

COMMENT

Promoting knowledge to improve workplace safety, health and wellbeing



Northern Ireland
Safety Group

Promoting Occupational
Safety & Health

STAYING ACTIVE DURING THE WORKING DAY

An article by Dr Danielle Logan BSc MPH PhD



In a recent article for Comment Dr Danielle Logan talks about the importance of staying active during the working day. Dr. Logan feels letting employees exercise during the working day is an area that needs further research.

6 deaths². There are a variety of reasons why physical activity levels may be low, but the main barrier has been suggested to be work-life commitments³.

Benefits of physical activity in the workplace

It is important to encourage physical activity at work, as it not only helps to maintain a healthy weight, but it can also improve sleep, manage stress and help reduce the risk of major illnesses such as cancers, type 2 diabetes or heart disease⁴. Subsequently, having healthy employees will mean less days off work due to sickness, increased productivity, higher employee morale and lower employee turnover⁴. However, it is important to remember that a combination of, for example, physical activity and healthy eating is necessary to maintain good health. The best thing an employer can do is to support employees to be more physically active,

Physical inactivity proving problematic?

It is well known that physical activity is an important part of leading a healthy lifestyle. It is, therefore,



recommended that adults should include at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (e.g. brisk walking) or at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity throughout the week (e.g. running)¹. Unfortunately, approximately 1 in 2 women and 1 in 3 men are not getting enough physical activity². This has led to physical inactivity costing the United Kingdom £7.4 billion annually and is responsible for 1 in



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beginning with the inclusion of this in the organisational policy and workplace culture⁴.

Is your working life making it difficult to keep active?



Do you find it difficult to include physical activity during your working week? If your answer is yes, would you consider being active for an hour during working time if you were still getting paid? This idea of exercising in the office is not new, and considering many hours are spent working, it makes sense to try to find to time during the working day to keep active. However, a qualitative based study in 2020 found that even if physical activity opportunities were offered to employees during paid work time, changes in current attitudes and culture towards physical activity in the workplace were needed before this could become common practice in the workplace⁵.

Why is it important to promote physical activity at work?

According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), a workplace culture which improves the health and wellbeing of employees will lead to a healthy and productive workforce⁶. The above mentioned study results corresponds with this NICE guidance and demonstrates the importance of recognising employees' current understanding of physical activity in the workplace, so as they don't feel the culture is being forced upon them, but rather that they are involved in developing the culture. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many working routines, but it is still important for employers to encourage being active at work, whether you are

working in the office or from home. One employer who has incorporated physical activity into the workplace culture is a social media management platform, Hootsuite, based in Vancouver⁷. During working hours, employees are able to block off an hour for exercise provided it does not coincide with meetings and then the time is made up by having lunch at their desks for instance⁷. The company found that any time lost on exercise was made back and more in terms of improved productivity from the employees⁷.

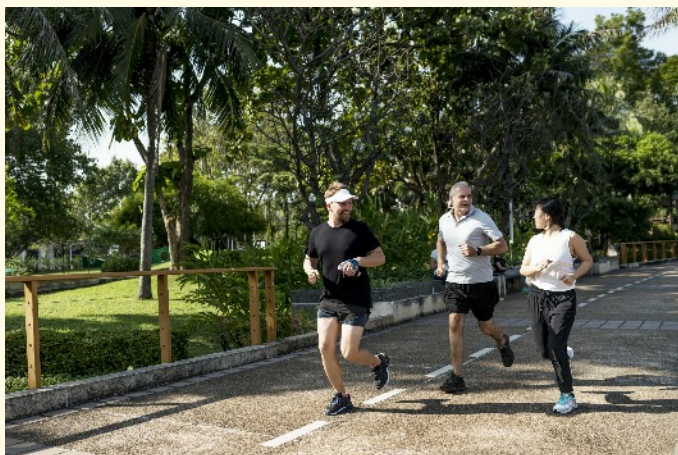
How can employers encourage physical activity at work?

This idea of including physical activity during paid work time may not suit all businesses and, therefore, it is important that workplaces promote health and wellbeing to employees in the most appropriate manner. Some

ideas that could be used to encourage physical activity at work could be, flexible working hours where lunch breaks could be longer to allow time for a walk or run, cycle to work schemes, corporate gym memberships (depending on the size of the business), lunch time walk or jog clubs or walk and talk / standing meetings to encourage movement instead of sitting in a meeting



room⁴. At present due to COVID-19, in person meetings must include social distancing measures. If, however, employees are working from home and they live close by, they could meet for a walk at lunch time. Also the time that would have been spent travelling to and from the office, could be replaced with physical activity in those time periods. These activities



will help to ensure that employees still take breaks, especially if their job involves sitting at a desk. This is important as it has been shown that even 3-4 minutes of light intensity physical movement (i.e. walking or stretching) will ease muscles and improve blood circulation¹. The chosen activity will however depend on each individual's situation and workplace, so it's important to find something that suits your personal circumstances and business, respectively.

Conclusion

To conclude, many adults are not meeting the recommended level of physical activity in their daily lifestyle, with work-life commitments mainly contributing to this problem. Finding ways to encourage physical activity is vital to help prevent major illnesses in later years. Incorporating physical activity into working hours, but still being paid, is a possible solution to increase physical activity. However, this will not become common practice in the workplace overnight, as it will involve addressing employee's attitudes and workplace culture towards physical activity. Research into this area of allowing employees to exercise during paid work time is needed.

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