabling them to share relevant information with their insurer for managing their claims. In developing a rehabilitation programme for an injured employee for example, if it is known from the outset that the injured party is obese, this can be factored into their treatment plan to ensure that the appropriate course of treatment is put in place.

30% of employers record the obesity levels of employees involved in workplace accidents

What we offer

As well as offering guidance around risks relating to obesity and how to promote employee wellbeing, we offer free rehabilitation support for any employees involved in an incident at work.

QBE Return

QBE Return supports injured employees and their employers for 30 days after a workplace incident. Employees can receive an immediate assessment of their injury and advice on how to manage it, as well as telephone support.

QBE Return+

QBE Return+ offers personalised rehabilitation support, complementing the services an employer already has in place. Some clients, for example, may have proactive occupational health services, but no facility to fast-track physiotherapy – which is where we'd step in.

How the research was carried out

50 Senior HR professionals across the UK were surveyed in February 2016. They came from a wide cross-section of industries.

The research was carried out by an independent research agency via an online survey.

Further reading

McKinsey&Company *Overcoming obesity: An initial economic analysis*

National Obesity Forum *State of the Nation's Waistline*

Academy of Medical Royal Colleges *Measuring up*

UK Food and Agriculture Organisation *The State of food and Agriculture 2013*



About QBE

QBE is a specialist business insurer and reinsurer.

We're big enough to make a difference, small enough to be fleet of foot. We may not be the best known, but a large part of the modern world depends on our cover. We have clients as varied as bus and coach fleet drivers and major international infrastructure consortiums. For them, we're the buffer between the best-laid plans and uncertain reality.

People who deal with us find us professional, pragmatic and reliable - this is one of the reasons we're still here after 130 years.

Our underwriters are empowered to take decisions that are important to you. (Because we know no computer can replace that human ability.)

And we don't just cover your risk. We help you manage it, meaning that you're less likely to have to make a claim in the first place.

Cover for all your business needs

Our extensive product range includes:

- Accident and health (including commercial PA and business travel)
- After the event insurance
- Commercial (including fleet, haulage, bus and coach, motor trade)
- Commercial combined
- Commercial crime
- Contractor all risks/EAR
- Energy - offshore and onshore
- Entertainment and leisure industry
- Environmental impairment liability
- Financial and professional liability (cyber liability, directors' and officers', professional indemnity)
- General liability (employer's liability, public liability, tradesman)
- Marine
- Motor
- Pharmaceutical and medical
- Political risk and terrorism
- Product guarantee and recall
- Product protection
- Property
- Reinsurance
- Scheme underwriting facility
- Specie
- Surety/bonds
- Trade credit
- Warranty and GAP

Find out more

For more information about how we can help your business, please visit www.QBEurope.com

Get in touch

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