

Five Steps To Get Your Workforce More Active

Since the pandemic began, are you exercising more or less each week?

Some may find that they have been more physically active since the outbreak of COVID-19, with lockdowns giving many people a little more time for themselves. However, some people have struggled to motivate themselves to be active outside of work, with 4 out of 5 employees unable to 'shut off' from work in the evenings⁽¹⁾ - suggesting that working from home doesn't necessarily mean more time for exercise.

Although many employees' commutes still consist of a handful of steps to the kitchen or home office, research suggests that people spend on average 5 hours a day sitting down,⁽²⁾ making us inactive for most of the working day. Being active has both physical and mental benefits. It can improve your fitness, elevate your mood, make you stronger and help you manage health conditions. The great thing about physical exercise is that everyone, regardless of ability level, can take part and begin to receive benefits from activity. These include reduced anxiety and better sleep, as well as weight loss and the reduced risk of certain diseases including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers.⁽³⁾

There are several ways employers can encourage their employees to be more active. Below are five ways staff increase their activity levels, all of which can be easily adapted for use at home or in the office.

1. Technology

Technology has been a great resource to connect to physical exercise during the pandemic. From home workout videos to fitness tracking apps, it can help facilitate a more active lifestyle. There are a range of exercise videos available for every fitness level. Employers could assist their employees by listing these resources through a periodic roundup of all the best content. Why not send out a weekly newsletter with the latest accessible health and wellness resources to access from home?

2. Group Classes

Employers can use technology in a variety of ways to encourage employees to work out remotely by setting up classes or blocking set times for employees to complete the same workout video, perhaps during an internal call once a week.

There are numerous personal trainers and exercise class companies who lead classes via video (or come into the office when appropriate). These can easily be dialled into, wherever your employees are working. The 'live' events could also help inject a sense of community, especially if attendees join on video. Make sure your employees know where to find these tools and how to sign up.

If you are a global business, you can also create social networks, linking colleagues from across the world who share an interest in a particular activity. Our Optum My Wellbeing app allows colleagues to share inspirational content and motivate one another along their exercise journey. It's also a great way for employees to socialise outside of working hours. When employees are back in the office, those who have connected virtually over a shared love of sport, could establish running clubs or sports teams in person.

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3. Walk And Talk

Employers should encourage employees to get out-and-about during calls, particularly if they're internal ones. A top-down approach will help encourage more employees to take

a walking meeting. Research has shown there are several benefits to walking. It can boost creative thinking, improve focus and increase productivity.⁽⁴⁾ Walking calls are a time-efficient way of getting some exercise whilst also improving work performance.

If it isn't practical to go for walk, then encourage standing meetings or standing desks for a more permanent alternative to a traditional seated desk. This can help to build more movement into workers' days. It's suggested that people burn more calories, reduce back pain and are more productive when standing up.⁽⁵⁾ Mixing up your work pattern is extremely important, particularly when you're working from home and not getting out of the house as much as you would when commuting.

4. Challenges

Employer-led challenges can really help with motivation, especially if there is a reward involved. Challenges can work in a variety of ways. It could be that you're setting employees personal challenges, for example, to hit 10,000 steps a day for 30 days and you'll receive a prize of some sort, whether it be a voucher or a half day of annual leave. Either way, exercise with some form of reward is a great way of encouraging uptake, and sets a clear message that your business is committed to investing in employees' physical health.

If employees truly want to foster a culture of healthy living and exercise, then it's worth encouraging workers to connect with other colleagues through fitness apps. For example, our Optum My Wellbeing app provides users with a space to engage and stay connected with colleagues, friends and family regardless of location. The app encourages users to participate in various fitness challenges, such as step counts, where they can track their progress against others worldwide. This is a great way to ensure employees feel connected and help build a sense of community. The app also monitors a person's mood to ensure their mental wellbeing is being tracked, so the necessary measures can be taken to address any problems that may occur during this time.

5. Discounted Equipment

Many workers find they don't have the correct equipment to participate in certain

sports, which can be disheartening. Luckily, many employers offer employee discount schemes which have discounts for gyms, sportswear, technology and bikes for cycling to work. Employees may not always be aware of these, so it's worth ensuring these are clearly signposted and employees are consistently informed about new offers and discounts.

Whatever your employee strategy is to encourage and facilitate increased physical activity, communication is key. Not only will it help navigate employees to the right resources, but it could also boost engagement and nurture a sense of community. An ongoing strategy will help drive repeat behaviours. If you promote regular exercise, it will hopefully continue beyond the pandemic. For more advice and tips on how to get more active consult your local primary care physician or family doctor.

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DR. SHOBA SUBRAMANIA

Medical Director, Europe
 DR SHOBA SUBRAMANIAN is one of the Medical Directors at UnitedHealthcare Global and a general practitioner by background. She has worked in the assistance industry for many years coordinating hundreds of medical evacuations internationally and escorting patients as a flight doctor herself. Her work has taken her around the globe to various countries including India, UAE, South Africa, Romania, Germany and Cambodia. She has considerable knowledge of global healthcare systems along with expertise in travel health, aviation medicine, occupational health and she recently attained the Diploma in Tropical Medicine from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
 She is an ALS certified VHS doctor with many years experience providing acute care remotely and conducting telehealth assessments for remote and offshore workers. Shoba is responsible for delivering safe medical transportation to our assistance and insurance members and leads our clinical teams in the UK, Europe and USA to achieve this. Her work has gained recognition across the business and she won the Sages of Clinical Excellence Award in 2019.



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