

WellSpring

Workout! Physical Activity in the Workplace



Physical Activity Programs in the Workplace: Why Bother?

JOANNE GESELL, MA, EDUCATION COORDINATOR, ALBERTA CENTRE FOR ACTIVE LIVING.

Bottom-Line Benefits

Over 15 million Canadians spend approximately half of their waking hours at work (Health Canada, 2001a). As people are arguably an organization's most valuable resource, concern for employees' health is fundamental in achieving business success.

According to the Tri-Annual Buffet Taylor National Wellness Survey (Health Canada, 2001b), workplace wellness programs have become increasingly important. Canadian organizations are spending more money on wellness programs because healthy employees are valuable company assets. For example, Canada Life reported a return on investment of \$6.85 on each corporate dollar invested on reduced turnover, productivity gains, and decreased medical claims (Health Canada, 2001c).

The Statistics Canada 1997 Labour Force Survey showed that each full-time employee missed an average of 7.4 days in that year (Health Canada, 2001c). Depending on the size of the company and the health of its employees, absenteeism can be an expensive liability. However, after the first six months of the Metro Fit program in Toronto, active municipal employees missed 3.5 fewer days than employees not in the program (Health Canada, 2001b).

Toronto Life found that employee turnover decreased for those in the company fitness program—1.5% versus 15% for non-participants (Health Canada, 2001c). Similarly, BC Hydro employees in a work-sponsored fitness program had a turnover rate of

3.5%, compared with the company average of 10.3% (Health Canada, 2001c).

Why Bring Physical Activity into the Workplace?

Organizations are beginning to be responsible for ensuring that their employees' environment fosters health, not disease. If we believe that all injuries and most illnesses are preventable, then employee health becomes an integral part of each business. Health, like other facets of business, can be both managed and self-managed. In addition, all employees at every level share responsibility for establishing a healthy work environment and promoting healthy lifestyles. Wellness initiatives not only enhance the physical and mental health of employees, they also benefit the productivity, efficiency, and operational performance of the organization (University of Alberta Senate Task Force on Wellness, 2003).

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Physical activity programs in the workplace also give employees access to health and wellness information and the education needed to manage their own health. Eighty-three per cent of the organizations surveyed in the Tri-Annual Buffet Taylor National Wellness Survey (Health Canada, 2001b) cited stress as the major health risk in their organizations. Individual employees who take responsibility for their own health can also learn to manage stress.

In addition, active living programs for employees (and their families and communities) contribute to employee satisfaction and productivity. There is a relationship between physical activity and a short-term economic impact on productivity. A review of the costs and benefits of active employees estimated a 4 to 25% increase in productivity for each physically active employee (CFLRI, n.d.).

What Programs Work?

To be effective and sustainable, active living must be integrated into the company's planning and become part of the organization's employee benefits.

A successful program will

- involve a senior management that supports individual health management;
- meet the needs of employees both in terms of their physical health and general well-being;
- be well-planned, officially introduced, and include a health-education component;
- encourage employees to incorporate active living into their daily lives;
- support active living at work.

All businesses can benefit from workplace physical activity programs. For example, access to bike racks, showers, and change areas are modest investments that have helped some businesses make it easier for their employees to be active.

Company recreational events (e.g., lunchtime walking programs, activity days, ski days, golf days, and team sports) are another way to promote physical activity and the health of employees.

Additionally, organizations might provide flex-time to allow employees to participate in physical activity. Company newsletters could include physical activity and community resource information. Another alternative is to share or subsidize programs in cooperation with community or private fitness centres.

Measuring Your Success

Establish a baseline measure of employee health before the initiative begins, so that you can demonstrate the benefits of an active living program in your workplace. The most prevalent types of workplace illness and injuries in North America are also preventable, or at least modifiable, through physical activity and lifestyle changes (Health Canada, 2001c).

Conditions such as stress, cardiovascular and musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory conditions, and cancer represent 70% of an organization's benefit costs (Health Canada, 2001c). For example, working adults with heart disease cost approximately \$4.5 billion in lost productivity each year in Ontario (in motion, n.d.). Organizations will be concerned with financial measurements, including cost/benefit analysis and return on investment calculations.

Other typical outcome measures might include the

- frequency of employee illness or injury;
- time taken for a disability;
- cost savings in short- and long-term disability, Workers' Compensation, and drug use.

It's best to carry out follow-up research after the program has been running for at least a year to measure the short-term results of the intervention.

Sustaining Your Program

Organizations with a corporate philosophy that both values physical activity and employee health and sustains communications, education, and encouragement are more likely to influence motivation and maintain participation (Wilson, 1990). Other determinants that affect participation rates include the following:

- employees' attitudes towards the program;
- employees' confidence about becoming active;
- social support (Lechner, de Vries, Adriaansen, Drabbels, 1997).

The following can encourage employees to participate in programs:

- convenient times and locations;
- flex-time to allow employees to participate;
- on-site facilities;
- management support and promotion of the program (Crump, Earp, Kozma, and Hertz-Picciotto, 1996).

Ultimately, the organization can only educate and provide the opportunity—it's up to the employee to adopt the more active lifestyle.

Ever Active Workplaces

LINDSAY WRIGHT, BPE, ALBERTA BE FIT FOR LIFE NETWORK.



Project Origins

The Alberta Be Fit For Life (BFFL)

Network is made up of eight resource centres strategically located throughout the province. As each BFFL centre was dealing differently with enquiries about workplace wellness, the network decided to create a central toolkit, which would allow each centre to access the same resources.

The project's development included resource/program scans, focus groups, an advisory committee, and a pilot project, all of which evolved into the Ever Active Workplaces toolkit. All eight BFFL centres were involved in developing this kit, which combined existing resources with original ideas and sections.

What Is the Ever Active Workplaces Project?

This new program will be used by the BFFL Network to facilitate physical activity programming for workplaces. The BFFL centre will support an interested workplace in creating a customized physical activity initiative. The workplace then takes the lead in planning and implementing the program.

One key factor in creating this project was to be able to use the program in all Alberta regions. For example, the program should work in Fort McMurray, downtown Calgary, or in a workplace that a BFFL centre has already worked with for three years. The program is flexible and can fit the needs of each region. Ever Active Workplaces is designed to help the workplace build a supportive environment for physical activity pursuits, education, and events by creating an atmosphere of empowerment and encouragement among work colleagues.

What's in the Toolkit?

Each BFFL centre uses the master toolkit to help plan the program. The centre then customizes the toolkit for each workplace, varying the program to fit each workplace's goals. For example, the toolkit might be tailored to achieve the following three main workplace goals:

- Goal 1—To increase the awareness of physical activity;
- Goal 2—To allow for more physical activity opportunities at work;
- Goal 3—To encourage family participation in physical activity (to reach this goal, the workplace would encourage events and the distribution of information that would support employees' family members being active).

The toolkit includes four sections:

- Section One—Communicating the Message (educational material, project planning tools, and communication ideas);

The Alberta Be Fit for Life (BFFL) Network

The Alberta Be Fit For Life centres provide services, education, and resources to encourage Albertans to be physically active.

The centres offer various physical activity and active living opportunities for schools, workplaces, and community groups.

The BFFL Network is supported through Alberta Community Development, the Alberta, Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation, and the regional colleges and universities that house each centre.

The Ever Active Workplaces project was funded through a two-year grant from Health Canada.

Quotes from Satisfied Ever Active Workplaces

Some comments from the piloting of Ever Active Workplaces...

Question: What was the most valuable part of the program?

Answer: "To see my co-workers try something active and enjoy it!"

Question: Will you continue to be an Ever Active Workplace?

Answer: "We are all busy. It is important to encourage balance in our lives."

Question: Have your feelings towards physical activity changed?

Answer: "Yes, positively. I feel better and this helps me focus and be more effective in my work."

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- Section Two—Getting Active (challenges, physical activity planning ideas, how to incorporate physical activity into a workday);
- Section Three—Staying Motivated (the barriers to becoming active and how to overcome them, articles, motivational tips);
- Section Four—Adopting Lifelong Physical Activity (personal guidelines on physical activity, how to involve your family, places to be active in your area).

These sections are customized for each workplace, depending on what the workplace wants to achieve. The role of the BFFL centre also depends on the needs of the workplace.

Please note: The BFFL Network charges a fee for the start up of the program and the toolkit. This fee varies, depending on the worksite.

What Makes a Successful Ever Active Workplace?

As part of becoming “Ever Active,” the workplace needs to be fully involved in the planning and delivery of the services. Successful Ever Active Workplaces have strong initiative leaders and a supportive management system. Once the workplace has set up an initial program and has shown a commitment to the program, it receives an Ever Active Workplaces certificate.

After this point, the BFFL centre’s role decreases, but the link between the workplace and the BFFL Network continues, as

the BFFL centre is still available for support, new information, and resources.

Ever Active Workplaces was designed to provide expertise and support for more active workplaces. The program’s direction in each region and workplace will differ depending on the worksite. For example, some centres with established workplace programs will integrate Ever Active Workplaces into their existing programming. Others will be starting from scratch. For more information about this program, contact Lindsay Wright at 780-492-0758 or at lindsay.wright@ualberta.ca.

Walk and Roll—A Guide to Active Transportation to, from, and at the Workplace

This guide calls on Canadian workers and employers to work collaboratively, so that employees can participate in daily physical activity.

The guide warns of the critical health risks to modern workers. We increasingly rely on motorized transportation in a new economy that obliges many of us to sit all day at a computer, on the phone, or in meetings.

Developed by a multi-disciplinary team of experts from across Canada, the guide outlines new ways of approaching a workday, from both an employer and employee perspective.

You can obtain this guide by visiting the Go for Green web site at www.goforgreen.ca.

A Framework for Building a Workplace Physical Activity Program

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How does a workplace design and implement a successful workplace physical activity program? Over the last few years, Alberta Centre for Active Living staff have been asked this question many times. A 1999 needs assessment of Alberta workplaces also identified the need for a resource to help companies start (and then evaluate) workplace physical activity programs (Poon, Zuck, Plotnikoff, & Horne, 2000).

Based on this demand, the Alberta Centre for Active Living decided to create this tool. This three-year initiative, which included ongoing input from stakeholders, ended in March 2003 with the development of the *Workplace Physical Activity Framework*. (Funding for the project came from the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation.)



An “Ecological Perspective”

After reviewing current literature in workplace physical activity programs, the project team chose to use an ecological perspective. Research showed that programs focused on individual employees were less successful than those considering the employee *and* the environment (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988; Sallis & Owen, 1997).

An ecological perspective takes into account several levels of intervention that may affect employee participation. This resource focused on five levels—the individual, social, organizational, community, and policy levels.

A program that considers all the various factors influencing the employee and his or her participation is more likely to succeed. For example, a company-sponsored active living event supported by management (as well as front-line employees) will attract more staff. On the other hand, a community-based event will have more staff participation

than an event that only has buy-in from management.

These ecological levels can also interact with one another. For example, the combination of factors such as shift work, legislation affecting employees working alone, and the location of facilities for physical activity can affect employee participation.

The Program Standard

So where does a workplace program start? The first part of the framework, the Program Standard, outlines how to get started. For example, the “groundwork” for any program includes building support from employers, unions, owners, and employees, as well as a thorough needs assessment of workers and their interests. Also included in this stage is an assessment of the physical resources available at the worksite and in the surrounding area.

The next phase, “construction,” involves building capacity in the five ecological levels listed above.

This part of the process could include

- providing educational material for employees (individual level);
- developing company policies to support physical activity (organizational level);
- partnering with community members (community level);

or

- encouraging company tournaments (social level).

“Detailing,” the third phase, addresses the need for efficient program administration (e.g., evaluation and record keeping) and the importance of good safety and risk management plans.

The Audit Tool

The second part of the framework, the Audit Tool, is an evaluation checklist that allows a company to assess whether it is meeting the actions recommended in the Program Standard. Workplaces can use the Audit Tool to monitor progress and identify areas for improvement.

The two parts allow a workplace to understand the elements of a good physical activity program and how to measure the program against a standard.

The Pilot Results

The final stage was to pilot the project in a variety of workplaces. Feedback from pilot sites was positive, although some participants suggested including examples of “best practices”—resources such as policies, needs assessments, and evaluation forms.

People who tested the tools in their workplaces generally appreciated the construction theme of the framework.

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Several organizations also suggested that a large workplace might want to assess its different sections separately in the Audit Tool, rather than completing one form for the whole organization. Most of these suggestions were incorporated into the final version of the framework.

The Program Standard and Audit Tool were designed to set a high standard for successful programs and to be useful for various types and sizes of workplaces. It will be interesting to hear the feedback as the framework is put into use.

The framework is available from the Alberta Centre for Active Living's web site at www.centre4activeliving.ca/research/resresources.html.

Project team members:

- Ron Plotnikoff, PhD, Senior Research Associate, Alberta Centre for Active Living, and Associate Professor, University of Alberta;
- Allan Fein, MSc, PhD Cand., University of Toronto;
- Leah Milton, BN, Workplace Health Consultant;
- Tricia Prodaniuk, BPE, Master's Cand., University of Alberta;
- Val Mayes, HBOR (Honours Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation), MEd.

What's Shaking at the University of Alberta? A Best-Practice Workplace Wellness Plan

KATHY GARNSWORTHY, COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING COORDINATOR, ALBERTA CENTRE FOR ACTIVE LIVING.

A Blueprint for Workplace Wellness

Workplace wellness is alive and active at the University of Alberta (U of A). The recently released *Final Report of the Senate Task Force on Wellness* includes a wide range of recommendations to improve the health of faculty, staff, and students (University of Alberta Senate Task Force on Wellness, 2003). In fact, the task force is aiming high—to make the U of A the “healthiest University in Canada” (p. 2).

As part of “developing an integrated, campus-wide wellness vision” (p. 2), the task force's mandate was to

- look at the current status of the university's health and wellness initiatives;
- critically examine any gaps and challenges and to propose plans and solutions;
- promote “practical and sustainable” ways in which the university's population can attain a healthier lifestyle (p. 2).

Realizing the need to involve major stakeholders from the beginning (and to gauge the current state of campus wellness), the task force organized public hearings, set up a web site to

receive comments, held meetings, received submissions, and distributed comment cards to staff and faculty.

The university community identified several key issues:

- lack of an integrated approach to a campus-wide wellness vision;
- difficulty in accessing fitness facilities and programs;
- roadblocks to achieving a study-work-life balance;
- increased stress;
- rapid change;
- nutrition barriers; and
- dealing with the consequences of smoking and the flu (p. 2).

Physical Activity Recommendations

Of course, many of the report's recommendations relate to physical activity. Many of these recommendations were originally suggested by U of A's Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, including the idea for an “Active Campus,” a proposal for a wide range of initiatives to improve healthy living among the university's population (p. 16).

The task force report lists other physical activity recommendations suggested by the faculty, for example,



- a campus-wide communications plan to encourage physical activity among students, staff, and faculty;
- a recreational physical activity plan (also campus-wide); and
- a research plan to evaluate the initiative (p. 9).

The Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation has hired Dr. Cantelon, a retired professor from the School of Physical and Health Education at Queen's University, in part to help build on the physical activity recommendations in the task force's report.

Dr. Cantelon's "wish list" includes visible measurements of successful programming that he would like to see implemented at the end of his one-year contract at the U of A.

First, he would like to see a working steering committee (with representation from senior administration, students, faculty, and staff) charged with implementing the report's recommendations. Given the professional expertise located in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, Dr. Cantelon believes that the faculty is best suited to organize such a committee.

Second, he hopes that the university will continue to redefine selected buildings in

certain campus sectors as "multi-purpose" (i.e., using new and renovated campus buildings both for academic purposes and for physical activity). For example, the new Lister Hall campus residence includes the David Tuckey Gymnasium. This building will be used both for Campus Recreation programs and for "pick-up" activities for residence students.

Finally, Dr. Cantelon notes that while physical activity credit courses offered by the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation can only accommodate 1,700 students, 6,000 students register for them. These courses are highly popular as credit electives in all faculties (except Medicine). However, space and instructor limitations restrict the number of students accepted. More multi-purpose facilities would help to solve this problem.

What Happens Next?

So, what's the next step for the U of A's workplace plan? Dr. Louis Francescutti (task force chair) is hopeful that the university's board of governors will adopt the report's recommendations at its next meeting early this fall.

After support from senior administration is in place, the challenge will be to find resources for the initiative and

a way to implement the recommendations.

Dr. Francescutti sees the establishment of a wellness office on campus as the logical next step. According to the report, the wellness office would provide "guidance and direction to the University, coordinate communications about programs and resources, and facilitate an integrated approach to supporting a healthy academic and work environment" (p. 15).

"This report could change the way the university does business" (Dr. Louis Francescutti, Chair, Senate Task Force on Wellness).

Dr. Francescutti, who sees his work on the task force as the "most exciting thing he's ever done," calls the report a first step towards creating an environment that supports healthy living for all members of the university—an environment that also "ensures that the right choice is the easy choice."

For more information about the *Final Report of the Senate Task Force on Wellness*, visit www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/senate/nav01.cfm?nav01=16198 (click on Links).

News from the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Home Support Exercise Program (HSEP) in Alberta

The Alberta Centre for Active Living and the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging are moving forward with the HSEP in Alberta. This physical activity intervention (accessible through Alberta Regional Health Authorities) will reach frail elderly people through home-care.

The Alberta Centre for Active Living has partnered with the Calgary Health Region for the urban HSEP pilot. (HSEP training sessions will take place in late October 2003.) Calgary home-care workers will then be able to go through the HSEP with their older adult clients. A second pilot in a predominantly rural region is scheduled for early 2004. For more information, please visit the centre's web site at www.centre4activeliving.ca/Education/OlderAdults/Projects.html.

2002 Alberta Survey on Physical Activity

As part of its mandate to provide credible and user-friendly physical activity information, the Alberta Centre for Active Living has monitored the status of physical activity in Alberta since 1995. This fall, we will publish the 2002 Alberta Survey on Physical Activity.

The sample for the centre's survey included 1,209 adults aged 18 years and over. Three separate sub-samples represent the cities of Edmonton and Calgary and the rest of the province. This survey focuses on leisure-time physical activity levels (taking into account several intra-personal, socio-demographic, and environmental variables). Watch the centre's web site (www.centre4activeliving.ca) for more details.

What Is Health in Action (HIA)? (www.health-in-action.org)

HIA is an interactive web site designed to serve the needs of Albertans in the fields of health promotion and injury prevention. Supported by the Alberta Centre for Active Living, HIA is an easy-to-use on-line resource for practitioners. Visit the web site at www.health-in-action.org/News/titles.shtml for more information about getting connected with HIA.

The Canadian Health Network (CHN)

Are you aware of credible Canadian web-based resources focusing on the role of physical activity in disease prevention among Aboriginal or other ethnic populations? If so, please send the links or information to Pauline Poon, CHN Project Manager, at pauline.poon@ualberta.ca. Visit the CHN Active Living Health Centre at www.canadian.health.network.ca.

WellSpring Has a New Look!

To make *WellSpring* more compatible with our other publications, we've gone two-colour and revamped the design. Contact Kathy Garnsworthy at kathy.garnsworthy@ualberta with any comments on our new design.

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Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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