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PROGRAMME: “NICE WORK”

PRODUCER: ROSAMUND JONES

PRESENTER: PHILIPPA LAMB

BBC REPORTER: MIKE JOHNSON

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Tape transcript typed by MAREE SHILLINGFORD

LAMB: Hello. Now if you caught the last series of Nice Work back in the spring you may remember hearing about a group of business executives who were about to trek off to the North Pole on foot. They were hoping to learn a thing or two about team work. In the event they all learnt rather more than they'd bargained for.

MAN: All the things that the Arctic can throw at you threw us which is immensely self-destroying. People were so tired having walked all day, maybe 10/12 hours during that day. It really just became a case of surviving.

LAMB: We'll be hearing more later about how the group managed in those terrible conditions, and how some of them are putting the lessons they learnt in the Arctic to good use, now that they're safely back at work. We're also going to be discussing a new theory which suggests that British bosses should be looking at the problem of absenteeism in a completely different way. First though, American employers have recently been horrified to discover just how much obesity in their work force is costing them. Statistics from the US government put the cost at a staggering \$13 billion a year. Now much of that figure is related to

rocketing health insurance premiums, but employers are also worried about the sheer number of working days being lost due to weight-related health problems. Luanne Highnan is with the Institute on the Cost and Health Effects of Obesity in Washington and she told me just how concerned American employers are becoming about this issue.

HIGHNAN: Most US companies have decided that it's not a choice whether or not to get involved with the problem of obesity in America. It's an imperative to do something before it continues to accelerate.

LAMB: What sort of things can companies do?

HIGHNAN: Many employers are actually slowing down the elevators and building walking paths, moving the parking lot for employees a little bit further away from the building.

LAMB: So they're slowing down the elevators to encourage people to walk so they get bored and they actually take the stairs instead?

HIGHNAN: That has happened.

LAMB: And presumably you're also talking about things like healthy food in canteens and having gyms on site, but it occurs to me, isn't it really the people who are pretty inclined to be fit and careful of their weight already who are going to make the most of these opportunities?

HIGHNAN: That has proven to be true for onsite gymnasiums, yes. But that's not so much true for food. Employers are throwing in incentives. If you buy nine meals from the healthy selections offered in the cafeteria the tenth one is free.

LAMB: Aren't bosses going to have to resort to sticks rather than carrots, where possible, to actually bring about change in this area?

HIGHNAN: It's the employers job to provide a variety of options for employees, but if an employee refuses to take any option, let's say they are very high risk, and won't participate in personal coaching or group meetings or medical supervision of fitness or a diet programme. If every option is refused, there are some employers who may consider not offering health benefits or offering them at a higher cost.

LAMB: What advice would you give to British employers?

HIGHNAN: We say promote activity at work. Give employees pedometers as rewards or incentives. We would encourage employers to consider a food policy that says, we're going to only offer healthy choices and only at meal times that we're going to make sure there's some percentage of healthy choices at every vending machine. Employees should not be trapped, for example, as you can be on an aeroplane without a single healthy option.

LAMB: I was talking there to Luanne Highnan of the Institute on the Cost and Health Effects of Obesity in Washington. Now obesity may be a far bigger problem right now in the US than it is in Britain, but employers here know that they can't afford to be complacent about it because we're catching up fast. Nearly two out of every three American adults are now classed as either over weight or outright obese. Here nearly two-thirds of men and over half of all women are already over weight and at this rate by 2010, at least a quarter of British adults will be obese.

LAMB: Now one company with an eye to the future is Standard Life Health Care in Guildford. Two years ago it introduced a programme to decrease the weight and improve the health of its work force. Bob Howard has been finding out how it works.

HOWARD: To many of us the chance of a massage is a special treat to be taken at our leisure. Not so for employees at Standard Life who are being offered a free neck and shoulder rub once a month. Two years ago the company decided to make the health of their staff a top priority. They brought in consultants, V-Life, to set up a voluntary programme for employees to monitor their health and change their lifestyles. Sarah Darman is one of those taking part.

DARMAN: I found that concentrating more on what I'm eating, the exercise that I'm doing and to sort of overall get a bit fitter really and concentrate on me.

HOWARD: Standard Life's basic strategy is to encourage their staff to exercise more. Be less stressed so they eat less and offer a healthier diet in the canteen. Massage takes care of the stress and encouraging staff to take the stairs helps promote fitness. David Furness has been offered a pedometer as part of the scheme so he can measure how much walking he's doing.

FURNESS: The government says that you should try and walk 10,000 steps a day which apparently is all the exercise that you need to maintain your health. But basically the pedometer you just clip it onto your clothes and through technology beyond my understanding it manages to count the steps that you use.

HOWARD: So you've got yours on now, what's your reading?

FURNESS: I actually just reset it today, so we've just taken 30 steps getting down from my desk to the restaurant.

HOWARD: Standard Life estimates that around 80% of their 450 employees in Guildford have opted to take part in the scheme. To register they have to fill out a confidential questionnaire about their health and attitudes to work. Asking how many days off sick employees have had or whether they suffer from depression are sensitive questions. Standard Life say they can't identify

individual employees from the data given to them. Instead they get an overall figure for their staff from which they can develop a plan. In their case the prognosis was to lessen stress and improve diet. Tania Handicomers having a healthy salad for lunch. Tania, what changes have been made to your canteen?

HANDICOMERS: Well they introduced a salad bar which we never used to have. So we've got lots more fruit. One major change that I've noticed in the last few weeks is that a till used to have a large chocolate bar next to it and it now has a lovely stand full of peanuts and raisins and healthy snack bars.

HOWARD: Have you changed your eating habits as a result of that?

HANDICOMERS: I tend to eat a lot more fruit during the day and I drink a lot more water. So yea definitely. Everyone eggs each other on and gives each other advice on health and things if they want to lose weight or be a bit more active.

HOWARD: The staff I talked to said it was the voluntary nature of the scheme which had encouraged them to take part and most were very positive. One said he'd lost 4 stone since the beginning of the year. Those who don't take part are told they won't be discriminated against in any way. Vince Mewitt is the head of resources at Standard Life.

MEWITT: We didn't actually find any objection but I think that's because we'd already built the trust amongst our employees, that we wouldn't be using this information on an individual basis and so we don't ever know what any individual person is doing on their assessments. We aggregate the scores. Sickness has gone down 19%, turnover we peaked at something like 24% back in '99 and we're now in Guildford running at 10%, labour turnover.

LAMB: That was Vince Mewitt ending that report by Bob Howard. Clive Pinder was listening to that with me. He's managing director of V-Life which designed that health and well-being plan at Standard Life, we've just been

hearing about. Ursula Arons is also with me. She's from the British Dietetic Association and she writes widely about nutrition. Clive, Standard Life are obviously taking their staff health very seriously. How worried about this are British employers? Are you finding that more of them are coming to you worried about staff fitness?

PINDER: The answer's yes. If you look at our business it's growing year-on-year, so. But I don't think they're coming to us just because they're concerned about employees' health. They're also coming to us because they're concerned about their own bottom line, and I think the important thing to realise from that last segment was that it wasn't just good for the employee, but it was also good for the employer.

LAMB: Now we heard from Luanne Highnan in the States that some employers there are moving, albeit slowly, more towards sticks than carrots. They're making it more expensive to eat junk food in the staff canteen, they're pushing back part of the cost of higher health and medical expenses premiums on to the staff who won't participate in well-being programmes. Do you expect to see that creeping in here?

PINDER: I think first of all you have to take into context the United States is very different. The employer almost pays for the whole of the health system over there. We don't have that system here. I think the government is going to ask us to take more responsibility, yes, do I think employers are going to ask us to take more responsibility? Much the same way as you get a discount if you have a tracking device in your car or a fire alarm on your house. The insurance companies will give you discount for you taking responsibility for what they're insuring and I think it's reasonable to assume that we should do the same with ourselves.

LAMB: So you're suggesting as the pressure grows on employers to focus on this, they will in turn perhaps put more pressure on their staff to engage with getting more fit and being less unhealthy.

PINDER: Good pressure to help you keep yourself healthy, yes. If you're talking about good pressure but I'm going to resist your attempt to make it a stick and carrot in a negative approach.

LAMB: Ursula, what do you make of programmes like this? Is this the way forward?

ARONS: It is going to be easier for some employers than for others, and of course if you have an office-based young population, they're going to be much more receptive to these kind of suggestions and developments, than if you have a population group where the people working are sort of taxi drivers, bus drivers, where they're not based in an office, where they don't have a single canteen where they will meet up.

LAMB: Clive, is there a danger that people who don't want to get on board with this are going to start feeling isolated and victimised?

PINDER: There is a danger of it happening, yes, but again this is the lowest common denominator. If the mass of the population start to take responsibility for their own health instead of relying on someone else to do it for them, that can only be a good thing.

LAMB: You use the phrase personal responsibility and it struck a cord with me because I do wonder, we've been talking about this as if it's something employers should be doing. Do employers actually have a right, let alone a duty, to interfere with how their staff choose to live?

PINDER: I think employers have a right to make sure that they create healthy working environments for their employees and I think employees have an obligation to turn up to work **and work** and be ready to work in a fit and healthy way and that's what we're talking about.

LAMB: Do you think there's going to come a time when unhealthy people who don't choose to exercise are going to become disadvantaged in the employment market, people just won't want them?

PINDER: I think that if you walk into an employment interview and you're obviously fat and unhealthy you're already disadvantaged.

LAMB: That's not really generally acknowledged, is it?

PINDER: It might not be generally acknowledged, but it's, I think, widely recognised.

LAMB: Ursula, what do you make of this?

ARONS: Well what you're trying to say is are we in danger of victimising and harassing and haranguing the overweight and yes I would be nervous about anything that really penalised and victimised individuals. But Clive is right to say that there are lots of things that could be done in a less threatening and direct way that encourage and support and make sort of healthy choices, the ones that are easier in everyday obvious. And if everyone's doing the same, then it's not being seen as a spotlight on just one individual member of the work force.

LAMB: And you do think that employers have a role to play here?

ARONS: I think they do simply because 60% of the UK population is overweight.

LAMB: Thank you both. Well as Clive and Ursula pointed out, prevention is better than cure. So what else could managers be doing to keep their work force fit and healthy? Well one thought is that they could manage them better in a book called "Status Syndrome" which was published last month. Michael Marmot argues that the way people are managed has a direct impact on their health. Those who lack autonomy are more likely to become ill than those who have more control over how they work. Michael Marmot is Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London and his findings are particularly fascinating because for the past 30 years, he's been tracking the health of different grades of civil servants. He spoke to Rosamund Jones about his findings.

MARMOT: The striking thing to come out of the study was that the higher you were in the hierarchy, the lower the risk and it wasn't due to blood pressure and it wasn't due to smoking and it wasn't due to cholesterol or overweight. But there was something really very dramatic and it was graded and that led me to think well what is it about the way people at different points of the hierarchy are living that might relate to the differences in health.

JONES: You say though that higher up in organisations, people are less likely to suffer from serious illness. Is one reason for this not that say higher up people are perhaps less likely to smoke, more likely to have a better diet, those sorts of factors?

MARMOT: Well that was the obvious place to look first and what we showed was controlling for all the things that we could study, all the usual culprits to do with lifestyle and risk factors. We counted for about a quarter of the social gradient in mortality.

JONES: So you obviously started to think well, perhaps it actually was to do with the level at which people were working?

MARMOT: Yea, so we focused on work and what we showed was that the circumstances at work were extremely important. Now when people think of stress at work they usually think that the top executive is the one with all the stress.

JONES: This is a sort of 16 hour typical working day, isn't it, that we hear so much about?

MARMOT: That's right and all the emails and I turn on my computer and I have 150 emails and "oh my God, am I under pressure." So that's how people think about stress at work. The revolution in thinking was to think not just about the amount of demand on people, but how much control they had and that demand by itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Those people with all the emails and the 16-hour days, to a large extent are doing it because they want to.

JONES: And if they really don't want to, I suppose they have the power to....

MARMOT: To change it.

JONES: To change it, yea.

MARMOT: What turns out to be far more bad for health is not how much demand you have, but how much control you have over the demand and over your working conditions in general. And that clearly relates to how low you are in the hierarchy. The lower in the hierarchy the less control you have and people with low control at work have increased risk of heart disease, of mental illness, of sickness absence, of muscular skeletal disorders.

JONES: Is it because these people are more stressed and that stress leads to these conditions, is that what you're saying?

MARMOT: That's exactly what I'm saying. There's good evidence that low control at work affects biological stress pathways and it puts you at increased risk of diabetes, of hypertension and those things increase heart disease, they increase mental illness. There are certainly plausible biological links. So I would say employers ignore that at their peril.

JONES: What you're saying is that if people feel they have no control, have very little autonomy, essentially are badly managed, that this actually makes them ill?

MARMOT: That's right. You see I don't think the sense of control is only a property of individuals. We see big differences depending on the way work is organised. I think it is a management issue.

LAMB: Rosamund Jones was talking there to Professor Michael Marmot. I'm joined now by David Cotes of the Work Foundation, who's also been examining the health of British workers. Recently he's been chairing a task force set up by the Department of Health which has been looking into the role that the work place plays in the health of the nation. Now David, I already know you are convinced by Professor Marmot's argument and your task force has taken his research into account. Your findings will in turn feed into the government's white paper on the health of the nation. I think we're expecting that in the autumn, aren't we? Given all the work you've done in this area, how do you think we need to change the debate on how employers manage sickness?

COTES: The debate at the moment I think is still about sickness and absence management, trying to stop people taking time off work and getting them back to work, if they've been sick, in the long-term. The great opportunity presented here, I think, is to reconfigure the discussion. So we begin to focus on the nature of the jobs that people are doing. The way in which those jobs are designed and if we focus on those things, and move beyond absence management,

we can start to make a big impact I think on the level of absence in the UK economy.

LAMB: I think it's a really compelling theory, the difficulty, it seems to me with it, is that the vast array of low status jobs, they're never going to be challenging and rewarding, are they? How do you change that?

COTES: There will always be a social gradient in health but you can make the hill less steep than it would otherwise be and you can take a job that seems low status and rather unrewarding and make it a more rewarding and enriching job. Not all jobs in call centres, which many people think are awful, are awful. You can give people a sense of mastery over the work, a sense of achievement that they're doing something worthwhile. So it's not that this is a given and there is nothing we can do. There is a great deal that we can do.

LAMB: Other countries are better at this than us, aren't they? I'm thinking of Scandinavia as an obvious example. What do they do that we don't do in terms of management?

COTES: Well they have publicly-funded programmes that look to promote better work organisation and job design and they also have, I think, trade unions and employers who take these issues seriously and give them some priority.

LAMB: This, as I mentioned, it all feeds into this government white paper. What can the government actually do, it's all rather intangible stuff, isn't it? What can they do?

COTES: I think there's a great deal the government can do. Now first of all there is the Health and Safety Executive that works with employers and unions to improve health and safety in the work place and I think they ought to focus on these questions of work organisation and job design and quality of management. There is a particular problem I think in small-and-medium-sized

companies and the Department of Trade and Industry has a huge range of programmes focused on help for SME's and I think these issues ought to be part of that exercise. It's an all embracing agenda potentially and it could create a sense of coherence behind the government's labour market policy that perhaps it's been lacking so far.

LAMB: So these wellness programmes we were hearing about earlier, the schemes that Standard Life Health Care have put in place, are they slightly missing the point, I mean is it actually really more about managing people well than making sure they eat salad at lunch time?

COTES: I think you need to do both actually. I think it's important that people do have a healthy diet, and I think it's important that people do take exercise, and you can't say that bad diet and lack of exercise are entirely due to a poorly designed job. That might be a factor, but it's not the most important factor. But it isn't enough, in and of itself it's not enough. It's only addressing half of the question really and employers can do a great deal more by thinking about how they run their organisations, about their business models, about management style, about work organisation, job design, skill development and pay.

LAMB: David Cotes, many thanks and thanks also to Clive Pinder and Ursula Arons who you heard from earlier. Now back in the spring series of Nice Work, you may remember that we followed the progress of a group of businessmen and women, City lawyers and bankers, who were all about to set off on perhaps the ultimate personal challenge, walking to the North Pole. Their plan was to make the trek on foot without the aid of machines or dogs and it was all part of a course designed to improve their leadership and team-work skills. When we spoke to them they were in training for the big event. Well now they are back and our reporter, Mike Johnson, has been talking to them about their experiences. Mike, they were all taking this expedition pretty seriously before they set off, as I

remember. I gather it turned out to be even more of a challenge than they expected.

JOHNSON: Well yes it did. I think they were all very well aware of the obvious dangers, the blizzards, the frost bite, the fatigue and so on. Their target was to walk 10 miles a day for eight days dragging sleds weighing 110 pounds in really some of the most inhospitable conditions on the face of the planet. But what really surprised them was how unpredictable conditions in the Arctic Circle can be. Now because ice drifts around, they'd go to sleep at night having walked hard all day only to wake up a couple of miles behind. And another problem bizarrely was that the weather was actually quite warm a mere minus-5 degrees rather than minus-25. So they were met by unexpected rivers of open water which they had to painstakingly find a way around. Well they took some recording equipment with them and here's one of the expedition guides Ann Daniels. She's describing the scene as they approached one of those rivers.

DANIELS: Obviously we can't swim over here and so we're going to have to find a crossing point where the ice comes together or a bridge has formed. And so we're going to go west and see if we can find a crossing point. It could take us ten minutes or it could take us ten hours, that's the Arctic Ocean for you.

JOHNSON: As it turned out, because of all the extra obstacles, the party only reached the North Pole with hours to spare before their rescue helicopter arrived to pick them up. It really was a frightening experience for a bunch of people who largely, until now, had led pretty sheltered lives. Leadership coach, Phil Wall, organised the exhibition. Shortly after they got back, he reflected on its impact.

WALL: I think some people underestimated the state of the physical challenge. So much of our life in our society today is designed to protect us from starkness and harshness and challenge and difficulty. Whereas in this environment that's all there is, there aren't any comforts, there isn't anywhere to hide.

JOHNSON: All the same it was his task to make sure these would-be explorers learnt something which would be relevant to their jobs on their return. But all his carefully-laid plans to deliver structured-personal development were wrecked in the harsh reality of life in the Arctic Circle.

WALL: I had this camp fire image in my mind that we'd gather together in one of the tents with a few heaters blaring in the evening and we'd share our leadership stories with each other.

KING: (Recording). "I've seen the promised land."

WALL: I had crafted some stories from some of the great leaders of our time, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and we were going to reflect on those stories.

KING: (Recording). "But I want you to know the night that we as a people will get to the promised land."

WALL: The people were so tired having walked all day, maybe ten/twelve hours during that day, it really just became a case of surviving. So the whole concept of delivering professional development was utterly naïve.

JOHNSON: Despite this, he still believes the £15,000 each delegate paid to come on this rather unusual training course was money well spent. They may well not have received any formal training in return. But according to Phil Wall, they were taught in far more subtle ways.

WALL: For those who are willing to look, there are so many lessons there. There's lessons of it takes you hours to travel a few hundred metres.

JOHNSON: So perseverance was key, do you think?

WALL: It's perseverance informed by character which says, "I will not give up." That is a true test of a leader's character.

JOHNSON: One leader put to the test was David Stob-Stobbart, an IT project manager at the City Investment Bank, Credit Suisse First Boston. He went to the North Pole to try to improve his management skills. So did it work for him?

STOB-STOBBART The idea of leadership in the traditional sense, in the text book sense, in my mind before going, was very much about the gestures of leadership, the slap on the back level of influence. And I think what this has shown me is that leadership is much more subtle than that, and I do think it's very much wrapped up in team work. You find yourself continuously being in and out of teams, working with different people and to be able to build those relationships I think is pretty key.

JOHNSON: Well Helen Christianson, your manager, is sitting right next to you. What difference have you seen in David since he came back from the North Pole?

CHRISTIANSON: What I've seen in David has been very obvious. The rapport he has established with people, he takes the time to build the rapport with people before launching into the tough stuff of business.

JOHNSON: How important is that skill, do you think, to the work that he does?

CHRISTIANSON: It's absolutely critical because you spend time working with people to encourage them to do something that your project needs them to do to meet your target. Influence and team work is critical to that success.

LAMB: Well I'm very pleased and not a little relieved actually to be able to welcome another of the expedition members to the studio, Charles Dunstan. A lot of listeners will know your name. You founded Carphone Warehouse about 15 years ago now, now a company with nearly 11,000 staff. Obviously you've taken a lot of risks, faced a lot of challenges in the course of your career. This North Pole trip was a much more physically demanding situation. How did you cope with that aspect of it?

DUNSTAN: The walking is hard but actually living at minus 20 is incredibly difficult, and it's just the most massive shock to the system and if you take that back to real life, I think it's a good lesson to learn how to cope with something that's completely outside of your normal experience.

LAMB: How did you get on with the living in a group thing, because we're all used to quite a lot of privacy. We have the luxury of being able to walk away from people, but you're stuck with them 24 hours a day?

DUNSTAN: There were three tents of six and we were easily the most dysfunctional. It took us longer to do everything. We formed a kind of very good bond together which, just laughing about our lot, and I think in adversity you either laugh or cry.

LAMB: Now you told us back in April that you thought it would be more personal use than professional. Is it turning out to be any use to you in the course of your work now that you're back?

DUNSTAN: I live very comfortably. There's always someone worrying that there's a car to take me somewhere, or an aeroplane ticket, or whatever I need to do. It was very good to be just one of 18 people, not have...., the responsibility of being a member of the team, but not the responsibility of leading. It was very good for me to be taken out of my normal comfy environment.

LAMB: Did you learn anything about leadership, do you think?

DUNSTAN: Leadership in a company isn't about me issuing instructions. Leadership in a company is about creating a team and getting everybody to believe in what you're going to do and believing that they can do it and that's really what we had to do.

LAMB: These sort of physically demanding courses are popular. They're supposed to improve management skills. Do you think they do? Do you send your people on courses of this sort?

DUNSTAN: We run a programme in Carphone Warehouse called "Challenge Yourself" and we organise to go walking in the Sahara or different things to raise money for charity where people opt in to get on. It's very much a voluntary thing. But the kind of Camaraderie and team spirit that comes out of those trips is absolutely amazing. So they are, I think it is very positive but I think it has to be something you choose to do.

LAMB: So, would you do it again?

DUNSTAN: As time goes by your memory of it becomes more and more rose tinted and so I think if you said to a lot of the people, now, right we're going to go to the Antarctic or something, quite a few people would probably be up for it. I haven't crossed that line yet.

LAMB: Charles Dunstan, many thanks indeed. That's it for this week. If you'd like to find out more about work and health, call the BBC Action Line. Here's the number, it's 0800 044 044. You'll find our website at bbc.co.uk/radio4. Just follow the links to Nice Work where you can also listen to all or indeed part of today's programme again. I'll be back with another live edition of Nice Work at the same time next week. We'll be getting our teeth into a

really thorny problem then, why are British workers so much less productive than our counterparts on the continent? Join me then.