

Commuting by Bike: Good for individuals, good for business

by Laura Flowers
Work/life column

The reasons to rethink car-centric commuting in Lexington are stacking up: fuel prices are increasing, interest in urban living is expanding, and as a community, our environmental conscious-ness is growing. Local businesses have a unique opportunity to position themselves in this crossroads by being great places to work, but also by being great community members. Facilitating alternative forms of commuting, such as biking, can achieve both these goals, and for employers, the benefits go beyond denting Lexington's carbon footprint.

The benefits of bicycle transportation are well-documented for individuals, but there is growing evidence that cycling benefits businesses too. On the financial side for individuals, the costs of owning and maintaining a bike are a small fraction of the cost of owning, maintaining, and parking a car, especially with the rising cost of gas. For businesses, it is much cheaper to encourage bike commuting than to pay for gym memberships or build in-house fitness facilities in effort to boost employee wellness. Healthwise, exposure to traffic congestion usually has negative health effects, including increased heart rate, blood pressure, increased stress and negative mood. On the other hand, bike commuting is likely to achieve the opposite results. Fit employees are more alert, more productive, and may reduce health insurance costs. The League of American Bicyclists argues that employers who appreciate their employees' personal needs (such as fitness) have less employee turnover, and ones that are perceived as environmentally aware are more likely to attract talent than those who are not.

Companies on the cutting edge of attracting excellent employees are growing more aware of what bikes can do for their bottom lines. Number one on Fortune's Best Places to Work in 2008, Google, not only promotes cycling but provides bikes to their employees to ride around the Google complex and on errands. Genetech, number five on the same list, gives their employees a \$4 per day subsidy for using alternative transportation. These companies are leading the way nationally, but Lexington has its own leaders.

The University of Kentucky promotes cycling through their Wildcat Wheels program providing students, employees, and staff with the opportunity to check out bikes to use on a daily or semester-long basis. Additionally, UK's Wildcat Wheels provides Blue Bikes for departments to use for a semester at a time. Employees who are insured through UK are eligible for up to \$180 a year for tracking their healthy behavior, which includes riding their bikes and taking bike safety classes.

Lexmark takes a less formal approach to encourage a cycling culture by providing basic, bike friendly facilities at their offices. "Employees are allowed to use stairwells and other areas inside buildings to store bicycles. We also have locker rooms and showers available in some areas," says Juli Gaworski, Community Relations Specialist. There is also support for employee initiatives such as "Bike-to-Lunch Thursdays." According to Gaworski, "More than anything, for Lexmark, this is an employee-morale and wellness issue. Anything that supports the efforts of our employees, we are pleased to promote."

The League of American Bicyclists have a great list of ways employers can encourage commuting by bike. Here are a few of their suggestions:

- Provide bike commuter facilities such as lockers, changing rooms, indoor bike parking or a simple bike rack
- Consider installing showers or arrange for shower use at a local health club
- Appoint a bike commuting coordinator to help employees plan routes to work using low-traffic but direct roads
- Partner with a local bike shop to offer employee discounts, maintenance clinics, or to showcase new bike models during lunch
- Offer subsidies for bike commuters who don't use car parking spaces
- Promote cycling by forming a company bicycle club or by allowing bike commuters to dress more casually at work.

While this list is a great way to start thinking about things you can request or work on implementing in your workplace, the best way to know what changes your organization might be able to make to encourage cycling is to ask around. See what your co-workers need to transition from four wheels to two.

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