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### **Trialists heal thyselfes**

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# ‘Trialists Heal Thyselves’: An evaluation of a workplace activity initiative for remote and hybrid-remote working clinical trial office staff

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## Introduction

UK NHS guidelines emphasise the need for adults to break up long periods of sitting and screen-work with regular physical activity to both maintain physical and mental health [1]. Within an office setting, active travel initiatives (Cyclescheme, ‘take the stairs’ posters, walking groups, lunchtime groups) can all be used to break up desk-time, promote physical activity during the working day and promote both physical and mental health. From March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, workload within an academic clinical trials unit increased and staff rapidly moved to remote and hybrid-remote working from home (WFH)

A rapid review by Oakman *et al* in Nov 2020 concluded that the impact of WAH on staff health outcomes was strongly influenced by the degree of available support available from employers [2]. The relationship between physical and mental health with WFH is complex and encompasses workload, work/life boundaries, gender and work roles, technical support and the use of performance indicators but measures to encourage staff to stay active and promote good mental health were also identified as factors

## Aims

- Establish a simple initiative to encourage physical activity and promote networking amongst remote and hybrid-remote WFH staff
- Assess the performance of the initiative over a 12 month period according to:
  - Take-up within the workplace
  - Retention
  - Feedback from participants
  - Feedback from non-participants where possible



Figure 1. Route and distance ‘travelled’ using public-access Google map

## Results

- 30 members of staff (45% of the total workforce) participated in the initiative at some point during the 12 month period. A total of 31,014.27km was logged by participants across the 12 months which allowed the route shown in Figure 1, with just over half (16989.16km or 55%) consisting of walking
- The average distance logged was 2584km per month but activity levels logged diminished over time (as shown in Figure 2)
- Jan-Mar 2021 were the peak months of engagement with an average of 3122.8km logged per month. Logged activity dipped sharply in April-May 2021
- 22 staff who participated within the initiative provided feedback:
  - 18 (82%) felt it encouraged them to stay active
  - 12 (57%) reported that it helped them cope with WFH (8 or 38% felt it made no difference and 1 or 4.7% did not find it helped)
  - The monthly prize was not seen as a major incentive with the main motivations listed as contributing to an overall goal (8 or 36%), a personal challenge (4 or 18%), visibility/accountability (4 or 18%) and connecting with others (3 or 14%)
  - Of those who did not participate, 5 provided feedback on their reasons why with added pressure and workload cited as the main reasons

## Conclusions and Limitations

- In the absence of baseline data on staff activity prior to March 2020 or to the introduction of the initiative it was not possible to assess the extent to which the distance challenge increased physical activity levels
- For some staff members the initiative helped promote physical activity but maintaining engagement long-term represented a challenge
- Just over half of respondents thought the initiative helped them cope with remote and hybrid-remote WFH patterns. However, an analysis of the workplace environment, and the factors thought to support this mode of working would be beneficial going forward – especially if remote and hybrid-remote working patterns become established post-COVID19
- No data was collected on workload, working patterns, fitness levels and caring responsibilities and further work is also needed to see whether initiatives like this are fully inclusive and why they appeal to some but not to others



## Methods

**Time period:** January to December 2021 (12 months). This period covered a national lockdown from 5<sup>th</sup> January -16<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and a halt to a phased return to the office in November 2021 due to the emergence of the Omicron variant

**Setting:** A medium-sized academic clinical trials unit comprising 67 members of staff in office-based roles (project management, administration, data management and statistical analysis). Office access for business-critical tasks was permitted throughout 2021 but all staff worked on a remote or hybrid-remote WFH pattern

### Initiative description:

- A voluntary distance challenge was organised to promote physical activity. Staff could opt in and out whenever they wished throughout the year. Participants logged their activity each month in km using a simple Microsoft Teams form either under their own name or a pseudonym. All forms of exercise were accepted, with activities such as walking, running or cycling logged in km or converted into proxy km (30 minutes of activities such as exercise classes or swimming logged as 5km)
- All participants entered into a random raffle for a monthly prize (an e-National Book Token). An administrator tracked overall distance on a public-access Google map following a fictional route
- Update emails sent each month on the running total in km, a monthly ‘destination’ description and location picture, and the monthly raffle winner
- In month 12 of the programme, a SurveyMonkey questionnaire was sent out to all staff members (participants and non-participants) within the trial unit to gather feedback

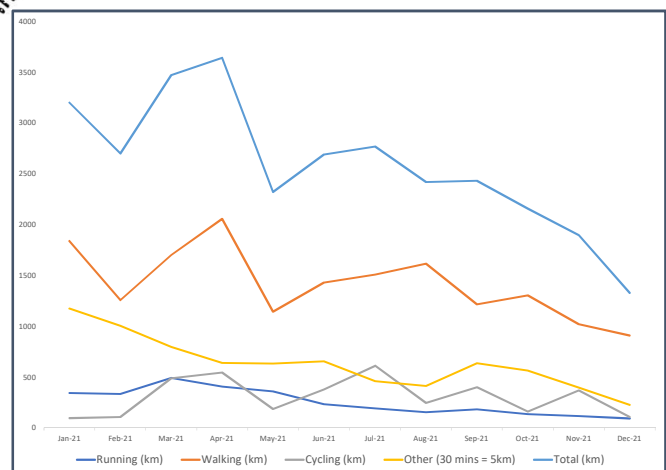


Figure 2. Activity levels in km logged per month (overall total and by mode)

## Key Findings

- Initiatives to encourage physical activity and staff networking can help to support remote and hybrid-remote WFH staff
- Incentives such as prizes had only a limited impact in motivating participation and engagement levels can wane even over a relatively short period of time
- Any measure chosen should be easy to use and allow staff to engage with others and set personal goals

1. Exercise - NHS (www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise)

2. Oakman J, Kinsman N, Stuckey R, Graham M, Weale V. A rapid review of mental and physical health effects of working at home: how do we optimise health?. *BMC Public Health*. 2020;20(1):1825. Published 2020 Nov 30. doi:10.1186/s12889-020-09875