



# Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



## Ten Ways to Integrate Physical Activity into Your Workplace

Many of us don't move enough during the day, let alone during our work time. Physical activity guidelines recommend that adults accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each week. That breaks down to 30 minutes of dedicated physical activity on at least five days out of seven, where two days are dedicated to strength training. However, research shows that only 18% reach that target in Canada.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S., the results were similar, with about 23% meeting the guidelines.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that "we're spending too much time idle – lounging, watching, surfing online and playing video games" and "even those who manage to meet daily physical activity guidelines are too sedentary the rest of the day."<sup>3</sup> While it's true that some workers may engage in physical activity outside of work hours or even on the way to work, the sedentary nature of many jobs, where there are extended periods of sitting at desks or in front of computers, means that a significant portion of the population is affected.

The question becomes, is this an individual issue, or do businesses have any influence or responsibility to try and help workers achieve better physical fitness? Consider that physically active workers tend to be more productive, creative, and participative when working in teams, improving overall organizational dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Businesses can also realize financial savings through reduced absenteeism and healthcare/benefits costs when they prioritize employee well-being by endorsing workplace physical activity initiatives.<sup>5</sup> Fostering health and wellness as an essential part of workplace culture can help attract and retain talent and boost a company's image and reputation.

Let's focus on ten things you can use to inspire you to integrate a shift towards encouraging and supporting more physical activity in your workplace.

### **1. Understand the importance of physical activity for employee wellbeing.**

Employers increasingly recognize the importance of promoting physical activity and implementing initiatives to encourage employees to move and exercise throughout the day to mitigate adverse health effects associated with prolonged sitting and sedentary behaviour. In short, movement is crucial for people's health because it reduces the risk of developing chronic diseases and improves overall quality of life.

### **2. Learn about the benefits of physical activity for business.**

- Regular physical activity helps enhance an organization's productivity, creativity, and team dynamics.
- It's possible to see reductions in absenteeism and healthcare costs, which can contribute to overall financial savings.
  - The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reviewed 56 studies of workplace health programs that pointed to 25% savings each on absenteeism, health care costs, and workers' compensation and disability management claims costs.<sup>6</sup>
- Knowing that a business fosters a culture of health and wellness can help with recruiting and talent retention while promoting a positive company image and reputation.

### **3. No amount of physical activity is too small...why not try yoga breaks?**

- Short, 10-minute movement bursts throughout the day provide quick energy boosts, improve blood circulation, and enhance mental focus. Cumulatively, it adds up to help prevent prolonged periods of sitting, reduce muscle stiffness, and help employees feel productive.
- Regular yoga breaks can help release muscle tension and improve focus by allowing for stretching, mindfulness and relaxation. For remote employees, offer an online meeting option so they can still participate as a group.

### **4. Encourage people to take walks during their lunch breaks, individually or in groups/teams.**

- Individual walks provide a chance to relieve stress. Teams can benefit from walking as a group to develop bonding, communication, and camaraderie. Either way offers a refreshing break from work tasks.
- For people who don't know the area well, develop and publish some suggested routes near your office space, including distances, surfaces, and elevations (uphill/downhill).

### **5. Provide equipment that supports movement throughout the workday.**

- While you don't necessarily need to provide complete on-site fitness centres, a wide range of available equipment can help promote exercise and reduce sedentary time:
  - Standing desks, desktop risers, walking workstations, folding treadmills, desk ellipticals, desk bikes.
  - Using equipment can help improve posture, musculoskeletal health and reduce backpain.
- If you decide to make equipment available to workers, ensure it's offered to everyone, including employees in hybrid work arrangements where some staff work remotely and ensure that the equipment is accessible for all.

### **6. Design (or redesign) your office space to optimize movement.**

- Reconfigure workspaces to encourage movement and facilitate better collaboration.
- Consider placement of printers, water coolers/refreshment stations, and meeting spaces (where accessibility allows). The farther these are from desk and seating areas, the more people must move to get to them.

### **7. Incorporate fun activities that boost morale, improve social engagement and reduce stress while building community.**

- Consider adding recreational activities like ping pong tables or mini basketball hoops.
- Support sports team activities and revive the idea of intra and intermural leagues.
- Providing opportunities for colleagues to connect in teams shows they value the communities where they operate and their employees live.

## 8. Offer Health and Wellness Program Incentives to demonstrate commitment.

- Try extending health challenges within the organization to promote healthy living and movement.
  - Consider a week where employees are encouraged to actively commute to the office to encourage healthy lifestyle choices that support movement and physical activity.
    - Examples: Take public transit and get off a stop earlier; park at the back of the parking lot; walk around the block before starting your day at a home office.
- Use incentives to encourage people's involvement. Consider providing gift cards, extra vacation days, company-sponsored fitness and health assessment events, or even on-site kinesiologists for a day to help with education about the benefits of movement.

## 9. Provide Health Plan Benefits that support healthy lifestyle and physical activity.

- Include healthcare spending accounts to support employees' access to fitness resources.
- Offer innovations such as discounted gym memberships and honour prescriptions for exercise, wearable fitness and activity trackers.

## 10. Build physical activity as one pillar of an inclusive and active work culture.


- Create a supportive culture where physical activity is valued but not obligatory. Progress and effort should be celebrated rather than being solely focused on an outcome.
- Provide training or workshops that focus on inclusive exercise techniques where activities can be adapted for different abilities and allow employees with mobility limitations to participate.

- Offer flexible working hours to support people's preferences for maintaining physical fitness.
- Emphasize inclusivity by offering a variety of activities that demonstrate respect for individual preferences and abilities.
- Remember that body size and shape do not always indicate someone's health or athletic ability.

Ultimately, creating a supportive community and shifting beliefs around physical activity can motivate employees to participate and work towards achieving their fitness goals. Recognizing the potential benefits of developing a sense of unity can lead to improved teamwork and collaboration, better work-life balance, and improved health.

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