TACKLING SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR

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Contents

FOREWORD

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It hardly needs saying that the challenges of the past year have had an unprecedented and detrimental effect on people's physical and mental wellbeing. Stress, anxiety and depression rates have risen as people have struggled to cope with a range of pressures, from loneliness and isolation to financial worries and job insecurity. Physical fitness has also been impacted. Declining levels of physical activity along with increasingly sedentary lifestyles were already a critical health concern pre pandemic, but changes to our daily lives and restrictions on movement have further exacerbated the problem. Screen time has soared across all age groups and, with gyms and pools shut and team sports on hold for much of the last year, normal exercise routines have been disrupted.

Working from home adds to many of these pressures. While, on the one hand, it offers greater flexibility and gives employees back time usually lost to commuting, it can also be an isolating experience. This is coupled with the fact that many workers do not have a proper home office set up and have been forced to create makeshift workstations without the right furniture or equipment. Furthermore, homeworking limits the opportunity for movement during the working day, whether that's walking or cycling as part of a commute, stopping at the gym on the way home or simply moving around the office.

Given that many companies are now discussing whether to implement a long-term hybrid work model that combines on-site and remote working, it is important to address the health impacts of homeworking at this juncture. Businesses must ensure not only that employees have ergonomically sound equipment at home but also empower them to make healthy decisions by encouraging breaks away from the desk and removing the pressure to be constantly available.

As a result, the importance of employee wellbeing programmes has been brought to the fore as businesses across all sectors come to recognise the impact such interventions could have on both staff wellbeing and company productivity. Employers have a responsibility towards the wellbeing of their staff, those who work on site and those working remotely, and there are many ways in which the workplace can support employees. A successful workplace wellness scheme should focus on two key areas: physical wellbeing and mental health. Critically, the two issues are linked: physical health has a knock-on effect on mental health by boosting energy levels and mood, relieving stress and improving memory and sleep.

Our mission at AJ Products is to provide simple solutions to support employee health. As a supplier of workplace furniture and interior solutions, one of the ways we do this is by focusing on ways to increase movement at work to address the problem of sedentary work time, whether in the office or at home. That is why we are constantly developing our active office furniture range to provide our clients with more ways to encourage wider movement in their workday. We believe that the way employees work and the resources made available to them can make a big difference to both physical and mental health. Moreover, because the problem is not limited to office workers, our ergonomic solutions extend to all types of workplaces including workshops, manufacturing facilities and warehouses.

Active working is far more than a trend, it represents a fundamental change to workplace design and asks critical questions about business priorities. However, workplace design is just one element: sit-stand furniture is only as effective as the people using it. Attitudes must change too. That's why we are committed to supporting both businesses and employees by working in partnership with ukactive to reduce sedentary behaviour at work and at home, raise public awareness of mental health and the ways companies can support it, and engender a culture of change within our nation's workplaces.

FOREWORD

Charlotte Cuenot
Senior Policy Development Manager, ukactive

In 2019, a quarter of the adult population in the UK were classed as inactive and, with evidence suggesting that office workers spending eight hours a day sat at a desk are up to 60% more likely to die early from diseases such as cancer and heart disease,[1] embedding activity into our working lives was already critical pre pandemic.

In the past year, the pandemic has placed unparalleled restrictions on people's lives and routines. The impact of the restrictions imposed has been highlighted in The Active Lives survey that was recently developed by Sport England. It demonstrates the staggering drop in physical activity levels among adults in the UK. To add to the concerning findings from Sport England, a study looked into the impact of COVID-19 on health behaviour, well-being, and long-term physical health. One of the conclusions from the report was that 'sedentary behaviour, such as prolonged periods of sitting, has now risen due to government mandates to stay at home' .

The success of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in the UK and the fact its citizens have been living under policy restrictions means tackling sedentary behaviour and getting people active should now be classed as a priority. Organisations needs to play a key role in this by ensuring that the right working environment is implemented, both physically and culturally, to support in creating a healthier, happier and more productive society. This includes learning from the experiences of the workforce during the lockdown period and understanding how that might translate to long-term changes to working environments.

This report shows that there is little disagreement that workplace wellbeing programmes work and are needed; this is unchanged by recent events, but we can also learn from those events. The dangers of sedentary behaviour are still all too real and combining this with low levels of physical activity creates an even higher risk for UK adults to be in poor health. This is impacting negatively on both personal lives and the productivity of the UK workforce. We also now know that it contributes to heightened risk factors from COVID-19.

Workplaces must play a proactive role in reducing sedentary behaviour and increasing activity among UK adults. This report demonstrates that it is possible; there are businesses out there that have made a difference to the lives of their staff and who have been able to adapt these ideas to current working circumstances.

The case studies in this report show how holistic programmes, which embed physical activity and other wellbeing approaches at the heart of their culture are those which are seeing success. Arguably, those that had great wellbeing programmes already in place were in a stronger position to support their staff when the challenging times came.

Another commonality is how vital it is that programmes and initiatives are supported from the very top of organisations, giving employees not just the opportunities but also genuine permission to look after their own wellbeing.

However, what it also shows is that there are challenges with providing broader tangible information that businesses can use to get started or continue on their wellbeing journey.

ukactive is also taking further steps to create a broader evidence base and adjusting that programme to ensure it reflects the new challenges faced by working society, with tangible and practical steps for businesses to help them tackle what is clearly a complex problem. It is crucial that we go beyond highlighting the problem to focus more on what can work now. Supporting this report is one step of many for us; we will continue to add new evidence, highlight best practice and ensure that when businesses are ready to tackle this challenge we are ready with the practical information that they need to decide what will work for them.

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1 Dr Ding MD et al., "The economic burden of physical inactivity: a global analysis of major non-communicable diseases"The Lancet. Volume 388, Issue 10051, (2016). Pages 1311 – 1324. https://doi .org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)30383-X.

Executive Summary

Work stress and negative health outcomes associated with sedentary behaviour have reached substantial proportions within western industrialised societies. In the UK alone, office culture costs the economy £29 billion in workplace absenteeism every year[2]. With the rise of homeworking and increasingly flexible working patterns, employers have a unique opportunity to reshape their values and play a more proactive role in supporting the physical and mental health of their employees to support the wellbeing of our national workforce.

This report demonstrates how simple measures such as equipping offices and homes with better furniture and encouraging employees to increase their physical activity levels can mitigate the negative health effects associated with sedentary behaviour in the workplace. Interventions around workplace design have been shown to reduce sitting time by as much as 40 minutes over an 8-hour work day, which translates to an 8% reduction in total sitting time[3]. Evidence shows taking multiple standing breaks or engaging in some physical movement throughout the day can be more beneficial than doing one exercise session for a set amount of time for the day while staying sedentary for the remainder of the day[4]. Therefore, it is crucial that employers consider how their workplace environment and culture impacts movement, and how they can support employees to be more active.

This report also features case studies from businesses of various sizes that highlight health and wellbeing strategies that have worked effectively. Whether interventions are centred around fitness challenges, wellbeing workshops or in-house workout classes, the case studies highlight the need for each business to consider what types of interventions would be most effective based on employee preferences and demographics. Even then, the case studies show that companies need to promote flexibility, permissibility and a positive working environment to ensure that employees feel comfortable to take part in these interventions and prioritise their health.

2 CIPD. "Health and Wellbeing at Work." May 2018. https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-at-work_t cm18-40863.pdf
3 Marcela, Cerise "Impact of Workplace Design and Planning on Sedentary Lifestyles" Cornell. May 2018. https://doi.org/10.7298/X44Q7S72
4 Ibid.

Background

The field of sedentary behaviour research has grown exponentially over the past 20 years. Academics and public health experts are becoming increasingly aware of the dangers associated with sedentary lifestyles. Yet confusion still exists regarding the correct definition for sedentary behaviour and its distinction from physical activity – the prevailing misconception being that 'sedentary' is synonymous with 'inactive'[5].

Sedentary behaviour can be defined as[6] sitting or reclining with low energy expenditure . Physical inactivity, on the other hand, can be defined as failing to meet the[7] Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidelines . Official guidance recommends adults accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity (such as brisk walking, cycling or dancing), 75 minutes of vigorous physical exercise (such as running or swimming), or a combination of both each week. Individuals may complete the recommended 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week and still be considered sedentary if they spend a large amount of their day sitting or lying down. Recent physical activity guidelines have therefore also emphasised that adults should aim to minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary, and break up long periods of inactivity[8] with light and easy movement where possible . Physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour therefore constitute distinct issues requiring well-defined solutions.

Approaches to tackling sedentary behaviour have traditionally focused on increasing physical activity levels, which has been shown to offset some of the negative health outcomes associated[9] with sitting for prolonged periods of time . However, recent research has made it clear that combatting sedentary lifestyles successfully and sustainably requires a wider and more holistic approach, which not only includes physical activity and movement but also places greater consideration on our surroundings[10] and the wider physical and cultural environment .

Prevalence of sedentary behaviour

In our modern environment, sedentary behaviour permeates through all facets of life – from the school classroom through to the care home. Revolutions in transport and technology have precipitated the reconfiguration of our surroundings in such a way that sedentary behaviour has become the default way to travel, work and spend our leisure time[11]. Being physically active and avoiding too much sedentary time is, today, a voluntary behaviour. Combatting sedentary behaviour is therefore contingent on reimagining public spaces, including workplaces, and designing them to encourage higher levels of physical activity and movement[12].

Over the last decade, the workplace has become increasingly proactive in driving this agenda. Though traditionally known for promoting sedentary behaviour, the workplace has also been recognised for having immense potential to prevent sedentary behaviour among the working population. As individuals spend a greater proportion of their life at work, there is a clear opportunity to reimagine traditional workplace or home office design and culture to minimise prolonged sedentary behaviour.

Current figures on sedentary behaviour suggest there is still substantial work to be done to reduce prolonged sitting. Figures from 2017 show that 10% of the UK population sits for 8.5 hours or more per day, and 29% sits for 5.5 to 8.5 hours per day[14]. To add to the rising concern around prolonged sitting, a recent study highlighted that sedentary behaviour had risen during 2020, as a result of the government mandates to stay at home.

Approximately half of total daily sitting time takes place at work. However, data suggests that not all industries are affected equally. Approximately 38% of white-collar occupations sit for 5.5 to 8.5 hours per day compared to 18% of manual workers[15]. Additional studies have shown that employees working in retail or local government reported significantly lower sitting times than those employed in service industry sectors.

Whatever the industry, it is clear from the literature that the working population in the UK engages in excessive sedentary behaviour. But why does this matter? [16]

5 Thivel, David et al. "Physical Activity, Inactivity, and Sedentary Behaviors: Definitions and Implications in Occupational Health." Frontiers in public health vol. 6 288. 5 Oct. 2018, doi:10.3389/fpubh.2018.00288
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical activity Guidelines. September 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Special Eurobarometer 472; Sport and physical activity (2017). European Commission.
15 Ibid.
16 A. Kazi, et al, "A survey of sitting time among UK employees" Occupational Medicine, Volume 64, Issue 7, (2014). Pages 497–502, https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqu099

Main dangers of sedentary behaviour

The World Health Organisation warns that sedentary lifestyles are associated with negative public health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, type-II diabetes and all-cause mortality[17]. According to public health experts, the issue has reached such substantial proportions that the steady gains in life expectancy realised during the 20th century will begin to diminish unless effective population-level interventions to combat sedentary behaviour are implemented[18].

Office workers spending eight hours a day sat at a desk are 60% more likely to die early from diseases such as cancer and heart disease[19]. According to some studies, the mortality rate is increased by 2% for every seated hour and can reach up to 8% per hour when the total consecutive time spent seated is above eight hours per day[20]. In the UK, sedentary behaviour is also associated with the two leading causes of workplace absence: back injuries and depression, and costs the economy £29 billion every year[21].

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Limiting sitting time to less than three hours per day could increase male and female life expectancy at birth in the USA by approximately 2.0 and 1.4 years respectively [22]

Given the substantial consequences associated with excessive sedentary behaviour, workplaces have the potential to play a leading role in offsetting negative health outcomes associated with prolonged sitting times. But where can workplaces start if they want to make a difference?

Offsetting sedentary behaviour

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed working life. Almost overnight, employers and employees were forced to adapt to remote working. As lockdown restrictions ease, businesses may need to embrace a blended approach to working – enabling employees to choose between working remotely or going into the office. This hybrid model can make it challenging for employers to combat sedentary behaviour in the workplace. The key is to adopt a holistic approach which considers workplace and home office design, regular movement, and physical activity levels.

Consider Workplace Design

Attributes of spatial design can promote regular movement at work by encouraging walking behaviours and stand-up breaks during the day. These types of behaviours can be effective in offsetting some of the negative health outcomes associated with prolonged sitting[23].

Reducing sedentary behaviour through workplace design could include interventions such as:

- The use of alternative work stations (sit-stand desks, treadmill desks and pedal machines)

- The creation of activity-based zones (focus pods, lounge zones, casual group zones)

- The optimisation of connective spaces (integrating fun facts about distance to a conference room, stimulating corridor paths through visually-pleasing graphics or participatory graphics)

- The provision of ergonomic home-office equipment (laptop stands and sit-stand desks)

These kinds of interventions have been shown to reduce sitting time by as much as 40 minutes over an 8-hour work day, which translates to an 8% reduction in total sitting time[24].

17 Spence, Gordon B. "Workplace Wellbeing Programmes: If you build it they may not come...because it's not what they need" University of Wollongong. 2015.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://scholar.google.co.uk/&httpsredir=1&article=1451&context=gsbpapers
18 Shields, Margot et al. "Sedentary behaviour and obesity." Statistics Canada catalogue no. 82-003-X Health Reports (2008). http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.572.6792&rep=rep1&type=pdf
19 Dr Ding MD et al., "The economic burden of physical inactivity: a global analysis of major non-communicable diseases" The Lancet. Volume 388, Issue 10051, (2016). Pages 1311 – 1324.
https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)30383-X.
20 Thivel, David et al. "Physical Activity, Inactivity, and Sedentary Behaviors: Definitions and Implications in Occupational Health." Frontiers in public health vol. 6 288. 5 Oct. 2018, doi:10.3389/fpubh.2018.00288
21 CIPD. "Health and Wellbeing at Work." May 2018.
https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-at-work_tcm18-40863.pdf
22 Katzmarzyk PT, Lee I-M. Sedentary behaviour and life expectancy in the USA: a cause-deleted life table analysis. BMJ Open 2012;2: e000828. doi:10.1136/ bmjopen-2012-000828

23 Owen, Neville et al. "Sedentary behaviour: emerging evidence for a new health risk." Mayo Clinic proceedings vol. 85,12 (2010): 1138-41. doi:10.4065/mcp.2010.0444
24 Marcela, Cerise "Impact of Workplace Design and Planning on Sedentary Lifestyles" Cornell. May 2018.
https://doi.org/10.7298/X44Q7S72

How to create a healthy workplace environment

1. Consider office design: Office design should accommodate the different needs of your workforce. Ensure plenty of space for collaboration and interaction, but consider how and where to incorporate areas for concentration and privacy. When employees are working from home, ensure they have the right equipment to stand while working or taking calls, and encourage them to take walking meetings when appropriate.

2. Choose high-quality office furniture: Giving employees' flexibility in office furniture and work stations can improve attendance, job satisfaction and work performance. Research shows that adopting an organisational culture which supports positive ergonomics is hugely important in achieving better employee health and wellbeing. Consider the impact that furniture may have on musculoskeletal disorders, and involve your employees in the process of choosing which furniture to purchase[25].

3. Give employees control over their work environment: Studies show that the extent to which employees perceive that they have control over their physical work environment can influence performance. Involve your employees in the process and use their feedback as an opportunity to gather ideas.

EXAMPLE

The Australian offices of Danish software company Zendesk feature desks divided into team sections and a central collaborative space for stand-up meetings. The offices draw on the concept of hygge, and the design is characterised by simplicity, functionality and minimalism. According to the occupants, this open space and comfort encourage autonomy and movement. Being able to stand, sit or lounge on the couch generates creativity, collaboration and energy within the team.

EXAMPLE

Multinational construction, property and infrastructure company Lendlease uses activity-based zones to encourage employees to move regularly throughout the day. Their work environment includes 'neighbourhood' tables, working walls, focus points for activities that require concentration, and enclosed pods that foster concentration and focus. This constitutes a great example of how workplace design can be used to nudge employees to move more throughout their working day. Whilst these spaces will now need to adapt to also protect their employees from COVID-19 transmission, it is important that we don't lose focus on these additional design benefits, and it will take creative design to do that.

25 Marcela, Cerise "Impact of Workplace Design and Planning on Sedentary Lifestyles" Cornell. May 2018. https://doi.org/10. 7298/X44Q7S72

Minimise sedentary time

The literature suggests that any activity which involves an increase in the frequency of muscle contraction seems to be beneficial in offsetting some of the negative health effects associated with sedentary behaviour[26]. This includes small movements such as standing up and incidental walking. In order to encourage employees to move throughout the day, it is important that workplaces create a culture where this is perceived as permissible.

Interventions to promote movement throughout the day could include:

• Encouraging all staff to take short, regular breaks throughout the day, even when working from home

• Limiting internal emails and encouraging staff to get up, speak to or call their colleagues

• Centralising printers, copiers and waste bins to increase the amount of time employees to stand up

• Educating staff about the benefits of integrating movement into their working day and providing them with examples of how best to do this in the office and at home

• Encouraging and providing guidance for walking or standing meetings

Though the effectiveness of these interventions is known, there is limited guidance for employers on how to generate profound workplace culture change and empower employees across all levels to feel comfortable taking breaks and moving across various spaces throughout the day. More robust evidence is needed to understand how workplaces can go about successfully navigating this change.

26 Castillo-Retamal, Marcelo et al. "Measuring Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour at Work: a Review" Work 40 (2011) DOI 10.3233/WOR-2011-1246

Increase physical activity

High levels of moderate intensity physical activity have been shown to eliminate the increased risk of death associated with high sitting time [27]. When paired with regular movement throughout the day, physical activity interventions can significantly reduce negative health outcomes. Studies show that people who engage in 60 to 75 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per day but sit for more than 8 hours daily have a significantly lower risk of dying than those who sit for less than 4 hours per day but did not engage in any physical activity [28]. Sport England research shows that 4 in 10 adults do not achieve the recommended 150 minutes of physical activity per week [29], suggesting there is more work to be done to encourage people to take up regular physical activity. It is critical that workplaces recognise that reducing sitting time and increasing activity levels are both vitally important to good health outcomes for individuals and that there are suitable solutions to all types of working environments.

The Chief Medical Officer's Guidelines for physical activity recommend 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week. The Guidelines recommend that adults of all ages build strength on at least two days a week, improve balance on at least two days a week, and minimise sedentary time. Government Guidelines highlight the benefits of physical activity for improved sleep, healthy weight maintenance, stress management, and improved quality of life.

Interventions to increase physical activity levels during the work week could include:

- Offering secure bicycle storage, personal lockers, showers and spaces to dry hair for active travel;

- Negotiating a corporate discount with local gyms;

- Organising lunchtime walking, running or yoga groups;

- Implementing flexible working to make it easier for employees to carve out time for exercise while juggling work and home responsibilities;

- Offering staff benefits that encourage activity (e.g. wellbeing allowance, contributing to gym memberships or offering retail discounts on

- related products);

- Corporate charity challenges;

- Providing dedicated or flexible facilities such as a gym or space that can work as a meeting room and a virtual studio;

- Offering education and inspiration via relevant workshops, talks or resources to support those who are not sure where to start with making a change.
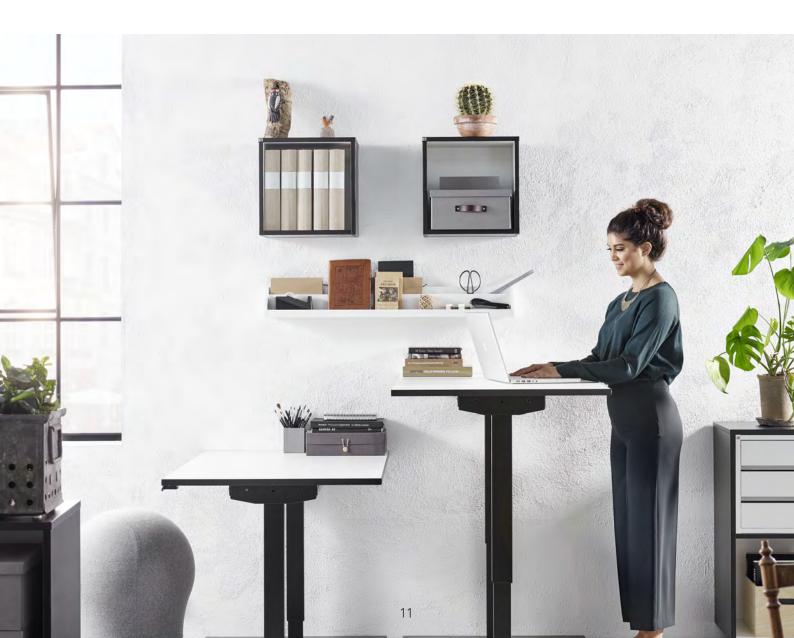
27 Ekelund, Ulf et al. "Does physical activity attenuate, or even eliminate, the detrimental association of sitting time with mortality?" Lancet 2016; 388; 1302-10, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/ S0140-6736(16)30370-1
28 Ibid.
29 Sport England. "Active Lives Adult Survey May 18/19 Report". October 2019.

Marks & Spencer introduced a calendar of initiatives such as the BIKE 24 charity challenge to increase physical activity levels among staff. In just one month, sickness absence fell by 7%, and over 10,000 employees have undertaken a wellbeing pledge to take steps to improve their health.

Conclusion of Section 1

The World Health Organisation warns that work stress and negative health outcomes associated with sedentary behaviour have reached problematic proportions within western industrialised societies[30]. This signals a need to redesign our modern physical and cultural environments to encourage and enable regular movement and increased levels of physical activity. Given the significant amount of time people spend at work, the workplace must be a catalyst for change. Employers must devote greater attention to workplace design and culture to reduce prolonged sitting and support positive health outcomes. In order to do so, organisations must also consider the importance of a more far-reaching approach to general health and wellbeing at work.

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30 Spence, Gordon B. "Workplace Wellbeing Programmes: If you build it they may not come…because it's not what they need" University of Wollongong. 2015. https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://scholar.google.co.uk/&httpsredir=1&article=1451&context=gsb papers

Section 2: Workplace Health & Wellbeing

Background

According to the latest Labour Force Survey, 32.5 million working days were lost to sickness absence in 2019-2020 due to work-related factors, 17.9 million of which were linked to workplace stress, anxiety and depression, and a further 8.9 million were attributed to musculoskeletal disorders [31]. Considering the number of working days lost due to work-related ill-health, organisations should be adopting a holistic approach to support the health and wellbeing of their workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everyone's lives to some degree, but it has also highlighted the importance of the things we value the most: the health, happiness and wellbeing of our communities. A new report from PriceWaterhouseCoopers shows that supporting employees' physical and emotional wellbeing has become one of five top priorities for business leaders in the aftermath of the crisis. Employers have a unique opportunity to rethink the way they support and engage with employees, placing the health, productivity and wellbeing of staff at the forefront of working practice policies.

These policies should include considerations around mental health. Research from Deloitte shows that poor mental health costs UK employers £45 billion a year through absenteeism and presenteeism. There is substantial evidence on the increasing prevalence of poor mental health at work, which is estimated to surpass other work-related illnesses such as musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory diseases, cancer, skin issues and hearing damage in the next

five to ten years. It is therefore crucial that employers consider how to properly look after their staff.

Estimates show that for every £1 invested in mental health in the workplace, employers can receive up to £5 back depending on the intervention [32]. Organisation-wide preventative activities to improve employee resilience tend to achieve a higher impact than reactive individual-focused activities. Companies need to take a proactive approach to better support our physical and mental health at work.

Fortunately, the past twenty years have shown a growing public and private sector interest in employee wellbeing [33]. As the evidence-base on the link between employee health and productivity continues to grow, companies around the world have adopted various workplace health and wellbeing programmes to support their employees. This movement has been accelerated further by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required many businesses to rethink their employee engagement practices. Workplace health and wellbeing programmes range widely in their focus and offering. Some companies place greater emphasis on optimising professional growth and encouraging social connections within their organisation, whilst others focus on boosting psychological health and diffusing risk factors. Whatever the programme, the overall aim is to support employees to achieve "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" [34].

31 Public Health England. "The impact of physical environments on employee wellbeing". August 2015. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772615/20150318_-_Physical_Environments_-_V3.0_FINAL.pdf

32 Deloitte. Mental health and employers: Refreshing the case for investment. January 2020. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-and-employers.pdf
33 Spence, Gordon B. "Workplace Wellbeing Programmes: If you build it they may not come…because it's not what they need" University of Wollongong. 2015. https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://scholar.google.co.uk/&httpsredir=1&article=1451&context=gsbpapers
34 Ibid.

Employers' Responsibility

In light of the disruption to traditional working patterns, it is important to note, for both organisations and employees, that an employer has the same legal duty of care for an employee's health, safety and wellbeing when working remotely as they do when they are working in the office. This applies whether the employee is based at home permanently or temporarily.

Therefore, employers have a responsibly to provide workers with advice on completing their own basic risk assessment of their home working environment to make sure they have a safe set up. Employers are also advised to keep in regular contact with workers, especially lone workers. In addition, employers need to try to meet employee needs around DSE equipment. For some equipment (e.g. keyboards, mouse) this could mean allowing workers to take this equipment home. For other larger items (e.g. ergonomic chairs, height-adjustable desks) employers should encourage workers to try other ways of creating a comfortable working environment (e.g. supporting cushions). There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to finding the right set up (either in the office or at home) but an organisation could offer a budget to put towards an ergonomic chair or standing desk converter, which can make a significant difference to health and wellbeing.

As Richard Branson said, "Take care of your employees and they will take care of your business".

Returning to the office

As the economy starts to open back up, employees will be anxious about returning to the workplace. After a year of working from home, being back in an office environment may be overwhelming. The main fears employers need to be aware of are:

- The commute - In a survey carried out in January and February 2021, over 80% of people said they would still be wary of crowded tubes, lifts, etc. even after the COVID-19 vaccine was widely available[35].

- Being back in close proximity with others - In the short-term, this will be a concern to many workers. While the shadow of COVID-19 still looms over us, going back into a busy work environment and being surrounded by large numbers of people will be daunting.

- The commute - In a survey carried out in January and February 2021, over 80% of people said they would still be wary of crowded tubes, lifts, etc. even after the COVID-19 vaccine was widely available.

For organisations, there are many solutions to support employees' fears of returning to an office environment – transparency and open communication are essential- but one that is relatively new and will likely be significant in the future is the hybrid working model.

A survey in May 2020 showed that 55% of US workers want a mixture of home and office working. In the UK, employers expect the proportion of regular home workers to double, from 18% pre-pandemic to 37% post-pandemic[36]. In addition, a poll by the recruiter Robert Half showed that 89% of firms expected some form of hybrid working to become permanent after the COVID-19 pandemic[37].

Following the lifting of COVID lockdowns worldwide, a wide range of hybrid arrangements have emerged, granting employees flexibility that was seldom offered before. Examples include:

- PwC has rolled out a flexible working policy that will allow its 22,000 UK staff to split their time about half and half between their home and office after the pandemic.

- Google's "flexible workweek" calls for employees to spend at least three days a week in the office and the rest at home.

- Lloyds Banking Group, the bank with the biggest UK high street presence, has said it will bring in working from home as a permanent lifestyle change, allowing it to cut 20% of its office space.

- Ford Motor's "flexible hybrid work model" leaves it up to workers and their managers to decide how much time they need to spend in the office.

- Accounting firm KPMG is to offer its UK employees the option to work from the office on a 'four-day fortnight' rotation, as a part of a new hybrid working model coming into force post-Covid-19.

- The past year has taught us that working from home does not reduce productivity. In light of this, companies should offer increased flexibility to staff, putting the emphasis on quality of work rather than availability between set hours. This will allow staff to create a work-life balance that works for them, thereby reducing stress and improving job satisfaction.

35 Why the future of work might be 'hybrid'. October 2020
https://blog.spacebase.com/2020/10/13/why-the-future-of-work-might-be-hybrid/

36 Why the future of work might be 'hybrid'. October 2020
https://blog.spacebase.com/2020/10/13/why-the-future-of-work-might-be-hybrid/
37 UK business believe hybrid working is here to stay. February 2021
https://www.roberthalf.co.uk/uk-business-believe-hybrid-working-here-stay-following-190-spike-remote-job-postings-start-pandemic

Top tips for mental health at work

1. Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of delivery: Organisations should produce, implement and communicate a mental-health-at-work-plan, which draws from best practice and represents views of employees across the organisation.

2. Proactively ensure workplace and home office design and organisation culture drive positive mental health outcomes: Workplace conditions should be of a standard to minimise the risk from any triggers for stress and mental health problems. Risks could include:

     a.   Long hours and no breaks
     b.   Unrealistic deadlines
     c.   Lone working
     d.   Poor managerial support
     e.   Working environment temperature and noise levels

Remote working can make it difficult to monitor these risks. Consider how you can communicate with your employees more regularly to ensure that they do have the ability to take breaks, work collaboratively with others and get the appropriate support from their manager.

3. Promote an open culture around mental health: Organisations can support an open culture around mental health through inductions and training, running internal communications campaigns and recruiting mental health wellbeing champions. Research from Deloitte shows that one in four employees fear negative consequences if they make their mental health issues formal, and only 44% feel comfortable talking to a line manager about their mental health[38].

4. Increase organisational confidence and capability: Organisations should educate staff to have effective conversations about mental health and signpost resources which provide support.

5. Provide mental health tools and support: Organisations should provide tailored in-house mental health support and signpost clinical help. This support might include:

     a.   Access to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
     b.   Counselling through Access to Work
     c.   Occupational Health
     d.   Employee Assistance Programmes and other tailored mental health and wellbeing support

6. Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting: Organisations should identify and track key measures for internal and external reporting, including the organisation's annual report and accounts.

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38 Deloitte. Mental health and employers: Refreshing the case for investment. January 2020.https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-and-employers.pdf

Factors that Form Workplace Wellbeing

According to Public Health England, "the surroundings in which employees spend their working lives are an important source of job satisfaction"[39]. A healthy workplace environment is key to supporting employee wellbeing, as it can ensure comfort, reduce sedentary behaviour and boost productivity. Even the simplest changes in sound levels, natural light and air quality have been shown to have a substantial impact on productivity.

With more and more employees working remotely, it is imperative that employers find ways to encourage staff to replicate healthy working practices at home. These include:

- Inspire staff to create a safe and soothing work environment at home: Different people will have different notions of what constitutes a pleasant work environment, but it's important that businesses encourage employees to find what works for them.

- Invest in home office equipment for staff: Offering a budget for ergonomically sound chairs or supplying employees with laptop stands and keyboards can make a huge difference to their health and wellbeing.

- Encourage staff to take regular breaks and get out at least once a day: Educate your employees about the benefits of getting up and stretching regularly and encourage them to take a full lunch break to go for a walk, jog or cycle.

- Empower employees to set boundaries: Where possible, it's important to ensure that people's working hours do not bleed over into personal time. Encourage staff to set clear boundaries on both ends of the working day.

BUT a healthy workplace extends beyond the physical environment. Workplace culture is equally important. A 'healthy' workplace culture may differ between organisations but tends to be one that allows enterprise to thrive. Enterprise prospers when employees are motivated and hungry for success. The aim should be an inclusive culture where everyone feels part of the business. In organisations that adopt a healthy culture, team spirit can be improved, employees are more likely to support each other and take advantage of opportunities available to them to improve their health. This can also be tricky when employees are predominantly working remotely, but there are plenty of measures businesses can implement to create an inclusive and healthy workplace culture.

39 Public Health England. "The impact of physical environments on employee wellbeing". August 2015.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_da
ta/file/772615/20150318_-_Physical_Environments_-_V3.0_FINAL.pdf

How to create a healthy workplace culture

1. Offer flexibility: Incorporating flexibility in the working day can help the workplace become a place for movement and relaxation by allowing for a variety of working styles that keep employees productive in a way that best suits their needs.

2. Give permission to engage and recognise the need for time: Workplace wellbeing initiatives can only work if employees feel they have permission to engage with these initiatives and can take the time to do so. This permission should be role-modelled from the very top of organisations.

3. Offer choices and place employees at the heart of decision-making: Involve your employees in the planning process so that the resulting workplace wellbeing programme is one that employees both want and need.

4. Encourage and support long-term behaviour change: Reducing sedentary behaviour is contingent on encouraging and supporting long-term behaviour change

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EXAMPLE

Denmark is known for its national culture of workplace health and wellbeing. Only 2% of employees regularly work very long hours, compared with the OECD average of 13%[40]. Denmark also grabbed the top spot in the Universum Global Workforce Happiness Index in 2016[41]. What is the secret to Denmark's inclusive, productive and happy workplace?

1. Prioritising work-life balance: Employers in Denmark have strategies in place to ensure that their employees are achieving a healthy work-life balance. The average working week is 37 hours, and overtime is actively discouraged. Employers also offer generous parental and annual leave allowances[42].

2. Freedom of choice: Employees can alter working hours to better suit their needs and play a vital role in designing their workplace wellbeing programmes. This ensures greater buy-in and involvement in wellbeing initiatives in the workplace environment.

3. Trust and equality: Scandinavian countries tend to have flat hierarchies which elevate individual responsibility and autonomy and encourage a more informal relationship between line managers and their rapports[43]. They also offer an equality of opportunity where diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, genders and workstyles promote a flexibility in thinking and a vibrancy in office culture.

4. The importance of happiness: Denmark has long known the value of a balanced and supportive workplace which places its employees' health and wellbeing high on the list of priorities.

It is important to note that Denmark's forward-thinking approach to workplace health and wellbeing is supported by a range of social, economic and political factors which enable companies to offer a great range of benefits to their employees.[44]

40 Alex Gray. "Denmark has the best work life balance – here's why". World Economic Forum. March 2017. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/denmark-best-work-life-balance-oecd/
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 HR Zone. "What can we learn from Denmark on happiness at work?" October 2015. https://www.hrzone.com/engage/employees/what-can-we-learn-from-denmark-on-happiness-at-work
44 Alex Gray. "Denmark has the best work life balance – here's why". World Economic Forum. March 2017. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/denmark-best-work-life-balance-oecd/

Conclusion of Section 2

Government figures show that millions of working days are lost each year due to work-related sickness absence in the UK. Supporting health and wellbeing in the workplace is therefore crucial to developing a happier, healthier and more productive workforce. Employers can achieve this firstly by creating a healthy workplace environment which ensures employee comfort, reduces sedentary behaviour and boosts productivity. Secondly, employers can create a healthy workplace culture which places employees and their wellbeing at the heart of decision-making. However, what concrete measures are organisations taking to support their staff? The next section of this report outlines real-world interventions undertaken across organisations to support the health and wellbeing of their staff.

CASE STUDIES

This section showcases 'real-world' innovative ideas being used by organisations to facilitate a healthier workforce.

Freestyle

Freestyle is a digital product studio which employs approximately 30 employees. Freestyle fosters a positive work environment that allows employees to grow and explore their creativity, and places great importance on employee health and wellbeing. As former competitive swimmers, the founders of the business recognised the value of physical activity in supporting physical and mental health, and created a workplace culture based on 'being better than yesterday'.

Freestyle has tested and implemented various activities and incentives over the years to support employees with their physical activity levels, health and wellbeing. The company recently developed an internal interface to track collective and individual miles as well as other activity statistics to incentivise employees to leave their desks and be active. In the run up to Christmas 2019, employees attempted to cover the total distance between their office and Lapland through walking, running and cycling as part of a fundraising for charity. The organisation even bought a static bike for the office so that employees could exercise throughout the working day and add more miles to the team total.

Other initiatives that encourage employees to be more active and prioritise their wellbeing include:

- Flexible working: all employees are able to work flexibly from day one so that they can fit in a morning run or make it to an evening training session.

- Fitness mornings: the company introduced 'fitness mornings', an initiative which allows employees to come into the office an hour later than usual once a month to undertake an activity which contributes to their wellbeing.

- Subsidised in-house Pilates sessions: Once a week, the team at Freestyle used to clear out their large meeting room to hold a lunchtime Pilates session at a subsidised price. During COVID-19, Freestyle made their Pilates sessions virtual and introduced an extra virtual HIIT session run by a local personal trainer. They also adopted a digital care package which includes virtual classes such as yoga, guided breath work and mindfulness to support staff mental health.

- Monthly wellbeing themed roundtables: the company holds monthly roundtable sessions with employees to discuss a wide range of wellbeing-related themes.

- Steal-a-day perk: this initiative allows employees to take up to four days a year off to learn something new, get inspired or do something good. This includes learning a new sport or activity and is offered alongside a £200 personal budget.

- Cycle-to-work scheme: the company runs a cycle to work scheme to encourage cycling as a means of transport to work.

- Fitness challenges: To keep employees engaged and active during lockdown, Freestyle challenged its employees to walk the length of the British Isles (from Lands' End to John O'Groats) – just under 1,000 kilometres. This challenge encouraged employees to make the most of their daily outdoor exercise allowance during lockdown to take a break from work and get some fresh air.

On top of a positive workplace culture, Freestyle also equipped their offices with the necessary facilities to accommodate employee participation in regular physical activity. Showers, personal lockers and changing facilities are available to all employees.

Although Freestyle employees have great ambitions to keep active, sometimes people need an extra boost of accountability, accessibility and reinforcement to ensure they keep moving. The perks listed above act as cues that reinforce, encourage and normalise physical activity in the workplace.

Despite the introduction of various workplace wellbeing initiatives, Freestyle still faces the challenge of ensuring that employees experience a culture of permissibility where they feel they can make use of the perks and benefits at their disposal. Freestyle attempted to overcome this issue in several ways:

- Ensuring that all members of the leadership team proactively use the perks and benefits;

- Contextualising the perks by highlighting the benefits of exercise, flexibility and time away from the office desk;

- Communicating and regularly reminding employees of these perks.

What do employees of Freestyle think?

The perks like the 'Steal a Day' and Pilates at work make me feel really privileged to work at Freestyle. When I tell my friends about it they are completely amazed that there is such a workplace, so it's no wonder so many colleagues recommend it as a great place to work.

Fitness mornings allow me to start the day with a mental reset, which has a great impact on my creativity, proactivity and ability to problem solve.

Joining the Pilates group at work has been a great way to spend an hour away from my desk, blow off some steam and get some much-needed exercise during the day. I always leave the session feeling relaxed and re-energised!

Having run out of vices I was willing to sacrifice as part of my New Year resolutions, I decided the other year to instead try out new things if the opportunity presented itself. I was always aware of the weekly Pilates sessions held at Freestyle but never considered joining in, so when an introductory taster session for newbies was held I thought I'd give it a go. As a developer I spend the vast majority of my day at a computer solving problems and creating solutions, which I love doing but it can be sedentary, solitary and mentally fatiguing. (I'm also not as young as I used to be - hey, if I were a professional athlete I'd be retired by now.) Thanks to our instructor, Bethany, I have found the weekly Pilates sessions to be a great antithesis to all of the above: mentally relaxing, at times physically challenging, fun and sociable. The fact that it takes place on work premises during lunch also means that even during a busy day I try to find the time. In fact, it's on those days that I probably need, enjoy and benefit from it the most.
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Crystal Ski Holidays

Crystal Ski Holidays is the largest ski and winter sports holiday company in the UK, which directly employs approximately 200 people. The organisation is a subsidiary of TUI, one of the world's leading travel groups, and creates winter holiday packages across Europe and North America.

Crystal Ski Holidays has recently introduced a set of wellness pledges and initiatives to support employees in creating and maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle.
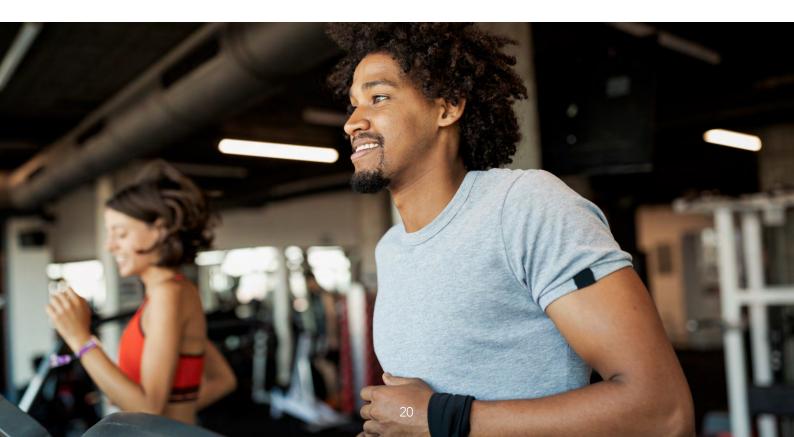
Several initiatives were launched to encourage employees to participate in this effort. These included:

• Creating a fitness charity challenge;

• Hosting regular running and cycling clubs during lunch hours;

• Offering free fruit every Monday;

• Setting up monthly wellness walks;

• Partnering with local gyms to offer employees discounts and free use of the gym for certain weeks.

The fitness charity challenge was by far the most successful in engaging employees across the organisation. Crystal Ski Holidays used fitness tracking app Strava to create a company group which recorded employee activity and displayed individual performance in real-time. Participants in the 'Fitness February' programme were able to view, support and measure each other's activity on the app.

To boost uptake, Crystal Ski Holidays donated £1 for every kilometre recorded by participants to Disability Snowsport UK (DSUK). The aim was to get a maximum number of participants to complete the company target set at 5,000km through February and raise £5,000. Employees received updates on progression towards this objective every Friday via email. To further increase uptake, the organisation also organised a number of peripheral initiatives including walking and running groups throughout the month.

According to company employees, the charity 'Fitness February' concept had a really positive impact on the wider business. Participants covered 5,151km during February and logged a total of 499 hours of physical activity. Crystal Ski Holidays highlighted the positive impact of this programme on employee engagement and team building, as colleagues from different departments came together to reach a common objective. The senior management also noticed that employees came to work with a more positive attitude during the month of February.

Shift 8 Ltd

Shift 8 Ltd has eleven employees who are committed to improving the social and physical activity of those with dementia and learning difficulties through the Magic Table product. The Magic Table is a series of games for people with mid-to-late stage dementia and adults with learning disabilities, encouraging them to participate instinctively in order to stimulate both physical and social activity. The games consist of a series of interactive light animations which can be projected on any table, motivating the mind and inspiring those living with dementia and learning disabilities to be active.

John Ramsay, the CEO of Shift 8, reached out to Rener Wellbeing Ltd, a workplace wellbeing consultancy, in order to develop a bespoke wellbeing strategy for the organisation as he felt Shift 8 did not have a clearly defined 'wellbeing strategy'. The aim was to help employees improve their levels of wellbeing, and to integrate it into their culture in a sustainable way.

The strategy development process was broken up into four main parts:

- Wellbeing Awareness Workshop

- Organisational Wellbeing Needs Analysis

- Bespoke Wellbeing Strategy Creation

- Wellbeing Strategy Implementation

The strategy began with an awareness workshop. This ensured all Shift 8 staff were on the same page, understanding both the importance of wellbeing and reasons for the executives wanting to develop a wellbeing strategy. This was then followed by a comprehensive wellbeing needs analysis, which was used to take the pulse of their current wellbeing status. Observations and interviews were conducted with staff members from all teams and of varying levels of seniority.

By fully understanding what was working for their employees' wellbeing, and where more structure or more effective practices could be put in place, Rener Wellbeing was able to develop a bespoke wellbeing strategy.

The bespoke wellbeing strategy included changes at an organisational level all the way through to support for individual employees, for example:

- There were changes made to the existing flexible working policy, based on the wellbeing needs analysis. The new policy ensured that both head office and remote teams had time to exercise and take breaks to carry out mindfulness or other wellbeing activities. The policy was also updated to provide clarity about what flexible working meant, with staff enabled to start and finish work at varying times, taking into account individual needs.

- The needs analysis also assessed the organisational chart, making improvements to ensure communication lines and job roles were clearly defined, which helped reduce anxiety and stress.

- The wellbeing strategy included 1:1 wellbeing support packages for the executive team and one other employee, focussed around Rener Wellbeing's four areas of wellbeing: mental health, physical activity, sleep and nutrition.

- Rener Wellbeing also developed tailor-made group wellbeing plans for the staff based at head office, with a separate plan for remote workers. They ran regular group follow-up sessions and continue to do so.

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Wellbeing is a massive part of our culture now, the strategy helped us put in place actions and we are actually doing them.

Sales increased massively, and our focus on wellbeing is a key element to that. We doubled our sales over the last year which would give us a return on investment (from the strategy) of nearly 250:1.
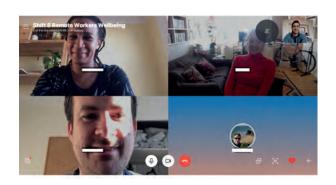
The employees of Shift 8 seem happier and healthier thanks to the bespoke wellbeing strategy, for example:

- Their nutrition improved — with few healthy food options close to the office, most of their employees now bring their own lunches into work. They also actively seek healthier food shops that are slightly further away from the office.

- Staff reported that their energy levels have increased.

- Employees reported that their quality and duration of sleep has risen.

- Physical activity levels have also increased, with many taking advantage of their lunch break by going to the gym, walking, and going to activity classes.

- Mental health has also become an open topic of discussion, spoken about between all staff without a sense of stigma.

Shift 8 also reported the team's overall performance has improved since the implementation of the wellbeing strategy, whereby Shift 8's in-year sales doubled in just three months and have continued to rise. These improvements were boosted significantly as a result of improved levels of wellbeing. This has led to the wellbeing strategy giving an ROI of 1:250, without taking into account cost savings from reduced absenteeism.

In December 2019, Rener Wellbeing carried out a year-end review of Shift 8's wellbeing strategy through interviews and company-wide surveys. From the findings, Rener Wellbeing updated Shift 8's wellbeing strategy to ensure the corresponding action plans were relevant to the employees' needs. Fortunately the proposed strategy for the first half of the year was still relevant when COVID-19 hit. The only amendments needed were to move some activities online. Examples of activities that were delivered are:

- March 2020 – Wellbeing Champion Training - Shift 8's Business Development Director trained on the basics of how to support Shift 8's employees. Especially in preparation for more employees working from home as a result of COVID-19.

- June 2020 – Digital Wellbeing Workshop - on how to take back control of your time and make conscious choices about how to use technology, individually, and as managers. The session was further tailored to support employees to have higher levels of digital wellbeing as they had to all work from home due to the lockdown.

AJ Products

AJ Products is a supplier of office and workplace furniture with a mission to make workplaces happier and healthier. In order to tackle the pressing issue of sedentary behaviour and support clients interested in developing a workplace health and wellbeing strategy, AJ Products made the decision to design an active working range that puts a focus on movement at work.

In their own workplace, AJ Products practices what they preach. Their offices are designed around the active working concept. Each employee has a sit-stand desk and a standing desk mat so they can choose to vary their position throughout the working day. By providing this benefit to all employees as standard, it has become a normal part of the day. What's more, seeing colleagues stand at their desk encourages other staff members to follow suit so that it becomes a group activity. The meeting room is also set up around the same concept with a sit-stand meeting table that encourages standing meetings instead of increasing overall sitting time in the office.

Seating is also important. Every staff member has an ergonomic office chair of their choosing to provide the most comfortable position when sitting down: one that supports a healthy posture and limits pressure on the back, neck and shoulders. Additionally, a wide variety of active sitting chairs are available throughout the workplace for workers to choose from, including balance balls, wobble stools and saddle chairs. This type of seat allows for light exercise at the desk and works the core muscles so that sitting itself becomes more active. Employees can choose to keep one of these chairs permanently at their desk or to swap between different options as they prefer. Each team also has access to a shared desk bike that allows them to undertake more intense exercise for short periods.

With staff working remotely during the COVID-19 lockdown, extra effort was required to ensure that the company's philosophy of staying active at work was not lost. Each employee was given the option to choose furniture that would let them create a comfortable home office space, so they could stay active at home and not fall victim to the common problems of poor posture and sedentary behaviour while working remotely. People chose the items that best suited them. For those with limited space at home, an active chair meant the difference between a sedentary work set up and having the ability to keep moving. Others were able to create a full sit-stand set up at home and work as they would have done in the office. Workers were also actively encouraged to move around while taking phone calls, take short breaks to walk around the house and get outside for some exercise in their lunch hour. Due to the success of this period of remote working, the company plans to embrace a hybrid work model moving forwards with staff given the flexibility to split their time between working in the office and from home.

By setting up their offices around movement, AJ Products has placed its core value of workplace wellbeing at the heart of company culture. The setup has normalised the discussion of health at work so that every staff member knows that their physical and mental wellbeing matters and that support is available whenever needed.

Looking Forward

It is recognised across the globe that improving health and wellbeing in the workplace constitutes a huge opportunity to secure the longevity and productivity of our workforce. From equipping offices with better furniture to increasing physical activity levels in the workplace, a lot is already being done to support employees across all sectors to lead healthier, more active lifestyles. Over the coming years, we will no doubt continue to see the proliferation of similar measures and wellbeing schemes that address employee physical, mental and financial health.

Yet in light of this proliferation, it is critical that employers understand what works. The challenge highlighted by the literature and some of the case studies in this report is that developing workplace wellbeing initiatives with a view to improve mental health and reduce sedentary behaviour is not sufficient to guarantee sustainable long-term behaviour change. Instead, companies need to create a physical environment and a culture of permissibility that leads employees to believe that they can and should take advantage of the various perks and benefits to which they have access. In addition, as evidenced in Denmark, workplace wellbeing initiatives need to be underpinned by Government-led policies around childcare, parental and annual leave to ensure that the workforce feels supported to have a better work-life balance.

Looking forward, the immediate priority is to establish what is currently working and how we can effectively learn lessons from the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on workplaces, both within the United Kingdom and abroad, to ensure that future working populations can lead healthier, more active lives.