

Policies that encourage physical activity

The goal of developing new policies for physical activity is to make healthy choices easier for your employees. According to the inaugural Minnesota Physical Activity Survey, almost 40% of Minnesota workers report that their employers provide support, programs or incentives for them to be physically active. Workers who report getting this support are more likely to be physically active on their breaks and results suggest that employer support may also influence workers' activity during time *away* from work as well. This highlights the potential influence that employers' policies and workplace environments may have on employees.

Once your policies are created, promote them frequently and include them in your organization's policy review cycle.

Time for physical activity

Allowing employees to use paid time to be physically active sends a strong message of support and encouragement. It also removes a major barrier – lack of time – to physical activity. There are a number of ways employers can provide employees with time for activity during the paid workday:

- **Policy that allows employees to use part of their regular workday (paid time, other than breaks or lunch) to be physically active.**
Sample language:
“Beginning January 1, 2009 all employees are required to receive at least 30 minutes, but not more than an hour, of paid break time each day to participate in physical activity. This time is designated for the purpose of participating in physical activity only. Employees who do not wish to participate can decline the extra break time.”
- **Designated ‘walk or work’ time.** The organization designates certain times during the paid workday that all employees can use for physical activity. This approach has the added advantage of co-worker support: everyone is getting up and taking a walk, so employees are more likely to “join the crowd”.
Sample language:
“All employees have the option to ‘walk or work’ during the 30 minutes from 8:30 to 9:00 am or from 2:30 to 3:00pm. Employees who choose to use those times for physical activity will be paid for that time. Employees who choose to continue to work also will be paid for that time. Other uses of the time, e.g., smoking breaks or coffee breaks, will not be paid.”
- **PTO (paid time off) for physical activity.** In the same way that some organizations provide employees with a certain number of PTO hours they can use for volunteer work or preventive health care, your organization may want to provide employees with a certain number of Physical Activity PTO hours to use each month. Employees need to obtain supervisor approval for the use of those hours, just as they would seek approval to use other PTO time.

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- **Employer matching.** This approach is similar to employer matching of employees' charitable contributions. Employees are provided with 30 minutes of paid time for physical activity – up to paid 2 hours per week -- for every 30 minutes of activity the employee puts in on his/her personal time. Some organizations ask employees to submit a physical activity plan to HR in order to “qualify” for the matching time.
- **Physical activity policy support and promotion in the determination of manager/supervisor bonuses.** It's one thing to have policies “on the books”. Making those policies a part of an organizational culture is another thing. Some progressive employers have included the degree to which managers encourage or allow their employees to use available paid time for physical activity in the managers' performance reviews and/or bonus determination.
- **Flex time for physical activity.** While not as powerful as providing paid time during the workday for physical activity, flexible work schedules can help employees overcome one of the most common barriers to activity – lack of time. Permit employees to come in earlier or leave later to allow them to fit in physical activity before work, after work, or to take a longer lunch break in order to be active. If you have an existing flex policy, promote it with a new twist to encourage employees to think about using the policy to be active.

Dress code

Review your organization's dress code. Does it allow employees to dress in a way that makes physical activity possible during the workday i.e., clothing and shoes that would allow for a 10 or 15 minute walk? If the dress code cannot provide for “walkable attire”, encourage employees to keep a pair of walking shoes at their desk or workstation.

Active commuting

Put in place policies that reward employees who choose to walk or bike to work, or who park in remote lots:

- provide those employees with their own private lockers, or
- provide those employees with a 30-minute later start time (outline in the policy that those employees get paid for those 30 minutes) in exchange for their choice to commute to work in an “active” way.

Walking meetings

If your organization has indoor or outdoor walking routes, encourage staff to hold walking meetings. Good candidates for walking meetings are meetings with two or three people and meetings that involve discussion and/or creative thinking rather than presentations, handouts or note taking.

The best way to encourage walking meetings is modeling, especially by upper management. If one vice president starts holding occasional walking meetings, the practice will spread.

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If the meeting isn't a candidate for a walking meeting, consider including time for a 10-minute walking break during longer meetings. A short walk can re-energize participants, allow for continued discussion or thought, and make the meeting more productive.

Note: Walking meetings need not involve walking! If you have wheelchair-bound colleagues, make sure that the route for your 'moving meeting' is fully accessible to those colleagues also.

Walking breaks during long meetings

If your meeting will last longer than two hours, plan an activity break. Ideas for a walking break are as follows:

- As the facilitator of the meeting, lead the walk. Use hallways outside the meeting room or if convenient, sidewalks outside the building. Plan to spend about 10-minutes for the activity break. Set the tone for the meeting by listing the walking break on the agenda. Encourage attendees to wear comfortable shoes.
- If brainstorming is on the agenda, consider "walk and talk" small group sessions.
- Arrange meetings with breaks and lunch times long enough to allow time for activity.