



# Physical Activity at the Workplace: Literature review and best practice case studies

*A Final Report Executive  
Summary to the European  
Commission*

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# **Physical Activity at the Workplace: A review of the evidence**

***A report to the European Commission***

written by

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## Executive Summary

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DG EAC of the European Commission commissioned Ecorys in September 2017 to undertake a literature review of physical activity at the workplace interventions. The study fulfils one of the actions of the Tartu Call for Healthy Lifestyles (September 2017), namely to carry out research to raise awareness of the effectiveness and outcomes of practices to promote workplace physical activity.

### Background

The benefits of a physically active lifestyle in health promotion and disease prevention are well documented and populations are becoming increasingly sedentary in their behaviour. There is a growing evidence base that workplace physical activity interventions can positively influence physical activity behaviour more generally. The most recent Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity (published in 2014) identifies that 13% of physical activities take place at work. Employers and business associations are also in a good position to raise awareness and empower employees to be active in the workplace through a range of interventions.

### Aims and methodology

The key objective of the study has been to complete a review of the literature regarding the effectiveness of workplace physical activity interventions. The review has sought to identify which types of workplace physical activity interventions are effective in changing physical activity behaviour for different workforce sectors and types of workplace. Effectiveness has been considered in terms of the physical activity outcomes, aspects of intervention design (e.g. length/intensity) and contributory motivators, barriers and facilitators. The ultimate aim of the study has been to identify best practices with regard to interventions designed to promote physical activity in the workplace. The research has also sought to identify examples of different physical activity corporate challenges and lessons on how to implement them.

The research was undertaken in two parts. The first involved a systematic review of the existing literature on workplace physical activity interventions. The review was based on a search and retrieval strategy involving rapid searches and a screening protocol (defining parameters for inclusion, such as publication date, geographical scope, language, study type and research themes). The literature review aimed to be as comprehensive as possible within the tight timeframe and resources for the study, both in terms of international coverage of studies and types of interventions covered. The second part of the study focused on identifying good practice interventions and undertaking research on their outcomes and key success factors. The desk-based review incorporated a rapid review of relevant websites including national sport agency websites and national health promotion organisations. This was supported by rapid web searches in various European languages focused on various countries using relevant key word search terms. The review of academic sources (detailed above) also revealed particular interventions that were considered for inclusion. For the final selection of best practice interventions, we conducted telephone interviews with relevant contacts in order to obtain further qualitative perspectives on outcomes and lessons, building on the evidence already available.

## Key findings

Based on a rapid and systematic review of the literature on workplace physical activity interventions, a number of key conclusions can be made with regard to their effectiveness and outcomes:

- The literature review has identified many studies which show positive outcomes for workplace interventions. Most of the studies reviewed measure the short-term effects of interventions on specific physical activity outcomes which are directly related to the intervention (for example, walking or exercise).
- There has been less focus on the effects of workplace interventions on overall physical activity behaviour using measures such as weekly levels of moderate or vigorous physical activity.
- There has also been more limited focus on the effects of interventions on specific groups including health inequality groups – the interventions were largely targeted at employees of all ages and all genders. However where there is a focus on inactive employees, the studies provide positive evidence on the particular benefits of workplace interventions for such groups.
- Evidence on some specific types of interventions (e.g. walking initiatives) is more developed and robust than others (e.g. stair walking).
- There is strong evidence based on the literature and case studies that multi-component interventions particularly those involving information, advice and counselling alongside organised opportunities to take part in activities have the best outcomes.

Through the literature review and case study evidence, it is also possible to identify some particular lessons on the implementation of workplace physical activity interventions. Lessons can be considered from both the perspective of national or regional level programmes that target the corporate sector and interventions that are implemented at the company level:

- The research has highlighted the different needs and aspirations of large and small companies with regard to physical activity interventions. National or regional level programmes help to address the specific information and resource barriers that small business face while larger companies are better equipped to develop more holistic interventions.
- The case studies show that sometimes it is better not to be too ambitious in terms of the intensity of the activities on offer – increasing walking, both within the office and through workplace challenges, is a realistic workplace activity as it is both low cost and low intensity.
- Some of the most successful examples of workplace physical activity interventions are those which allow physical activity to become embedded in the company's culture and daily practices. Managers and leaders in such companies emphasise the importance of physical activity and provide a variety of participation opportunities. Activities are also tailored to meet the needs of different groups and levels of fitness.
- More successful interventions tend to integrate regular moderate physical activity as part of employees' daily work schedule.

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- The case study research has also highlighted a number of common lessons in the implementation of physical activity programmes within the workplace:
    - Leadership and buy-in of senior staff – the case studies show that effective interventions can depend on the buy-in of senior management.
    - Coordination of programmes – a project manager or physical activity champion within the company can help to focus resources on particular actions.

The research has also drawn together some specific evidence on the use of company challenges focused on raising physical activity levels. Step count challenges are shown to be particularly effective and engaging when they utilise pedometers and when employees are encouraged to reach set targets. Cycle to work challenges can lead to high levels of engagement and sustainable change if they incorporate a strong promotional component by providing employees motivation and informative material on cycling to work.

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