

Employers have a role to play in encouraging increased participation in physical activities

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/too-busy-to-get-active-why-people-should-be-more-active-and-how-they-can-be-motivated/

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Research by Grace Lordan and Debayan Pakrashi quantified the benefits of exercise for mental and physical health. Given that the average person recognizes the benefits but does not meet the recommended amount, how can we motivate people to exercise? Simply disseminating information on the benefits is not enough to motivate people to exercise. Because many of us lack the time or work in sedentary jobs, one policy option is for employers to encourage exercise during work hours. The benefits of a healthier work-force would pay off in terms of reduced absenteeism and productivity gains.



It is recommended that each individual should do 150 minutes of moderate activity each week. This equates to 30 minutes of moderate activity five days a week. The average person in England, however, does well below these levels, doing only one day of sports and exercise per week. Adding to this all other types of moderate activity (including work and housework), the average person is still only about halfway to achieving these government goals with respect to physical activity.



Our [recent report](#) looks at the benefits from physical activity, sports and exercise in terms of a range of both physical and mental health outcomes. Overall, the findings suggest that those that exercise have better mental health and physical health, lower cholesterol and blood pressure levels, are less likely to report having cardiovascular disease or Type 2 diabetes and are more likely to have a healthy weight. In particular, those that follows the recommended guidelines, in comparison to those who are inactive, are 3% less likely to be overweight and 7% less likely to be obese. Additionally, they are 4% less likely to have clinically measured high blood pressure and 6% less likely to have clinically measured high cholesterol. The results also suggest that individuals who exercise five days a week for 30 minutes reduce their probability of being psychologically distressed by 6%. Finally, they have a 4% decreased probability of reporting bad physical health.

The report also finds that the benefits to health can be achieved through any type of moderate physical activity (if you sweat and are out of breath). This is inclusive of work, gardening and housework! However, it is worth noting that while England is not active to the levels that the government wants, the average person is aware of the levels of activity that they should do. They are also aware that they should be doing more. So if people know that they should be doing something and are not, policy options that are primarily based on the dissemination of information are unlikely to get people moving.

The data used in this report points to the fact that individuals are time poor. So, what will get people moving more? Well a logical explanation for the decreasing levels of physical activity is that it is more common for individuals to work in sedentary roles. The data used in this report also reveals that individuals blame busy work schedules for not doing enough physical activity. Employees who are regularly active have better health, mental health, earn higher household income and are more likely to be employed. Given that employers themselves stand to gain if their employees are more physically active, through decreased absenteeism and an increase in productivity from having a healthy workforce, there is a role for them to play in terms of encouraging increased participation in physical activities. To this end, workplace gyms, fun days and regular activity classes are obvious interventions that employers could consider. Additionally, educating employees on the importance of a work/life balance could also prove rewarding and lead to a workforce with a higher overall wellbeing!

But it is not just employers that can help in getting people moving. The report also revealed that individuals would do more activity if they were advised to do so by their GP. Therefore, there is a direct role for GPs to recommend 150

minutes of moderate physical activity per week. Additionally, many individuals believed that they would do more if they had someone to be active with. However, strengthening social networks could be very difficult from a policy perspective, particularly as people are now moving to conducting more and more of their social interactions online.

The report also revealed that more and more individuals are turning to the Internet to get advice on the quantity of activity that they should be doing. They also use the Internet to find information on various types of exercise. This implies that there is a role for government to ensure that an endorsed website dedicated to providing such information is returned *first* on major search engines when individuals search for advice in this regard. This is currently not the case. The [NHS webpage's](#) offering in this regard seems appropriate.

It is hoped that underlining physical activity as a predictor of a range of health outcomes may help to get Britain moving more often. This is particularly important given the increasing trend of obesity. Additionally, policy options around physical activity are more straightforward with respect to tackling the obesity epidemic given that more physical activity is almost always a good thing. This is in contrast to the mixed messages people receive regarding food. The Government wants people to minimise consuming foods that are calorie dense, and yet glossy advertising and the deep pockets of industries promoting these foods counteract these messages. Having a straightforward government message with respect to food intake is also clouded by the fact that nearly all foods are beneficial as part of a balanced diet, but if consumed to excess will adversely affect health. A 'move more' type campaign around physical activity therefore seems like a sensible message, given the cost associated with the alternative – physical inactivity. Both employers and GPs can help in making this happen!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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