



# Physical Activity in the Workplace

A guide to promoting physical activity in the workplace



Compiled by  
**Waterford Sports Partnership**

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## » Introduction

In today's society sedentary lifestyles are on the increase and this is a growing concern, thus, it is important that people are targeted appropriately. With almost half the Irish population in employment, what better place to encourage a more active lifestyle than in the workplace. It has also been noted by The Centre for Health Promotion Studies that the workplace has been suggested as a favourable setting for the promotion of exercise "because of established channels of communication, existing support networks and opportunities for developing corporate norms of behaviour" (Centre for Health Promotion Studies 2001). Current recommendations state that an accumulation of at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity most days of the week is necessary for health benefits (Health Promotion Unit, 2001). Due to time constraints people are finding it more difficult to allocate parts of their day to physical activity. The workplace can be a useful setting to incorporate physical activity because it can assist those who generally cannot find the time outside their working hours, for example, a 20 minute walk during lunch or walk to and from work. The Waterford Sports Partnership (WSP) Strategic Plan 2003-2006 aims to develop and support programmes designed at increasing general participation in sport and physical activity. This guide has been developed to target workplaces and offer a resource to employers and staff that will assist in the promotion of physical activity.

### **Aim of this guide**

To provide organisations with a resource for promoting physical activity in the workplace.

### **Main Objectives**

The objective of this guide is to promote the benefits of a physically active workforce and to provide a structure in order to make it easier to encourage the workforce to be more active through:

- » Increasing awareness of the importance of physical activity
- » Promoting the benefits of an active lifestyle to physical, psychological and social well-being
- » Organising and running sports events and activities within the company

**Good luck with implementing activity programmes in your organisation and remember...  
"an active workforce is a healthy and happy workforce"!**

# » Why physical activity in the workplace ?

**T**wo of the main questions that may be asked are “**why physical activity**”? and more importantly “**why in the workplace**”?

First and foremost, it is well established that physical activity has many health benefits and these are listed below. The National Health and Lifestyle Survey report (2003) states that 21% of respondents did not take part in exercise at all in 1998, this figure increased to 28% for the year 2002. It is evident from these figures that physical inactivity has increased which leaves people at risk of premature death, chronic disease and disability.

It is quite clear that society has become more competitive and this is reflected in the workplace. Stress-related illness is more frequent due to increasing stress levels in daily life. It is established that physical activity will reduce stress, therefore, facilitating physical activity initiatives will make a difference to the health of an organisation’s workforce.

## **Physiological and Psychological Benefits of Physical Activity**

- » Contributes to healthy bones, muscles, and joints
- » Increases energy and promotes a feeling of well-being
- » Reduces body fat and tones muscles
- » Reduces stress
- » Decreases the risk of stroke, colon cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity
- » Improves co-ordination and balance
- » Reduces the risk of coronary heart disease
- » Improves coordination between the heart, lungs and other organs
- » Helps relaxation

## **Benefits of a Physically Active Workforce**

### **BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYEES:**

- » Improves fitness and health
- » Improves productivity and morale
- » Improves team spirit and job satisfaction
- » Reduces stress
- » New hobby interest/sense of purpose/involvement
- » A means of getting to know other people in the workplace
- » Improves concentration and mental sharpness
- » Aids relaxation

### **BENEFITS FOR ORGANISATIONS:**

- » Reduces absenteeism and staff turnover
- » Reduces stress in the workplace
- » Improves productivity
- » Improves motivation and morale amongst staff
- » Greater efficiency in the company as a whole
- » Improves corporate image/loyalty
- » Attractive addition to a recruitment package
- » Improves relations between management and staff

## » How to get started

**M**uch of the information in this guide will give suggestions for events that can be organised to promote physical activity in the workplace. The previous section provides the rationale and supports the importance of having an active workforce and will be extremely useful in terms of presenting the idea to management or peers.

This section will provide an outline to assist in the successful promotion of physical activity in the workplace. This outline consists of a series of steps that can be taken by your organisation. It is important to recognise that these steps will vary from one organisation to the next but in the majority of cases all steps will be completed either formally or informally. The steps include:

- 1. Management Support**
- 2. Establishing an organising committee**
- 3. Planning**
- 4. Communication and Motivation**

### **1. Management Support**

For any physical activity programme or any health initiative to be successful it is vital that the programme has management support. Every employee at every level including management has responsibility for creating a healthy work environment and promoting healthy lifestyles.

#### **HOW TO ENLIST MANAGEMENT SUPPORT:**

- A.** Arrange a meeting with management.
- B.** Outline the benefits of a physically active workforce to employees and to the organisation (outlined in previous section). Concern and care for the health of staff is essential to achieve business success and remind management that healthy employees enhance an organisation's competitive position.
- C.** Outline possible areas where management support may be required.
  - i.** Use of company facilities
  - ii.** Financial support
  - iii.** Flexi – time
  - iv.** Allocation of resources e.g. Notice Board to advertise events, or reminder messages on how to stay active

## 2 Establishing an organising committee

The size of an organisation will determine who and how many are involved in the organising committee. In order to establish the committee one should consider having a representative from management, human resources, health and safety, finance and a number of enthusiastic energetic staff. Support is needed for any programme to be successful hence the necessity for the committee to share the workload. This committee will be responsible for deciding which initiatives take place and to whom the workload can be delegated for individual events in order to ensure success.

## 3 Planning

Once the committee has been established a number of issues must be addressed. These include consultation, research, selection, running the event and evaluation.

### CONSULTATION

Determine the level of interest in physical activity. This will answer the question “**what do staff want?**” It is important that staff are realistic in their ideas and suggestions. In order to obtain these ideas the committee must decide how much time they can afford to devote to assessment. For example, will the approach be informal chats over a coffee or will the approach be e-mailing a questionnaire to all staff which may be more time consuming but may suit larger organisations. A sample questionnaire is provided in the folder.

### RESEARCH

Once the level of interest is determined the committee must decide what activities can realistically be fitted into the workplace environment. This will answer the question “**what is possible?**” Issues such as costings and resources will need to be addressed.

For example:

- » Are there facilities in-house that can be used?
- » If it is not possible to get access to certain facilities in-house can the local leisure facilities, community hall or club pitches be used?
- » Check out insurance - staff may be covered under the company's insurance
- » Safety of participants – a sample Par-Q questionnaire is included in the folder. It is important to consider asking all participants to fill out one of those forms to ensure that they are suitable for participating in physical activity.

### SELECTION

When dealing with activity programmes it is important that they are fun, sociable and encourage maximum participation. Sport can be an easy way to ensure social interaction and ‘fun’. Options can vary from team sports such as soccer, volleyball or tag rugby to individual sports such as swimming and walking. All of these can be organised in tournament / league style to ensure involvement of all employees who want to participate.

However, organised sport does not necessarily suit all, therefore the provision of aerobics / circuits / yoga / pilates classes is another alternative that may encourage employees to be more active. Another option would be to organise walking groups and walking routes in the vicinity of your organisation so people can participate at lunch hours etc.

Activities can be prioritised in order of suitability to the workplace environment, employee interest and level of participation amongst staff. It is important to ensure that the programmes implemented meet the demands and needs of employees in terms of their physical health and overall sense of well-being. The programme should be flexible and allow employees to choose how best to incorporate active living into their daily lives.

### **RUNNING THE EVENT**

The planning process of an event will answer two specific questions:

- A** What are we trying to achieve?
  - » Identify needs and priorities
  - » Set clear aims and objectives for the specific event
- B** What are we going to do?
  - » Establish space, time and resources

#### **Organisation of space**

- Suitability of venue
- Safety considerations

#### **Organisation of time**

- What is the appropriate time to do the activity? (Lunch / before work / after work / evening / weekend)
- Is there enough time to do the activity during lunch etc.

#### **Organisation of resources**

- What equipment is required?
- What other costs are involved and how will they be met?
- Who is needed / available to run the event

### **EVALUATION**

It is important that the committee include evaluation in the overall plan. Evaluation is the process of assessing what has been achieved and how it has been achieved. It means looking critically at the activity programme i.e. what worked well and what could be improved. Evaluation can be done at various different levels. A simple method of evaluating a programme is to calculate participation rates and adherence levels (if a long-term programme). A more detailed evaluation would involve asking people for feedback formally or informally e.g. questionnaire or a chat over coffee. Example of areas that could be reviewed are:

- » Participation rates in activity programmes
- » Participant satisfaction
- » Perceived Value
- » Management commitment

Organisations may also wish to consider reviewing whether the activity programmes are encouraging any changes in physical activity levels or are having any impact on other areas such as productivity, morale etc.

## 4 Communication and Motivation

### Communication

Communication is vital to ensure that any activity initiative is successful. Not only does the organising committee have to work together but it must successfully communicate with other interested parties e.g. providers (halls/equipment/catering), qualified instructors (eg: yoga, aerobics etc.) and the participants.

Communication needs to be effective. There are three main components that will determine the type of communication to be used:

- » size of the organisation
- » available technology
- » available resources

Organisers can communicate news of an event by written and / or verbal communication. Written can be in the form of letters, memos, reports or posters. These can be posted on notice boards, sent in payslips or by global mail shot on e-mail. Samples of posters advertising events and promoting physical activity are included in the folder. Verbal communication may be more appropriate for smaller organisations.

### Motivation

The organisation has a role in educating and providing opportunities for its employees to choose a more active lifestyle. Ongoing motivation however is vital. The organisation can undertake many activities that help employees make active and easy choices e.g. motivational notices, a variety of activities, spot prizes for certain events, etc. Continued communication, education, encouragement, corporate philosophy and behaviour are the critical factors that influence motivation and sustained participation.

Now that the team is in place, management are supportive and the planning process has been completed, read on for ideas and programmes.

# » Activity Ideas in the workplace

It is important to offer a variety of activities to cater for a maximum number of participants. The table below outlines the various types of activities that will be discussed in this section.

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## Creating the Environment

Businesses can take a variety of actions to encourage regular physical activity among employees.

These may include:

- » Developing a company physical activity policy, which encourages an active workforce. This does not have to be complicated or lengthy but it ensures the first step in commitment to a healthy workforce.
- » Implementing awareness and education campaigns highlighting the benefits of physical activity and providing information on opportunities to participate in physical activity in the local community
- » Provision of bicycle racks in an open safe environment
- » Providing access to shower facilities and changing areas. These could be shared among a number of companies
- » Stairways made attractive and accessible
- » Encourage placement of motivational signs at points of decision making e.g. having a sign at the lift suggesting to use the stairs instead
- » Support for regular recreational events and team sports
- » Flexible working hours where possible; allowing employees to participate in physical activity during the working day (e.g. longer lunch breaks).
- » Support for the provision of an information notice board. This space could be used for advertising upcoming events. This could also advertise a list of facilities in the local area (e.g. tennis club, athletics track, parks, sports clubs etc).

### **Building activity into the working day**

Various motivational posters or 'Thought for the day' e-mails are useful tools to encourage participation and increase awareness of how to incorporate activity into the working day. The erection of distance signs may encourage staff to walk/cycle to work. Distance signs can be applied in many workplaces especially if they are located in an industrial estate. Motivational signs could also be used at bus stops to indicate that an organisation is 10 minutes walk away etc.

Many office based jobs are sedentary in their nature (i.e. sitting at a desk). Therefore, it is worthwhile considering ways of encouraging staff to be as mobile as possible. For example, rather than taking the lift use the stairs.

### **Themed Days / Weeks**

There are many nationally organised themed days / weeks throughout the year, for example, 'National No Smoking Day' run by the Irish Cancer Society, 'Irish Heart Week' run by the Irish Heart Foundation, or 'European Car Free Day' run by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Transport. These themed days / weeks can be useful in promoting physical activity because there will be support networks available from National Bodies. While these events are a useful tool to aid the process of promoting physical activity it is also worth considering organising an in-house themed week such as a "Physical Activity Awareness Week". This could simply involve a poster campaign and a 'Thought for the day' e-mail along with some fun activities. A sample of ideas for posters and e-mails is included in the folder.

### **Walking**

Walking is the simplest, safest and one of the most effective forms of exercise. Not only does regular walking benefit the heart and lungs, but also keeps bones, muscles and joints in good condition and increases the feeling of well-being. This sense of well-being helps in coping with the stresses and strains of modern day living. Another positive aspect of walking is that it does not require expensive equipment or facilities. For these reasons walking is one of the simplest initiatives that can be introduced into a workplace. Lunchtime walks are easy to organise and only require a set time, meeting place and enthusiastic leader..

For those starting off, a general guide for time and distance would be to walk 1 mile in 20 minutes. A fitter walker could cover 1 mile in 15 minutes. The Irish Heart Foundation highlights some very useful pointers in relation to walking. A poster version is included in the folder.

### Sports Tournament / League

A variety of sports can be introduced into an organisation through tournaments or friendly games. For all sports it is important that there is a general understanding of the rules. The folder contains a sample of suggested rules for 5-side soccer, basketball, tennis, and tag rugby. These sports prove very popular in workplace activity programmes.

#### CHECKLIST FOR RUNNING A TOURNAMENT / LEAGUE

These events generally happen over a number of nights / weeks and can support a charity. Along with planning areas discussed earlier, there are a few specific pointers worth noting for these activities.

- » Designate one person to oversee the event
- » Appoint a captain for each team. This person is responsible for submitting team members and having their team together on the night with money collected etc.
- » Have contact numbers / e-mails of captains
- » If it is a tournament, conduct a draw well in advance to ensure all teams know what time they are on etc. This is to ensure that the appropriate amount of games is played on each night and that all teams get a game. An example of a draw for an interdepartmental 5-a-side soccer tournament comprising 8 teams is included in the folder
- » Plaques / prizes are organised if appropriate
- » Appropriate equipment is available for the event e.g. nets, tag rugby belts, balls etc.
- » Ensure that the league table is placed in a location where all employees can check playing times
- » If necessary, ensure a referee is appointed for the event and equipped with a whistle and stopwatch
- » Coloured bibs for teams will be required or alternatively organise teams in different coloured tops
- » Encourage participation by as many people as possible and promote a bit of fun during the event.

### Seasonal Sports Challenges

There is usually an increased interest in a particular sport when a nationwide or worldwide sporting event is taking place e.g. Rugby/Soccer World Cup, Wimbledon, and The Irish Open Golf etc. As activity organisers it is worth using these events to your advantage in order to capture the interested groups. Below are three examples of what can be done:

- » Interdepartmental Tag Rugby once a week during Rugby World Cup or the Six Nations Competition
- » Tennis Courts booked during Wimbledon. This can be organised as a league or an informal 'fun' evening of tennis
- » Soccer League / tournament during the European Cup or World Cup competition

### Exercise Classes

Exercise classes can be incorporated into workplace activity programmes. These can be very effective however there are some factors that should be considered before commencing. Below are a few tips:

- » Ensure classes meet the needs of employees
- » Ensure the time of the class suits staff in order to facilitate maximum participation
- » Engage a qualified instructor with experience in the individual discipline
- » Ensure Public Liability insurance covers the venue. The instructor should have his / her own professional indemnity insurance and should be asked to produce a copy.
- » Provision of equipment. What are the instructors' requirements?
- » Provision of a suitable room (size, ventilation, is floor suited to activity?)
- » Appropriate screening procedure by instructor. The instructor is adequately trained in screening procedures and his / her advice should be adhered to
- » Monitor attendance at classes by using a sign-in sheet
- » Sports and Social club may wish to subsidise the cost for employees

### Below is an outline of popular classes that may be considered

#### AEROBICS

Using the same large muscle group, rhythmically, for a period of 15 to 20 minutes or longer while maintaining 60-80% of your maximum heart rate.

In an aerobics class, moves are at a low or high intensity. There are three different types of aerobic classes:

- 1 Low-Impact Aerobics
- 2 High-impact Aerobics
- 3 Step Aerobics

#### CIRCUIT

Circuit training is the execution of a selected number of exercises in a determined sequence and time (e.g. there may be 12 exercise stations where the work time at each station can be between 35-60 seconds).

There are three different types of circuits:

- 1 Aerobic
- 2 Anaerobic
- 3 Local Muscular endurance

Generally these exercises are combined and this results in a mixed circuit.

#### **YOGA**

A system of exercises for attaining bodily and/or mental control and well-being. Various forms of yoga include poses for building strength and flexibility, breathing exercises for cleansing and/or meditation for relaxation and stress reduction.

#### **PILATES**

Can be best described as a cross between yoga and weightlifting. The main components are resisting your own weight, controlled breathing, spine alignment and abdominal clenching.

#### **CALLANETICS**

A system of physical exercise which involves frequently repeated small movements of the muscles and is intended to make the body firmer and more attractively shaped.

### **Other considerations for healthy living**

While this guide's main focus is the promotion of physical activity it is important to recognise the other important areas for consideration in a workplace health promotion programme. These include healthy eating, alcohol, stress and mental well-being and smoking.

#### **HEALTHY EATING**

Nutrition plays a vital role in the growth, repair and maintenance of healthy bodies. The workplace is an ideal setting to encourage and increase awareness of the importance of a healthy balanced diet.

#### **ALCOHOL**

Alcohol is a major health issue in today's society. In the workplace, staff performance, safety and absenteeism can suffer as a result of the after effects of alcohol consumption.

#### **STRESS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING**

The impact of stress on our lives is being increasingly acknowledged and recognised. Stress can be defined as the mismatch between the demands placed on a person and the perceived ability to meet these demands resulting in a negative impact on a person's mental well-being.

#### **SMOKING**

Research has proven that smoking is a major risk factor in the development of many serious health problems. The implementation of The Public Health (Tobacco) Act 2004 entirely bans smoking in the workplace. However companies can still promote smoking cessation programmes for their workforce in order to continue to support staff.

While these areas are beyond the scope of this guide, much information is available to assist employers in implementing programmes that adopt the holistic approach to healthy lifestyles at work. Contact the local Health Promotion Office for more information and guidance.

The following section provides a resource list that will assist co-ordinators to obtain more information in relation to organisations that assist and provide resources for physical activity programmes. It is worth noting that some of these organisations e.g. Irish Heart Foundation and Health Promotion Unit will also assist in the promotion of other important areas of workplace health promotion.

## Resource List

Organisation	Programmes	Procedure	Costs
Waterford Sports Partnership	Assistance in providing information and guidance in relation to promoting physical activity.	Contact WSP Tel: 058 21192 / 051 849855 Web: www.waterfordsportspartnership.ie	Free
Irish Heart Foundation (IHF)	Happy Heart at Work programme	Contact IHF for a 'Happy Heart at work' Co-ordinator resources pack <b>or</b> more specifically a 'Co-ordinators Guide for the Happy Heart Lifestyle Challenge' Tel: 01 6685001 Web: www.irishheart.ie Website also contains a lot of useful information.	For Lifestyle Challenge: costs vary 2004 Charges a125 < 50 employees a200 < 100 employees This is also included in the Co-ordinator's pack.
Irish Heart Foundation (IHF)	Slí na Sláinte I and II Slí challenge	Contact IHF and a member of the Slí team will visit to discuss the possibility of setting up a new Slí walking route. Tel: 01 6685001 Web: www.irishheart.ie Click on Slí na Sláinte	The cost related to Slí II falls into two categories: 1. Motivation Signs 2. Services, materials provided by IHF. A breakdown of cost can be found on the website. If an organisation believes they may experience difficulty in meeting costs please contact Slí Programme Manager to discuss further.
Health Canada	Stairway to Health	Log onto 'Stairway to Health' website and register company. Resources on this site include posters, newsletters etc. www.activelivingatwork.com and click on stairway to health icon.	Free
The Alberta Centre for Active Living	Workplace Physical Activity Framework	This document can be downloaded from the web address below. It may be useful for setting up physical activity programmes www.centre4activeliving.ca Click on research, Click on research resources, Scroll down, Click on Workplace Physical Activity Framework, Register your company to access this document.	Free
European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP)	Useful documents for programmes	Some documents that may be useful include: Models of Good Practice Healthy employees in healthy organisation. Questionnaires for self-assessment in workplace health promotion. All documents can be downloaded from www.enwhp.org	Free

**Other useful information sources include;**  
Health Promotion Unit: [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)

Health Service Executive: [www.sehb.ie](http://www.sehb.ie)  
Irish Sports Council: [www.irishsportsCouncil.ie](http://www.irishsportsCouncil.ie)

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SLAN (Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes and Nutrition)

HBSC (Health Behaviour in school aged children), National University of Ireland Galway; April 2003

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Get a life, get active handbook. A handy guide of physical activity for a healthier heart, Ireland needs a change of heart campaign, 2001

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Supporting Healthy Lifestyles: A guide to making sustainable and effective lifestyle changes in the workplace, Health Promotion Department, 2003

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Waterford Sports Partnership Strategic Plan 2003 - 2006



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