



**To:** City Development

**From:** Adrian Davis

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**Subject:** Essential Evidence on a page: No 70 Exercise at work and self-reported work performance

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**Top line:** Positive changes in self-reported performance outcomes of white-collar employees are mostly linked to the mood changes brought about by exercise.

The workplace is an ideal setting for exercise promotion and many recognise its associated public health potential. Since exercising employees are essentially healthier than sedentary ones, employers stand to benefit from encouraging structured exercise and less formal physical activity among their workers. Exercise is increasingly portrayed to employers as an effective means of combating workplace stress and of supporting organisations' aspirations to corporate social responsibility.

Physical activity influences at least 20 major diseases and has a positive role in mental health. Economic analysts suggest that 70% of UK adults meeting recommendations for exercising 150 minutes/week would save the economy £487 million by preventing 2.7 million days of work absence.<sup>1</sup> Research supports associations of physical activity with acute mood benefits and enhanced psychological affect. Following exercise, even individual sessions, psychological improvements seem to arise, the persisting effects of which are responsible for feelings of lowered tension and exhilaration. Physical activity also contributes to positive physical self-perception, positive mental health and protect against development of mental health problems.

In a study to address linkages between workplace exercising on self-reported workplace performance<sup>2</sup> three organisations in Bristol were chosen according to: a working population large enough to support a sizeable group of regular work-day exercisers (i.e. 250 employees); having on-site exercise facilities; and adopting a supportive approach towards exercising at work. Using posters and e-mail, only volunteer employees who regularly exercised on-site, during workdays, were recruited. The randomised control trial was used as it is the method of choice for identifying which interventions work best. Questionnaires were used to assess work performance, and self-selected physical activity, plus 'mood diaries' where participants rated how active or sedentary the job was, and how they felt at the end of the work day about successes and achievement. These were augmented by focus group sessions on each site. Most physical activity during the working day were dominated by cardiovascular exercise (72%), with 12% engaging in weight training and 16% in games or team sports. 80% respondents reported doing moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, while the remainder reported "very hard" exercise.

There were four main findings. First, self-directed exercise – especially that which fits into a typical one-hour lunch break – was associated with important mood benefits. Second, workplace performance improved. Third, exercising was associated with a wide range of positive work attitudes and perspectives regarding self, tasks and colleagues. Fourthly, overall self-reported performance improvements were largely dependent of exercise-related mood changes. Lastly, the focus group work found that without opportunities for physical activity, less positive attitudes to work and colleagues would prevail. This implies that exercising at work has a key morale-building effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Deloitte and TARP (2007), Health of the Nation, Deloitte, London.

<sup>2</sup> Coulson, J., McKenna, J., Field, M. 2008 Exercising at work and self-reported work performance, *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 1(3): 176-197.