Unhealthy hearts

A sedentary lifestyle often comes with the territory of an office job, but so can countless health problems. We look at how to promote a more active workforce.

Sedentary living is an increasing problem. With research showing it to be causing more global deaths (5.3 million) than smoking*, it’s become the silent killer.

Office workers are especially at risk of the health consequences of sedentary lifestyles, which include heart disease and cancer. What compounds this risk for them is the way most people work – sitting still for long periods of time and not being able to engage in physical activity for an eight hour period. They rarely get any form of vigorous movement in this time unless they have developed healthy habits such as taking the stairs multiple times during the working day or going to the gym on their lunch break.

In addition, the majority of sedentary workers report that time is why they struggle to add exercise into their daily routine – an hour in the gym at lunch just isn’t feasible for most people.

But studies increasingly show that living a more sedentary lifestyle can pose serious health risks, which may well sound alarm bells for many office workers in the UK. Research reveals that the average British office worker spends 6.8 hours at their desk each day, and may well sound alarm bells for many office workers in the UK. The UK’s National Health Service suggests that a sedentary lifestyle is the way most people work, which is estimated to cost the UK economy £11 billion each year.

**Health impacts**

The UK’s National Health Service suggests that a sedentary lifestyle can have an extremely negative impact on people’s health. Excessive sitting can impact the body’s metabolism, affecting how we regulate sugar, blood pressure and break down fat.

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“Shockingly, British office workers are spending less time outdoors than prisoners”
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Meanwhile, research from the University of Queensland has found that being disconnected with nature has immense impacts on both physical health and emotional wellbeing, and is linked to increased stress, higher blood pressure and decreased self-esteem.

**Move more, sit less**

“Physical inactivity is one of the most significant global health crises of the moment,” warns Dr Mike Knapt, Associate Medical Director at the British Heart Foundation. “Levels of physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour in the UK remain stubbornly high, and combined, these two risk factors present a substantial threat to our cardiovascular health and risk of early death.

“Making physical activity easier and more accessible for all is of paramount importance if we are to reduce the burden of inactivity-related ill health.”

According to research by Nuffield Health, the most effective interventions for inactive office workers include active desks and activity prompts. These act as gentle nudges to increase physical movement and gives employees the flexibility to work standing up or sitting down throughout the day.

However, different employee demographics respond better to some methods than others. Under-represented groups are less likely to be meeting physical activity guidelines – including women, lower socio-economic groups and those with lower levels of educational achievement, according to the study. They tend to respond best to a combined offline and online multi-component approach to become more active. Interventions must also be adapted to the type of workplace, depending on the space and resources available, people’s work schedules and whether employees work flexibly or remotely.

**Urban transport**

Active travel is touted as one way to combat a sedentary lifestyle. One of the easiest ways to build exercise into employees’ days is to encourage them get active during their commute, either through walking or cycling, or even skateboarding, scootering or rollerblading.

But it can be difficult to change travel habits, either for yourself or your employees, depending on distance from the workplace and transport options. But where possible, there are several benefits to active travel, as outlined by Sustrans, a sustainable transport charity.

The charity claims that active travel can also improve business efficiency. People who cycle take approximately half the days off compared to the average worker, resulting in a £13.7 billion annual boost to the British economy. Alongside this, promoting healthier travel options in the workplace has been shown to reduce absenteeism by up to 20%.

As well as the obvious health benefits, there’s a wider range of spin-off benefits for the economy, including reducing congestion and pollution in cities, which is estimated to cost the UK economy £11 billion each year.

**Get them on their feet**

While technology has, in many ways, simplified our working lives, it is also responsible for causing us to remain seated for too long; in fact the IT tools (Wi-Fi, smartphones and laptops) that are supposed to make us more flexible are doing the opposite – removing the need for us to move.

The modern worker can arrive at work, communicate with colleagues, read emails, engage in several calls, eat lunch, complete various different tasks, participate in a video conference and join in on a team discussion, all without leaving their seat.

Walking meetings offer the chance for exercise. People who walk alongside colleagues are more likely to be productive, collaborative and engaged than those who work from a desk. This informal style is effective for 1-2-1 meetings and brainstorm.

Not many people can stand comfortably for two hours so standing meetings are a great motivator for keeping proceedings concise – while giving participants an opportunity to stretch their legs.

If practicable, you could organise lunchtime exercise or sports or yoga groups for those who enjoy doing activities with workmates.

**Revitalising office design**

GIVEN THE BENEFITS OF BEING CONNECTED WITH NATURE, IT’S CONCERNING THAT PEOPLE ARE NOT PUTTING THEMSELVES INTO THE SITUATION WHERE THEY CAN EXPERIENCE IT. WORRYINGLY, ONE STUDY SHOWS THAT 70% OF BRITISH FEEL THEY HAVE “LOST TOUCH WITH NATURE.” MANY WORKERS NOW LIVE AND WORK IN AN ARTIFICIAL ENVIRONMENT. IT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT FOR OFFICE MANAGERS TO LISTEN TO EMPLOYEES’ WISHES WHEN DESIGNING WORKSPACES.

Humans have an inherent need to interact with nature and green spaces – a concept called biophilia. With Britons spending 92% of their time indoors, and the office being the predominant location for many, office and HR managers should be more aware of the impact the workplace environment can have on wellbeing.

Employees are growing tired of identical office spaces with the same uninspiring interior decor. It is becoming increasingly important for office managers to listen to employees’ wishes when designing workplaces.

A study of 1,000 UK office workers by office plant supplier Ambius reveals that introducing indoor plants (49%), nicer artwork (50%), and a more interesting urban area (48%) into an urban area. 90% of the UK’s population lives in what’s classified as an urban area.

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A study of 1,000 UK office workers by office plant supplier Ambius reveals that introducing indoor plants (49%), nicer artwork (50%), and a more interesting colour scheme (54%), topped the list of employees’ requests to improve their workplace.

The study also unsurprising highlighted benefits of personalisation in the workplace. Brits are often very house-proud and take great pleasure in adding a personal
touch to their interior design at home, however almost 60% of workers do not apply the same effort to personalise their desk. In fact, one in five (21%) said their workplace has a policy preventing desk personalisation, yet half of all respondents said they feel both more productive and less stressed when given the opportunity to personalise their workspace.

The layout of the office can also help employees experience the benefits of a nicer office environment, or provide a sense of being closer to nature. For example, glass not only helps to facilitate eye-catching architecture, it lets in plenty of natural light. This is very important, especially in an office environment. Utilising light effectively not only improves the aesthetics of an office but can have a profound impact on workers’ productivity. Keeping office design flexible and dynamic, and using lighting and art innovatively, can go a long way to increasing employees’ comfort and engagement levels at work.

Take the lead

There is a common misconception that for change to occur, leaders must be vocal and bold, giving inspirational speeches to drive the new practice. However, this behaviour will not always achieve the desired result.

Physical activity needs to be ingrained in workplace culture from the top down, with leaders exhibiting a true passion for the change. The process needs to be at the top of every manager’s priorities to develop a new culture for employees and championed by trailblazers on the ground.

However, employers need to approach these ‘personal’ issues sensitively so staff don’t feel like their personal choices or actions are being criticised. Nutrition and exercise may not appear to on the surface but they can represent real challenges for some employees. Businesses need to keep conversations around healthy lifestyles positive, focusing on the benefits more physical activity can bring, like increasing energy, job performance and emotional resilience both at work and in their personal lives. Every workplace is different, so a one-size-fits-all approach simply won’t do.

Before developing an in-depth plan for intervention, it may be beneficial to conduct a short survey to understand how your employees feel about the proposed methods and which they feel would work best for them personally. The benefits of an active workforce are clear, and so too are the risks associated with physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour, so organisations and employees have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

A positive environment

Though it is not always possible to escape the office during the working day, it is certainly possible to create a positive office environment that enables workers to get away from their desk or feel closer to nature. Those that do will reap the benefits from improved employee wellbeing.

### HOW PLANTS ENHANCE PRODUCTIVITY

For employers, the benefits of incorporating greenery into interior design are very clear. It can lead to an increase in workplace productivity, as joint research from the universities of Cardiff, Exeter, Queensland and Groningen, supported by office plant supplier Ambius, has shown.

The study demonstrated that plants can increase productivity by as much as 15%, as well as improving employees’ sense of wellbeing in the workplace by up to 40%. On top of that, in some situations, indoor plants can improve air quality and remove significant quantities of air pollutants, making for a more pleasant environment.

Plants can also help to reduce noise in the office and help increase levels of concentration. Research by Ambius and South Bank University in London has shown that one of the ways that plants can reduce noise is through sound absorption. Plant parts such as stems, leaves, branches and bark are all able to absorb sound, as well as deflect and refract sound.

Introducing natural objects into the workplace is one way to reconnect employees with nature. Research found that 63% of workers are unable to see plants or green space from their workstation, so it’s important for employers to consider incorporating plants into office design to drive employee engagement.

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