

Physical Wellbeing

in the Workplace



Can Corporate Wellness Initiatives Really Impact Employee Health and Wellbeing?

Most people know that physical wellbeing is something they should concern themselves with, but often the role employers can play in the process is often overlooked. Employers can not only positively affect physical wellbeing by implementing initiatives, they can also have many unintended negative effects.

Personal Group have a particular interest in employee health and wellbeing, as there have been strong links made between employee wellbeing and their overall happiness and productivity at work. This led us to conduct a survey of UK employees to better understand the state of physical wellbeing in the workplace, and what, if anything, could be done to remedy the situation. The survey ran from 19th November until 31st December 2018 and was completed by over 1,000 people in the UK.

This report discusses the results of the survey and how they relate to the effect of physical health issues on the productivity of the UK workforce. We will also offer advice on how to help reduce the levels of presenteeism and absence experienced due to physical health related issues.

If you would like more information on mental health in the workplace then you can find our research on the subject [here](#).



How Can the Workplace Affect Physical Wellbeing?

Presenteeism is once again moving up the agenda at many HR meetings.

However, presenteeism is just one aspect contributing to the lost productivity that companies must account for, as sick days, annual leave (*when used for time off to deal with illness or personal issues*) and other forms of absence also contribute to a reduction in employee output. In some instances, one employee's annual leave can result in an increased level of presenteeism in their colleagues, as they take on the extra workload to cover their co-workers' duties. As extra workload can also lead to further issues, such as lower self-esteem, increased smoking and other physical and psychological problems, it's not surprising that presenteeism has received the attention it has in the HR world.

Additionally, some of the most prominent physical wellbeing issues are those associated with prolonged periods of sitting, with a strong positive correlation between the amount of time spent sedentary, the prevalence of cardiometabolic diseases and a reduction in life expectancy. Interestingly however, despite the importance of being active, there seems to be a concerted lack of effort on behalf of both employers and employees to increase the overall activity levels of employees. In our most recent Physical Wellbeing Survey, Personal Group found that **70%** of UK employees who sit down to work, only get up from their desk or workstation every hour at best, and **38%** of those only move every two hours or more.

According to guidelines set out by Public Health England, workers should attempt to stand up for at least two hours a day, which means that for every half an hour of sitting, 10 minutes should be spent standing. The report details that

the initial aim should be to work towards getting at least two hours a day of standing and light walking during working hours, and eventually work up to a total of four hours per day.

Seated work should be regularly broken up with standing work and vice versa. Sit-stand adjustable desk stations were highly recommended. Additionally, similar to avoiding remaining in a static seated position for a long time, remaining in a static standing position should also be avoided.

However, the workplace does not just pose a risk to desk-based employees. Increasing attention has focused on the effect the built environment can have on an employee's physical health. In this instance the built environment refers to the physical aspects of an employee's work environment, but in general it refers to anything that has been designed by humans.² This includes things such as public conveniences for bus drivers, the layout of the stock rooms in retail stores and even the interior of a vehicle, and anything provided by employers to improve it.

This, of course, can also refer to the physical appearance of the office building, or other workplace, and how that may affect employees. Studies have shown strong positive correlation between how a workplace looks (e.g. the presence of graffiti, greenery or shade) and the levels of physical activity, and recreational walking of employees. This is particularly important for warehouse operatives, as their built environment is often designed around functionality and productivity rather than aesthetics. If, as an employer, you can enhance the aesthetics of the physical environment, this can have a positive impact on the mood, behaviour and performance of your employees.



Seated work should be regularly broken up with standing work and vice versa.

Additionally, the proximity to healthy or unhealthy food outlets has been linked to individuals dietary choices, and related chronic diseases.³ Obviously, employers cannot be expected to change the location of their current office building based on the proximity to healthy or unhealthy food, however, it's important that employers think carefully about the food they provide within the workplace, providing a range of healthy options as opposed to just chocolates and crisps in a vending machine.



The appearance of the workplace is not the only factor that can affect employees' physical health, the '*social work environment*' can also have a huge impact. Conflict in the workplace and work overload or underload can all have an impact on an employee's physical health.

Health studies have also found that the more hours employees work, the more likely they are to have health issues, with heart complaints having far higher correlations with work hours than other health conditions. As health conditions have been shown to contribute to presenteeism, and an overwhelming **84.7%** of UK employees believe employers have a responsibility to support workers health and wellbeing, many forward-thinking employers are choosing to act.⁴ Examples include implementing initiatives ranging from yoga and mindfulness classes, to stand up desks, and the provision of showers to encourage physical exercise or even installing an onsite gym.

According to a study by a team of economists at the University of Warwick, happiness is an important factor that contributes individual productivity. The study found that happiness creates a **12%** increase in productivity, while unhappiness results in **10%** less productivity than the norm. It sounds simple and that's because it is - happiness does have significant positive effects on productivity, so it pays for businesses to embrace a culture of employee happiness and wellbeing.

Happier employees tend to be more engaged, so happiness, engagement and productivity in the workplace are intrinsically linked. And at a time when the UK is lagging compared to other developed countries in terms of its productivity, keeping employees happy and healthy should be a workplace priority.

Why Does Employee Wellbeing Matter?

Research on the effect of overall wellbeing and the physical health of a person has progressed throughout the years. This progress has helped establish a significant link between staff wellbeing – both physical and mental – and their levels of productivity.

A survey conducted by Personal Group in 2018 indicated some worrying trends with regards to the prioritisation of work over wellbeing, with the average British worker having worked more than four days whilst genuinely ill in the previous year, and over half of UK employees (**52%**) admitting to delaying seeking medical advice because they didn't want to take time off work. Presenteeism and absenteeism are a constant point of focus for HR

Departments, so if taking an interest in staff wellbeing can help reduce the effects, it's something that businesses must take into account.

Ironically, our survey revealed that those working within HR are the most likely professional group to turn up to work whilst ill, with **83%** of them reporting doing so in the previous year. This is a sad indictment of the health and wellbeing policies in British workplaces and illustrates how much more work there is to be done moving from just having a wellbeing policy, to having a culture of wellbeing. If even the HR department are guilty of presenteeism, how can they help solve this productivity puzzle across the rest of the business?

2: Woolf and Aron, 2013

3: Babey et al., 2019

4: Merrill et al., 2012; Personal Group, 2018

Action Points

Employer led physical wellbeing programmes have been shown to improve employee health and fitness, reduce absenteeism, increase retention, and improve employee alertness, morale and job satisfaction, all of which contribute to a more productive workforce and a positive corporate image.⁵

In fact, workplaces who are perceived to not be supporting their employees physical or emotional health and making it difficult for employees to adopt healthy behaviours, such as getting exercise on their lunch breaks, were far more likely to have high presenteeism compared to other places of work.

Based on our recent survey data, the appetite for physical health benefits is remarkably high across the UK workforce. Whilst the most popular wished for benefit for 2019 was health insurance, with **40%** of respondents citing it as their

top choice, it was followed closely by discounted gym memberships (**38%**), rewards linked to physical activity (**28%**) and physical health-based incentives, such as interdepartmental step challenges or competitions (**24%**). This insight gives employers an understanding of where to start when launching a wellbeing programme that will improve the physical wellbeing of their employees.

However, it is important to remember that any culture change must start from the top down, with buy in from senior management and staff, as this increases employee adoption and acceptance - There is no point implementing a culture change without consulting those affected.

Let's take a look at the main areas that employers can revamp in order to take steps in the right direction.

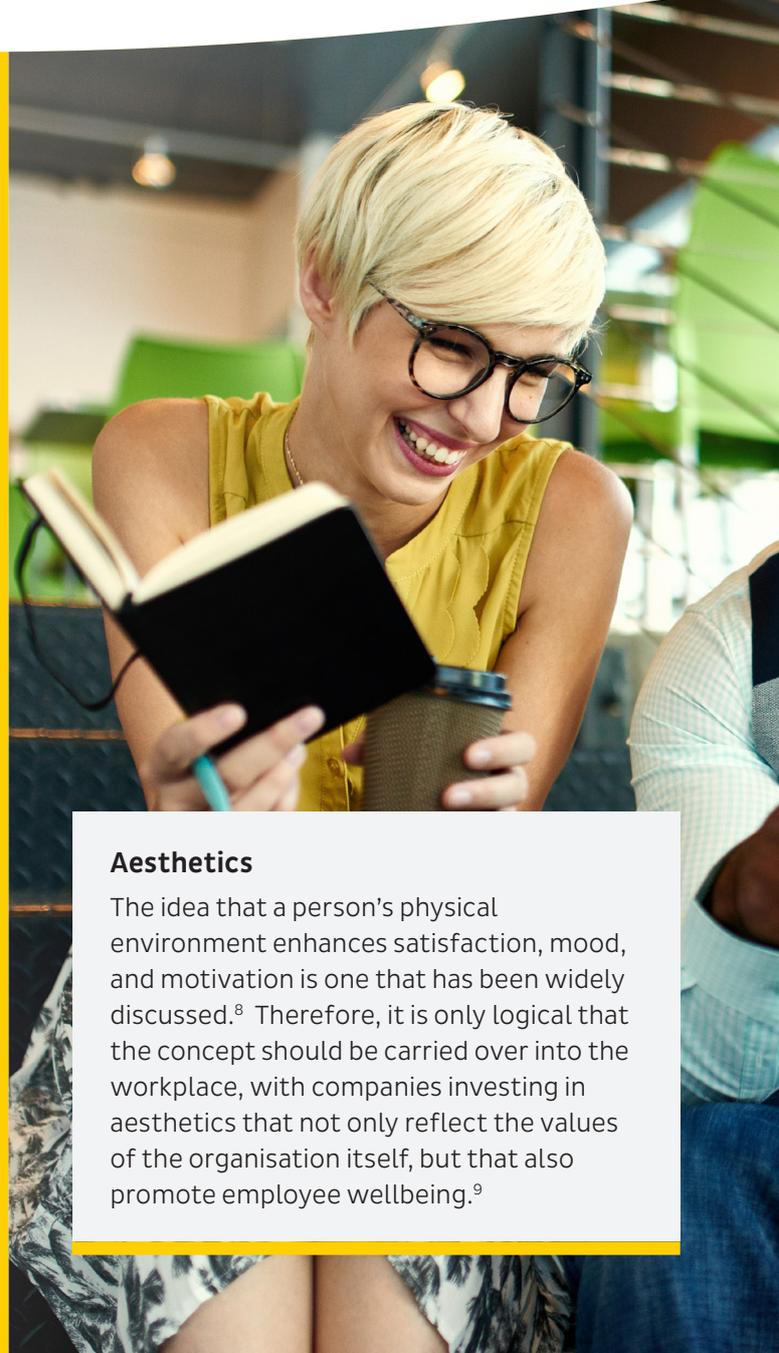
Rethink the Built Environment

Occupational Health

Health hazards, safety hazards, and other perils can obviously negatively impact health and wellbeing among workers.⁶ The latest estimates show that between 2015/16 and 2017/18 an average of **595,000** workers were injured in workplace accidents and a further **529,000** workers suffered a new case of ill health which they believe to be either caused or made worse by their work.⁷

The total costs of workplace self-reported injuries and ill health in 2016/17 totalled **£15 billion**, so it is unsurprising that occupational health remains a crucial aspect of any workplace health and wellbeing offering.

Occupational health is not just limited to hazardous situations, often an occupational health advisor can assist with correct placement of computer screens or the correct support whilst sitting at a desk, as well as other aspects that could negatively impact physical wellbeing. These ideas are not new, back in 1992 research found the spatial layout and functionality of the physical surroundings to be particularly important in work environments and research conducted by Bjerke, Ind and De Paoli in 2007 revealed that the functionality of the design elements such as the chairs, the desks, the PCs and their adaptability have an impact in employee wellbeing.



Aesthetics

The idea that a person's physical environment enhances satisfaction, mood, and motivation is one that has been widely discussed.⁸ Therefore, it is only logical that the concept should be carried over into the workplace, with companies investing in aesthetics that not only reflect the values of the organisation itself, but that also promote employee wellbeing.⁹

5: Conrad, 1988; Bevan, 2010

6: Green and Baker, 1991; De Simone, 2014

7: Hse.gov.uk, 2019

8: Bjerke, Ind and De Paoli, 2007; Bitner, 1992

9: Strati, 1999

Both the built and social environment of the workplace have developed into an important part of the working day, with employee interaction with their colleagues and the space around them having a profound effect on their emotional and physical wellbeing.¹⁰ Other environmental factors such as good ventilation and open space have also been shown to increase employee perceptions of personal control and high levels of perceived personal control have been related to lower stress levels, increased job satisfaction, and tended to be physically and mentally healthy.¹¹

Employers must regularly rethink how they organise and decorate the environment they expect their employees to work in, for both hazard prevention and aesthetic reasons. Perhaps even asking the employees themselves what they feel works and what doesn't, and where they find themselves to be most effective.



Implement Physical Wellbeing Incentives

Step Challenges

Studies have consistently shown that exercise is beneficial when it comes to improving presenteeism, therefore, it makes sense for employers to advocate for their staff to increase the amount of physical activity they partake in.¹² Healthy competition between staff and departments can be used as a tool to encourage employee participation. This was exemplified with one of Personal Group's client's wellbeing weeks. The client hosted a roadshow which included blood pressure testing, BMI measures, and the ability to calculate your metabolic age. What started as a friendly competition amongst staff as they all competed to get the lowest metabolic age, in turn, encouraged more employees to participate in the wellbeing roadshow.

The same sort of friendly competition could be utilised to encourage other healthy behaviours within the workplace, such as healthy eating, increasing step count, water consumption, and increase engagement with the wellbeing offering as a whole.

Access to Healthy Food

Employees who eat no healthy food during the day, and those who did not eat 5 or more servings of fruit and

vegetables on 4 or more days in the past week were more likely to have high rates of presenteeism in the workplace, which makes employee eating choices of great interest to their employers.¹³

Whilst it is impossible for employers to police what employees can and cannot eat, and unreasonable for them to want to do so, there are some ways in which they can positively impact the eating choices of their employees. These steps can be as simple as offering healthy options for purchase in the office tuck shop or canteen or including information on how to eat better as part of their overall wellbeing offering.

Personal Group's 2019 physical health survey revealed that employees whose employers provided access to healthy food options were almost twice as likely to agree to sharing their health data with their employer (36.22% compared to 20.99%). Employee health data can be invaluable to employers when producing a new health and wellbeing initiative.

However, employers should consider providing healthy food options and physical incentives in the benefits they can give to their employees, not just to gain access to their health data but just because it's the right thing to do.

10: Cartwright, Cooper and Earley, 2001

11: Bitner, 1992; Kirkaldy, Furnham, and Cooper, 1994

12: Cancelliere et al., 2011

13: Merrill et al., 2012

Modernising Physical Wellbeing Benefits

Male employees surveyed were more enthusiastic about the idea of a Cycle to Work scheme than their female counterparts (15% compared to 8%) and a video doctor service (13% compared to 9%), whereas women's preference was for physical health-based incentives such as step challenges (28% of women compared to 19% of men).

The most popular benefit 18-24 year olds would like to see implemented is discounted gym membership, with over half (55%) wishing their employer offered it, but the most desired benefit for those 35 and over was health insurance (42%).



Male employees surveyed were more enthusiastic about the idea of a Cycle to Work scheme than their female counterparts.

Discounted Gym Memberships

Discounted gym memberships were the second most wished for physical health benefit for 2019, so it is clear that UK workers are ready to take their physical wellbeing into their own hands.¹⁴ Fortunately, this desire not only benefits employees but also employers, as employees who have access to, and use, a corporate health and fitness club report better physical wellbeing than employees who did not.¹⁵

Online GP

Our 2018 survey indicated some worrying trends with regards to the prioritisation of work over health, with the average British worker having worked more than four days whilst ill in the previous year, and over half of UK employees (52%) admitting to delaying seeking medical advice in order to avoid taking time away from work. This combined with the fact that the average wait time for a face to face GP appointment in the UK is around 2 weeks suggests that, as a nation, we are often working while ill or while worrying about a potential ailment. Of those who did take time off work to see a doctor, 15.7% took unpaid leave to do so, 17.5% used their annual leave entitlement and 22.4% left work early or arrived late - all of which can have a negative effect on both employee wellbeing and organisational productivity.

These figures show a surprising lack of willingness amongst employees of all ages and sectors to take time off when sick, something that could be largely alleviated by the provision of an online GP service. Almost half (47.5%) of respondents said that they would use an online GP if it was quicker than seeing one in person, if they could speak to a doctor at work (29.3%) or if it saved them from having to take time off work (30.8%). An overwhelming 70% of respondents agreed that having access to an online doctor would give them 'peace of mind'. Providing access to an online GP service as part of

an employee wellbeing initiative can reduce the amount of time it takes for employees to resolve their health concerns, meaning a reduction in both presenteeism and absenteeism in the workforce.

Cycle to Work Scheme

Allowing staff to take part in a Cycle to Work scheme, run and partially funded by the government, is a great way to encourage improvements in physical health and make your company greener in the process.

The government introduced Cycle to Work in 1999 - an annual tax exemption that allows employees to purchase new cycle equipment as part of a salary sacrifice scheme. Cycle to Work schemes not only save employees money on the cost of their new equipment, but they receive further savings on the cost of their commute. This has had a positive impact on workplace health, as cycling two hours a week reduces the change of heart disease by 50%, increases employee motivation levels, and has been shown to encourage the uptake of physical activity.¹⁶

Whilst there is no way of ensuring all employees will benefit from a gym membership, make use of an online GP, or take part in the Cycle to Work scheme, it is important for employers to show that they are willing to help their staff adopt a healthy lifestyle.

Even small adoption levels can result in significant returns on investment both for the organisational bottom line as well as in visible improvements to employee wellbeing levels. Workplaces who are seen to be making it difficult for employees to adopt healthy behaviours are far more likely to see high rates of presenteeism than those who are actively trying to foster healthy habit in their employee base.¹⁷

14: Personal Group, 2019
15: Daley and Parfitt, 1996

16: Gov.uk, 2019; Purdue University Research
17: Merrill et al., 2012



💡 Legally, an employer is responsible for an employee's health, safety and welfare so far as is reasonably practicable

Responsibility for Remote Workers

Remote working is becoming far more common, fortunately it's simple enough to offer remote workers the same access to incentives and online wellbeing benefits as their site-based counterparts.

However, when it comes to the employer's responsibility for their employee's physical environment and general health and wellbeing it can become more complicated.

Working from Home

If an employee is wholly or partially based at home, then the location needs to be suitable for them to do so, but the question remains, whose responsibility is it to ensure that this is the case?

Legally, an employer is responsible for an employee's health, safety and welfare so far as is reasonably practicable. In this case, it's safer to assume that employers should conduct risk assessments of the home working environment of their employees. Conducting this risk assessment is much simpler when the remote worker is employed in a desk-based job, simply requiring an initial risk assessment and possibly periodic reassessments as and when changes arise.

The importance of the equipment and working environment depends heavily on the ratio between remote and office-based working. An employee who is only working at home one day a week may only need a desk, laptop and mobile phone, while an employee who is permanently based at home is likely to need a full home office. There is currently no legal obligation for an employer to provide the equipment necessary for homeworking, however, where the employee may suffer from a disability, the provision of such equipment could be considered a reasonable adjustment.¹⁸

Additionally, due to the employee potentially not having regular direct contact with co-workers and HR members, a robust and effective communications system is required. Just stopping by their desk to let them know they should take their rest breaks or meet other working time obligations isn't a possibility, so it is important for employers to consider other methods of communication. This can take the form of pulse surveys, so as to not interrupt a busy workday, or push notifications, which won't clutter the remote employees already busy inbox or just a call to check in and see how they are doing.

Additional care must also be taken to understand whether specialist equipment is required or needs to be safety tested, what first aid arrangements can be made, and how to report work-related accidents.

Working on the Road

In today's workforce, many more remote workers find themselves based on the road. Unfortunately, these workers are most likely to find themselves in need of employer assistance with their physical wellbeing, as they are more at risk of accidents or injuries.

While some of these workers may be viewed as self-employed, such as those working for app-based transport services, and therefore legally responsible for their own wellbeing, there are some adjustments employers can make to help them remain safer and healthier.¹⁹ These include paying couriers or other drivers per block of time, rather than per journey. However, if employers still wish to pay based on the employees drop off rate, they should ensure that they

consider the time taken to travel safely within the speed limit and perform administrative functions such as scanning parcels and obtaining signatures.

Other risk points for drivers and riders include tiredness from overwork and the stress of an unpredictable pay-cheque, with many road-based workers reporting regular near misses and collisions (*Christie and Ward, 2018*).

It is proven that educating people on their driving behaviour improves their safety, so for our road-based staff members at Personal Group, we implemented a telematics system which helps employees identify potential hazards within their driving habits. Since introducing the car software system our average driving percentage has risen to around **94%**.

Implementation

While concerns for the health and wellbeing of employees is not a new issue, the nature of the intervention has changed over the years.

Previously, any concerns for employee's physical health were dealt with under the umbrella of occupational health, a field which emerged during World War I.²⁰ Since the growth of occupational health, there has been a growing awareness of the relationship between an employee's health and wellbeing and their work life, however, occupational health interventions focus mainly on the work environment including; health hazards, safety hazards, and other hazards and perils which could result in an unsafe work environment and thus negatively impacting the health and wellbeing of the workforce.²¹

The field of occupational health, whilst highly important, does not encompass all of the modern wellbeing considerations. Companies have deviated from the one size fits all environmental focus and shifted towards a more personalised approach to employee wellbeing. Back in 2011 Diane Lack noted two key intervention methods; preventative measures, such as taking breaks, leaving work on time and insuring that employees make use of their annual leave entitlement; and curative methods, which tend to focus more on the physical health related symptoms themselves.

It is important to consider both of these methods when planning and implementing any wellbeing initiative, as any factor that influences employee health and wellbeing can have a significant impact on the financial health and profitability of an organisation.²²



Whilst it might be tempting to just follow the action points above and consider it a job well done, for any wellbeing programme to be truly effective employers must tailor their offering to the individual needs of their workforce. This may seem like a daunting task for the HR department, however, it can be easier than it seems. Three in ten UK workers would be willing to let their employers have access to their health stats if they were offered physical health related employee benefits.²³

When initially implementing these benefits, it would be wise to ask your workforce what they would most like to see implemented, as whilst our survey results highlight the difference in priorities depending on generation, gender and type of employment, there is no easier way to ensure you are giving your employees what you want than simply asking them what that is.

19: Christie and Ward, 2018

20: Green and Baker, 1991

21: Danna and Griffin, 1999

22: Cooper and Cartwright, 1994

23: Personal Group, 2019

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