

# Exercising at work: does it increase productivity?

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**T**he workplace has been described as an ideal setting for exercise promotion and many recognize its associated public health potential. Since exercising employees are essentially healthier than sedentary ones, it has been posited that employers stand to benefit from encouraging structured exercise and also less formal physical activity among their workers.

Exercise is increasingly portrayed to employers as an effective means of combating workplace stress and of supporting organizations' aspirations to corporate social responsibility and organizational justice. Indeed, employers may make considerable investment to support work-based exercise facilities. Almost half (48 per cent) of "The 100 Best Companies to Work For 2006" offered gym access to employees, possibly to emphasize care for employees and/or to heighten their workplace satisfaction.

Physical activity is currently regarded as the parent discipline that houses structured exercise. Physical activity influences at least 20 major diseases and also has a positive role in maintaining mental health. Indices of mental health that are pertinent to physically asymptomatic individuals include morale and mood.

Recent work has shown how physical activity has a positive influence on coping skills for work behaviour and for tolerating minor irritations without becoming stressed. Economic analysts have suggested that 70 per cent of UK adults meeting current recommendation for exercising 150+ minutes/week would save the economy £487 million by preventing 2.7 million days of work absence. However, other literature around improved performance or productivity following exercise is vague.

It is important to distinguish short- from long-term effects on specific elements of workplace performance and to determine how employees can act independently to benefit that performance on any given work day. One such mechanism could be through mood enhancement, leading to further developments which make work easier to complete.

Research supports associations of physical activity with acute mood benefits and enhanced psychological affects. Following exercise – even individual sessions – a rapidly evolving pattern of affective improvement seems to arise, the persisting effects of which are responsible for feelings of lowered tension and exhilaration. Thus, exercising may be an effective, short-term strategy for self-regulation of mood. Physical activity can also contribute to positive physical self-perception, positively promote mental health and protect against the development of mental health problems, all of which may be seen as factors within the so-called epidemic of workplace stress.

Since psychosocial features of the workplace contribute to sick leave and underperformance, it is surprising that potential relationships between on-site exercise, mood and work performance have not been better explored. In US employees, one estimate was that depression cost employers \$44 billion per year in lost productivity time. This figure is \$31 billion per year more than that for peers without depression, excluding costs associated with short- and long-term disability.

Emotional concerns may predict job performance more strongly than job satisfaction and employers may be more motivated by improvements in workplace processes, rather than simply focusing on outcomes. For example, organizations could seek to promote mood improvement for its relationship to a range of behaviours that influence the working

environment including organizational spontaneity, pro-social behaviour, managerial fairness, altruism and morale. Indeed, recent research in the UK has identified that a “4A” model (access, ability, attitude and application) often combines powerfully to improve workplace effectiveness. Physical activity can play either a direct or indirect role in facilitating each of these “A” factors, or their effective combinations, toward improved workplace economic performance.

### Evidence of the benefits of exercise

A study of three organizations (two private and one public) in Southwest England revealed that:

- Self-directed exercise – especially that which fits into a typical one-hour lunch break – was associated with important mood benefits.
- Performance increments consistently favoured the exercise condition.
- Exercising was associated with a wide range of beneficially changed work attitudes and perspectives regarding self, tasks and colleagues.
- Trial data also distinguished that a range of process-related variables were each connected to overall self-reported performance improvement but only rarely were these independent of exercise-related mood changes.

The findings suggest that positive changes in self-reported performance outcomes of white-collar employees were mostly linked to the mood changes brought about by exercise. However, despite the positive findings, there are also limitations, such as there being few objective criteria for assessing both mood and performance, and the use of self-reporting questionnaires has been widely criticized.

The challenge of identifying performance in white-collar work remains a major challenge since it is often difficult to compare inputs with outcomes as in productivity studies. Other potential moderators, such as fitness, health, exercise specifics and eating behaviour, were only crudely self-reported.

From these relatively limited data, it is unlikely that employers are going to be queuing to provide gyms. This notwithstanding, the findings provide compelling, positive evidence of acute effects that are part of a growing body of literature pointing in similar directions. The direction and scale of these effects are impressive, given that participants:

- estimated high baseline performance;
- were experienced exercisers; and
- chose their own exercise involvement.

Overall consistency of the findings from both questionnaires and focus groups lends weight to the understanding that work-based exercising has an acute effect on helping employees to become more tolerant colleagues and more resilient workers.

### Competitive advantage

Compared to days when no exercise was undertaken during the working day, exercising improves mood and performance, leading to better concentration, work-based relationships and heightened resilience to stress.

The small, but consistently positive, self-reported performance effects underline the value of providing work-based physical activity opportunities for white-collar employees holding sedentary posts.

Implications for competitive advantage and incentive for increasing active breaks from work are evident, with mutual, multi-faceted benefit to employers and staff. Employers should proactively seek to foster a supportive environment, particularly by challenging exercisers' concerns over time management and negative inter-employee politics.

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