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COMMENTARY

Counteracting the Inactivity Epidemic: Should We Ring-Fence Paid Work Time for Physical Activity?

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Physical Inactivity Is a Problem

Physical inactivity is one of the most persistent public health challenges, with inactivity rates among the global population increasing from 23% in 2000 to 31% in 2022.[1–3] As modern society is irrevocably geared toward making life more convenient, the physical demands of daily living have been diminished.[4] This shift has contributed to the rise of long-term conditions including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, and depression.[5,6] Subsequently, the burden on healthcare services is large,[7] with many individuals now spending more years in poor health.[8] In the United States, physical inactivity is associated with 11% of aggregate healthcare expenditures, costing an estimated $117 billion per year.[9]

Evidence shows that small increases in physical activity can have substantial health benefits.[10] However, one of the most commonly reported barriers to increasing physical activity is a perceived lack of time.[11] Whether due to genuine constraints—such as inflexible work schedules, caregiving, and commuting—or a lower prioritization of physical activity during leisure time,[11] the outcome is the same—physical activity is consistently sidelined. Pragmatic solutions to introduce physical activity into daily life are essential and must complement a busy lifestyle. We argue that ring-fencing time for physical activity during paid work time could provide a mutually beneficial opportunity, for both employees and employers, to achieve this.

Why Target Work Time?

A full-time employee from ages 18 to 65 years will accumulate over 75,000 working hours—more than a tenth of a typical lifetime.[12] Around half of weekday sitting time occurs while working,[13] and office workers are sedentary for up to 71% of their working hours.[14] Work provides structure, predictability, and social community, all of which can support habit formation and long-term physical activity behavior change.[15] In addition, the rise of flexible work models, particularly since COVID-19, has removed many logistical barriers. For example, time saved from commuting can free up more time in the day to incorporate physical activity, and the greater autonomy in managing one's schedule can allow for small bouts of physical activity throughout the day. Moreover, working from home can reduce the social pressures or perceptions of "not working" that might otherwise discourage activity in traditional office settings. Working time, whether in office, at home, or in hybrid settings, clearly presents a valuable opportunity to rethink and integrate physical activity into evolving daily work patterns.

Ring-Fencing Work Time as a Solution

Relying on individual initiative and willpower is failing to increase population level physical activity levels. Instead, ring-fencing paid work time could provide employees with the opportunity and structure to engage in physical activity. Workplace health programs that rely on voluntary participation during unpaid breaks (eg, lunch breaks) often show low engagement and have mixed outcomes.[16–18] In contrast, movement behavior interventions implemented specifically as breaks during paid working time have largely shown positive effects on a variety of health outcomes,[19] including physical and mental well-being and reductions in musculoskeletal pain—one of the most prevalent issues among workers and the second leading cause of sickness absence in the United Kingdom in 2024.[20] It appears that when employees are provided dedicated paid time to be active, physical activity participation increases,[21] while common barriers, such as guilt, scheduling conflict, stress, and workload pressure, are likely to be reduced.[22] Ring-fencing work time for physical activity could help shift cultural norms and send a strong signal from employers that efforts to maintain health and well-being are valued.

The Business Case

Supporting employee health should be considered an investment, not a cost. Poor workforce health drives up running costs through increased absenteeism, presenteeism, staff turnover, and decreased productivity. Absenteeism is estimated to account for ~29% of health and productivity costs,[23] and the costs associated with presenteeism, when employees are physically present but working below full capacity due to health issues, are likely much higher.[24] In 2024, in the United Kingdom, an estimated 149 million working days were lost because of sickness or injury.[20] In 2023, the UK economy lost an estimated £26 billion due to sickness absence and a further £57 billion from impaired productivity due to work-related mental health conditions.[25] Moreover, there are nearly 2 million people out of work due to sickness, many of whom would like to return to work with appropriate support.[26]

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Though employers may raise concerns about productivity, costs, workplace disruption, and cultural fit,[22,27,28] emerging evidence suggests the opposite. Studies have shown that replacing a small number of working hours with physical activity reduces absenteeism by up to 11%,[29] saves up to $15 for every $1 of associated cost,[30] and improves work performance and productivity.[31] These are likely a direct result of the well-evidenced health benefits of physical activity on mental and physical health. Employers already have legal obligations to protect workers from physical hazards like chemicals, machinery, or environmental risks under health and safety regulations. This raises the question: should employers also share responsibility in mitigating the well-documented health risks of prolonged sedentary behavior?

This responsibility is echoed in various national and international guidance. Public health agencies, such as The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, actively recommend that employers support physical activity through formal policies.[32] The Royal Society for Public Health recommends a mandatory national Health and Work Standard, setting minimum levels of support for employee well-being.[12] Ring-fencing time for physical activity could form part of this standard. There is a clear, tangible benefit, such that investing in workplace physical activity initiatives can lead to higher productivity, reduced absenteeism, and lower staff turnover. This direct return on investment makes a strong business case for employers to support and prioritize physical activity during work time.

Not All Occupations Are the Same

Implementing ring-fenced time will look different across sectors and regions. In office settings, 20 to 30 minutes of daily movement may involve walking, resistance training, or structured physical activity. For more physically demanding "blue-collar" jobs, like construction or logistics, the target may be to introduce low-intensity stretching exercises, in an effort to address injury risk and musculoskeletal pain (a common condition in such professions). Importantly, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work, and flexibility and inclusivity must guide implementation. Offering a range of options and adapting interventions based on role/profession, shift pattern, physical ability, and cultural differences, while grounding initiatives in behavior change theories, such as the socioecological model and self-determination theory, will improve uptake, adherence, and ultimately effectiveness.[4,33,34]

To date, the vast majority of physical activity interventions conducted during work time have taken place in high-income countries and among white-collar employees.[19] Barriers across sectors and geographical regions such as limited resources, cultural attitudes, infrastructure constraints, and rigid work schedules, as well as organizational factors like lack of managerial support, financial limitations, and unsupportive workplace culture, can all hinder implementation and uptake, and impact the success of such initiatives.[22] For instance, deeply embedded beliefs about productivity, as well as high workloads or a culture of skipping breaks, will disrupt even the most well-designed and co-created workplace health promotion initiatives.

To ease concerns about implementation, businesses can begin with pilot programs, allowing organizations to evaluate impact and refine approaches before scaling. Policy support from government, local councils/bodies, and institutions, including through incentives, grants, or coproduced guidance, will help accelerate adoption. Importantly, technology can enhance delivery and engagement through wearables, gamified apps, and remote-access options. Not

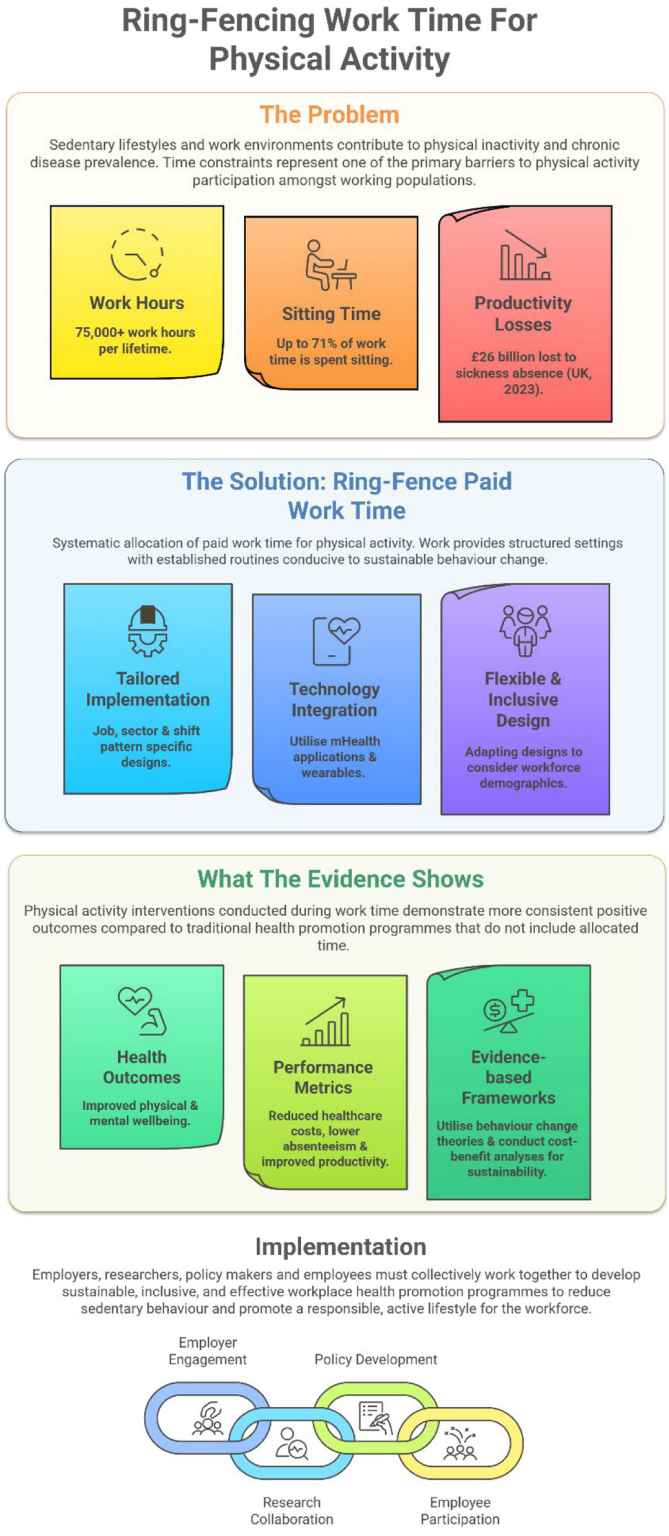

Figure 1 — Schematic illustration of the concept of ring-fencing paid work time for physical activity. The figure outlines the underlying problem of physical inactivity, proposes the allocation of work time for physical activity as a potential solution, and summarizes the current evidence supporting this approach.

all employees have the same preferences or physical capabilities, so offering autonomy and tailoring interventions to meet the preferences and needs of diverse populations, including considerations of age, gender, ethnic and cultural differences, will likely further enhance adoption and effectiveness.

Summary

Workplace cultures that limit physical activity are contributing to the global burden of disease and imposing significant economic costs on employers. Health-related productivity losses are not inevitable, but they will not be solved through traditional health promotion strategies. Ring-fencing paid work time for physical activity is a pragmatic strategy that provides employees with the opportunity to be active, possibly without harming productivity. Evidence supports its effectiveness; however, such strategies are yet to be implemented across diverse occupational settings, and employers may need more robust evidence on the cost-effectiveness before widespread adoption.

Employees, employers, researchers, and policymakers must work collectively to develop sustainable, inclusive, and effective programs to increase physical activity levels (Figure 1). Investing in workforce health by ring-fencing time for physical activity is a sensible strategy for employers and has the potential to reduce long-term costs, improve employee health and well-being, increase staff retention, and enhance an employer's public image.

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