

## Views: 5 financially beneficial ways to get employees exercising at work



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There's a new adage that's been gaining in popularity: "Sitting is the new smoking." Prolonged sitting (or not taking frequent opportunities to get up and move) is like smoking in two important ways: It has no benefit in the short term, and it can have both short- and long-term serious consequences to health and productivity.

In a nutshell, prolonged inactivity can undermine the health and productivity of every member of your workforce. Conversely, an active, moving workforce can lead to better productivity, more engagement and greater employee satisfaction and retention. Business leaders need to sit up (or better yet, stand up) and take notice.



### Why movement matters

In 2016, the American Heart Association published a science advisory statement that calls for increased movement throughout the day and cites the accumulating evidence that "...greater time spent in sedentary behavior is associated with all-cause and cardiovascular morbidity and mortality." Movement, or lack of it, in the workplace is important to employee health because:

We're built to move. Marc Hamilton, Ph.D., who studies the effects of sedentary living at the Health and Human Performance Laboratory at the University of Houston, notes that it is common for adults to spend more than nine hours a day being sedentary. The dilemma, as he explains it is:

"Our bodies were built to move all day. When we're depriving ourselves of that kind of essential muscular activity throughout the day, very potent things happen inside our bodies. You can't impact those same cellular processes by going to a gym and doing artificial exercises for 30 minutes."

Lack of movement affects our brains. Extended periods of inactivity during the workday also compromise mental health and cognitive processes. According to research summarized by Dr. James Levine, professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, in his 2009 book, "Move a Little, Lose a Lot," sitting too long can put our brains into a slumbering state, resulting in slower processing speed and impeded problem-solving capability, learning, and memory retention. Research shows

incorporating movement throughout the workday is essential to maximize energy and performance as well as reduce the significant health consequences associated with prolonged periods of inactivity. So, if you want workers at the top of their games mentally and physically, encourage them to get up and move around during working hours.

However, encouraging employees to move during the workday is easier said than done. There is an ingrained mindset that productive workers sit at their desk, and people who are moving around are not getting anything done. Changing that mindset is key to encouraging and increasing movement in the workplace.

### **The role of business leaders and managers**

Business leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the connection between movement during the workday and business performance outcomes. As a result, innovative companies are creating environments, policies and practices to encourage movement throughout the workday. These companies are going beyond the obvious tactic of bringing movable workstations into the office. It's not enough that executive leadership recognizes the value of movement in the workplace; to be effective, movement and activity must be encouraged and rewarded.

Managers have the closest connection to employees and their daily work, which makes their role in these efforts even more important than the top brass. HR leaders realize that front-line managers have business goals and deadlines to meet, which may make it challenging to bring "support employee health" to the top of the checklist. The goal of employee health becomes a priority when front-line managers see that it can actually improve the performance of their teams.

Even managers who have a strong belief in the potential of employee health improvement can struggle with some common misperceptions and myths about physical movement in the workplace. Here's what managers can do to get past these mental roadblocks.

### **Shattering five common physical movement myths**

"Employee health is not my business – it's up to the employee to make movement during work a priority." In reality, workforce health and well-being is every manager's concern when it comes to optimizing the capability of employees to deliver on their individual, business line, and organizational objectives. Employee health and well-being is an essential enabler and multiplier of all other human assets (knowledge, talents, skills, abilities, experience, intelligence, training, judgment, and wisdom) that contribute to sustainable business success.

The Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute has led research that demonstrated the effects of small amounts of physical activity throughout the day on performance. Employees were asked to "move" for anywhere from 2-5 minutes at regular intervals during the day, about every 30 minutes. Notably, this movement was not considered a "break" (although it certainly could involve recovery); instead employees continued to work while moving. This happened in the form of walking meetings,

walking with a headset while on conference calls, and performing stretches or large muscle movements like squats while the employees continued to work. After 90 days, the participants in the study reported higher energy levels, improved engagement, better focus, and heightened intrinsic motivation, even away from work and at home.

Brief movement breaks can also improve mood and influence how employees view their employer, which has implications for turnover rates and customer satisfaction ratings. New generations of employees, including millennials, have come to expect the wellness opportunities offered by the majority of employers today. Successfully recruiting top talent is, to a significant degree, influenced by whether an employer offers a comprehensive wellness program and a culture of health.

The bottom line: Any employer who aims to maximize work quality and quantity will want to create a movement-friendly workplace as a core business strategy. Changes to the work environment and policies that make movement throughout the workday the norm can help promote a high-performing workforce.

“If my team members are not at their desk or workstation, they can’t be productive.” In today’s information-based economy, many employees spend the majority of their workday responding to emails, attending meetings and talking on the phone. A significant portion of this work could be accomplished while on the move. A recent study done at the University of Miami showed that structured walking meetings were an effective way to add physical activity into the workday while maintaining productivity.

According to Dr. John Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard and the author of “Spark: the Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain,” when the body starts moving, the brain “lights up” in almost all areas which helps with improved cognition, creativity and problem solving.

The bottom line: Your employees can activate the brain with movement. When employees are powering through a project to meet a deadline, a movement break may actually help decrease errors and improve the quality of the final work product.

“People cannot perform at high levels and be physically active at the same time.” Yes, there are a few cases where this is true. You don’t want someone doing stretching exercises while operating a vehicle or a machine, or while actually *operating* in a surgical suite. However small periods of movement can be done throughout the day — even while staying put at the workstation or desk — and these periods of activity can make a difference.

James Levine, M.D., Ph.D., and a researcher at the Mayo Clinic, emphasizes that the mere act of getting up out of one’s chair to stand is all it takes to break out of “hibernation mode.”

The bottom line: Standing up can help improve one’s ability to think and standing for intermittent periods while working can also help improve posture and reduces muscle stiffness.

“Supporting movement at work is both expensive and impractical.” While research about the negative effects of sitting for too long have resulted in a surge of useful new office furniture products, such as sit-stand desks or treadmill workstations that allow one to walk at a slow pace while working, employers don’t have to provide every employee with new office furniture. A variety of inexpensive changes to work policy and the environment can make it easy and inviting for workers to move more. Building movement into the workday requires initiative, planning and creativity, but not a huge financial investment.

The bottom line: You can create a culture of movement in a very cost-effective way.

“Movement during the workday is distracting/disruptive to others.” Sure, in open-office arrangements, it can be disruptive when someone works from a standing position. For example, lower cubical walls between individual workstations may not sufficiently dampen noise when someone stands while talking during a conference call. By using teamwork and brainstorming, strategies can be designed and tailored to the job at hand that both add movement and decrease disruption. For example, establish a set time of day when everybody in the office does a stretch break together.

The bottom line: Once everyone understands how important it is to move, it will be easier to encourage people in most any work setting to get creative and figure out how to be both respectful of others and promote everyone’s health and performance.

### **3 simple steps to promote movement at work**

A movement-friendly workplace is one that relies on a comprehensive strategy to encourage movement and minimize sedentary time during the workday. The foundation for this initiative is the recognition that movement during the workday is key for a high-performing workforce. Planning should take into consideration influences at the level of individual workers, teams, and organizational systems. Specific tactics can be grouped under three categories: policies, physical environment and collaboration.

- 1.) Establish policies and guidelines that support and encourage movement at work. Research has demonstrated that employees will move more if they have both permission and support to incorporate more movement into their work day. Leading companies have begun to implement a variety of policies that encourage adding movement into the way work gets done on a daily basis. Managers can support policies by being aware of them and taking action to incorporate these practices into their work as a way to prompt and model desired behaviors. Consider the following:
  - Moving meetings: Encourage meeting participants to stand as often as needed. Create opportunities to stand and stretch or move during meetings that last more than 90 minutes. Consider having a formal “standing” agenda item midway through the meeting that gets everyone up and out of their chairs. Arrange for a facilitated 15-minute movement break during full-day meetings. Brief meetings or huddles can be scheduled as standing events.

- Meeting length/time: Structure all meetings to end 5-10 minutes early so that attendees can get a brief movement break in before their next meeting. Generally avoid scheduling meetings over the typical lunch period.
  - Flexible scheduling: To the extent possible, allow employees to incorporate movement into their day in ways that are most convenient to them, while ensuring they meet essential business needs.
  - Work attire: Promote “business casual” dress guidelines that are professional, yet are conducive to more frequent standing and movement throughout the day.
- 2.) Make the environment “movement friendly.” Your goal is to minimize prolonged sitting time. Managers and supervisors can help support employee health by creating work environments and process adjustments within their sphere of influence.

For example:

- Post examples of desk/workstation exercises that can be done conveniently and unobtrusively throughout the day.
  - Make existing stairwells more attractive through the use of color, good lighting, decoration and cleanliness. A redesigned stairway can become a revolving art gallery space and a fun place to post encouraging, inspirational messages.
  - When making general improvements to existing workspaces, use an active design approach to incorporate workflows around common areas that promote movement and social interaction, for example by centralizing the location of employee mail, office supplies, printers and copiers.
  - Designate and clearly mark approved walking corridors inside larger buildings and complexes, for example by adding directional arrows to floors or walls in wider hallways. These areas can be promoted as preferred corridors for walking meetings.
  - Measure and map walking trails in close proximity to the worksite.
  - Provide shared movement workstations that allow employees to stand and/or walk while using a computer or talking on the telephone.
  - Add standing height tables without chairs to common areas and the periphery of meeting rooms.
  - Introduce software into your time management systems on employee computers that issue informative reminders and prompts to move (or at least stand up) at regular intervals.
- 3.) Be a role model and involve your team members. Nothing is more effective at promoting movement during the workday than consistent role models. This ensures that investments in pro-movement guidelines, policies and environments don’t go to waste. It is important for individuals across all levels of leadership to be considered in an intentional role modeling strategy. Examples of role modeling strategy include:

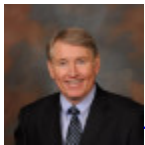
- Recruit, educate and train leaders at every level of the organization who will role model appropriate movement into their workday and encourage their peers and direct reports to join them. Wellness champions can be especially valuable in this role.
- Invite employees to share their personal experiences with increased movement during the workday. Share these experiences in a blog, newsletter or staff meeting to communicate that there are many ways to have a healthier, more active and productive work day.
- Recognize “movement champions.” Consider offering a contest that encourages workers to share photos of themselves moving while conducting regular work tasks.

Frequent movement during the workday can deliver a host of valuable and immediate benefits. These include higher energy levels, improved mood, increased blood flow to major muscle groups and to the brain, and potentially enhancements to learning, memory retention, alertness, creativity, and problem solving.

Providing employees with the opportunity and support to add movement to their workday reinforces the message that the organization and its leaders care about their well-being. Such perceptions can influence employee engagement with their work, which is strongly linked to worker productivity and performance and contributes to better business outcomes.



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