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Effects of Changing Work Environments on Employer Support for Physical Activity During COVID-19

Elizabeth Ablah, PhD, MPH¹, Matthew P. Buman, PhD², Liz Petersen, MS³, Chia-Chia Chang, MPH, MBA⁴, Ann Wyatt, MEd⁵, Sarah Ziemer, BS⁶, Mary T. Imboden, PhD, MS⁷, Janet R. Wojcik, PhD⁸, Neil E. Peterson, PhD, NP-C⁹, Anna Zendell, PhD, MSW¹⁰, David R. Anderson, PhD¹¹, and Laurie P. Whitsel, PhD¹²

Introduction

COVID-19 dramatically accelerated evolving changes in the way we define the “work environment” in the United States. In response to COVID-19, many employers have offered increased flexibility for where employees work, including remote (an employee’s workstation is at home) and hybrid work (an employee works both at the employer worksite and remotely, on pre-determined schedules). Accordingly, worksite physical activity (PA) and sedentary behaviors (SB) such as extended sitting time (ST) may have changed.^{1,2} However, little is known about whether these work arrangements are associated with changes in employer support for PA. Interviews were conducted to assess this gap in understanding. Because little is known about employer support for equity with respect to PA and SB, this study sought to identify

¹University of Kansas School of Medicine, Wichita, KS, USA

²Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ, USA

³Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), USA

⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA, USA

⁵HealthFitness, Bear, DE, USA

⁶Wellbeats, St. Louis Park, MN, USA

⁷Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO), Raleigh; North Carolina and George Fox University, Newberg, OR, USA

⁸Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC, USA

⁹Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

¹⁰Excelsior University, Albany, NY, USA

¹¹VisioNext LLC, St. Paul, MN, USA

¹²American Heart Association, Washington, DC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Elizabeth Ablah, PhD, MPH, University of Kansas School of Medicine, Wichita, KS, USA.

Email: eablah@kumc.edu

potential strategies to assure equity in PA opportunities across work environments.

The Experts

The Physical Activity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (PAPREN) and National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP) Business/Industry Work Group convened a group of five experts in workforce health to serve as panelists (Table 1). During a Zoom meeting on Friday, December 16, the experts were asked to respond to eight questions that had been developed by the PAPREN/NPAP Work Group.

What We Learned

As COVID-19 has Evolved, so Have employers' Policies About Acceptable Work Arrangements. How has COVID-19 Changed employees' Working Environments?

Ms. Wyatt: "We have a great opportunity to look across a variety of companies that we...provide services for, and I think 'flexibility' is probably the number one thing I hear. There are so many companies that now offer hybrid work. Coming into the 'workplace' may look very different by worksite. A vast majority do two-to-three days on site, and people can set their hours. Typically, they have core hours - that's brought a lot of flexibility. So many are embracing working from home, but I'm starting to hear a trend of companies wanting their employees to come back on site. I'm curious to see how that's going to start to evolve over this next year. We're still, of course, seeing a lot of COVID-19 cases."

Ms. Ziemer: "Employees are resistant to employers asking them to 'come back at all,' especially when employees have been productive remotely. One large employer surveyed their employees; with greater than 90% response, employees most frequently describe returning to an office as 'pointless.' 'So even if it is feasible for them to go back, they really don't want to.'"

Ms. Petersen: "In 2020, 78% of employers reported offering expanded remote work options and benefits for socially distanced employees (e.g. expanded leave to care for family).³ Additionally, 63% of organizations had hybrid work opportunities for most employees, so that's a good indication of how prevalent the hybrid workforce has become.⁴ Several occupations are most likely able to offer flexible work arrangements, including information technology, finance, sales, marketing, and human resources."

Ms. Chang: "Frontline workers, such as health care workers, service, retail, manufacturing, and production are occupational groups that have largely been unable to work remotely."

Ms. Petersen: "I would also add hospitality, transportation, utilities, and child and elder care as occupations least likely to offer flexible work arrangements."

Ms. Chang: "I think a lot of the people who are paid less and who do not have the flexibility in where and when they work, are the ones who are not getting the full benefits of the remote work. Moreover, in 2020, some of these places needed to be closed because of potential COVID-19 exposures, which meant that many of those employees were unpaid and/or no longer employed."

Where do Increased Physical Activity and Decreased Sedentary Behavior rank as Priorities for employers? How has That Prioritization Evolved Throughout COVID-19?

Dr. Buman: "There is some recognition that sitting time has increased incredibly since COVID-19."⁵

Ms. Chang: "Despite this, we have not heard that physical activity has become more of a priority during COVID. People have been concerned about COVID and changes related to going hybrid or remote. There has been more concern about mental health and isolation from increased remote work."

Dr. Buman: "I agree. Many worksites are still indicating they would love to offer a physical activity program to their employees, but right now, they have 100 other issues to deal with, including mental health, as major concerns. Employers are looking for how they can offer an additional benefit to their employees. This is an opportunity for employers to connect to concerns about employees' well-being."

We Know More About Stress Because of COVID-19. Do employers Value Mental Health and Well-being? Are employers Using Physical Activity as a tool to Address Well-being/reduce Stress?

Ms. Petersen: "In 2022, 42% of companies reported that wellness benefits were extremely or very important benefit categories.⁴ Compare this to 2020 and 2021, when it was up to 62%."

Ms. Ziemer: "Clients were coming here as a place to address fitness and nutrition, but then they quickly routed themselves over to mindfulness-type activities. Many companies were promoting five-to-10-minute classes employees can do at their workstations to combat stress, anxiety, depression related to COVID-19. Now employers are seeing the connections to mental health, fitness, nutrition, mindfulness."

Ms. Chang: "Because of COVID-19, there has been greater attention paid to mental health in the workplace. Talk has been mostly about individual resilience, which puts responsibility on the workers. Slowly, more employers are identifying how workplace policies can promote health. How can cultures, leadership, and management get rid of toxic work environments and make work environments more supportive? Now, employers are attending to employees' mental health and giving them time to take care of their health; that can include physical activity."

How Have Employers/vendors Encouraged Physical Activity And/or Discouraged Sedentary Behavior During COVID-19?

Ms. Wyatt: "Early on, when employers offered hybrid work arrangements, and people were coming back to the workplace, it was so meeting-heavy that people just did not have time for anything else; that was certainly detracting from people participating in physical activity. Employees started sharing, 'You have this great gym here for me, but I can't use it. I'm in meetings from the time I step in the door until the time I'm done. You're even bringing lunch in so that I do not need to leave. You're creating some great efficiencies, but you're also

Table 1. Panelists' Positions and Expertise.

| Panelist | Position | Expertise |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Dr. Matthew Buman | Professor, college of health solutions at Arizona State University | Developing and implementing evidence-based interventions to reduce sitting and increase PA in workplaces |
| Ms. Chia-Chia Chang | Coordinator, total worker Health® at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) | Healthy work design and well-being |
| Ms. Liz Petersen | Quality manager, human resources knowledge center at society for human resource management (SHRM) | Human resources research |
| Ms. Ann Wyatt | Chief client success leader at HealthFitness | Creating strong communities of health by engaging people on-site and online |
| Ms. Sarah Ziemer | Senior vice president, corporate sales at Wellbeats | Corporate health and wellbeing sales, strategy, and leadership |

not allowing me to do everything I need to be able to do.' We started to see more requests for things like stretch breaks or mindfulness activities during meetings. One manager brought his whole team into the fitness center to work out. When they are being intentional, they are really having some great success."

Ms. Petersen: "It is best for employers to offer as many different options as possible to encourage a community of motion. The more that leaders can show what they are doing, leading by example, the better. Encourage the use of adjustable desks or other active workstations. My boss is pedaling underneath her desk. In the middle of our meeting, her employees say, 'Oh, you're pedaling!' Calling out those things, it makes you wonder – 'What activity have I done today?' Hosting one-on-one meetings on a walk if you are in-person, or if you're not in-person, both be on your cell phones. 'Let's go for a walk in our own neighborhoods and have that conversation.' Other effective strategies to prompt PA and/or decrease SB include well bots – something that pops up to remind you on your computer screen, 'Hey! You've been on the screen [X amount of time]. Here's this quick exercise you can do!' It's a good thing to see those reminders and offer them as many ways as possible. Additional strategies include gaining support from management, having access to exercise facilities, paid gym memberships, and offering PA programs that include social support."

Ms. Ziemer: "It can be beneficial to promote a philanthropic cause. For instance, 'People who complete at least 80% of this challenge will get a donation to their charity of choice,' where they can benefit a cause that is meaningful to them."

What Are Barriers to employers Encouraging PA And/ or Discouraging Sedentary Behavior Through the Worksite? Are These Barriers Specific to COVID-19? How can These Barriers Be Overcome?

Panelists described multiple barriers associated with employers encouraging PA and/or discouraging SB during COVID-19.

Dr. Buman: "Due to flexible work environments, we have to offer hybrid types of physical activity and sedentary programs. From a researcher perspective, we lack knowledge about the necessary interventions and how to deliver them in these spaces. We had a program that was highly evidence-based to reduce sitting, prior to COVID. It's no longer evidence-based when we have workers who

are now not in the office or are in hybrid settings. We have to scramble now to develop and build that evidence, which we are doing. As a field, that is where we are. We have these great programs that work, but they do not necessarily work in the contexts in which many of us now live."

Ms. Ziemer: "Employers may not fully support wellness initiatives in workplace culture. It's alarming how many employers say, 'Well, we'd love to offer this benefit, but can we turn it off during the workday?'" She also described how workplaces are navigating workforce reductions and asking for more output from fewer employees. "To implement fitness is sometimes frustrating to employees, because 'I don't even have time to eat, let alone work out!'" To address these barriers, she indicated that workplaces need to prioritize and integrate wellness into their culture.

Ms. Petersen: "Generally, it's a matter of the business executives deciding what they want their work culture to be like, and do they want to make sure that they're attracting and retaining high-quality talent. Employers' initial responses to COVID-19 have allowed them the opportunity to determine whether remote can work for them. But now, what do they want their work culture to be? Is the culture going to be flexible, or is the culture going to have a set expectation of everyone? The more flexible the workplace is in allowing employees to decide what works for them, the easier it is to recruit. The more companies want a fixed everyone-in-the-office mentality, the more resistance they may receive from employees and high-quality candidates."

Ms. Wyatt: "People are still having trouble setting their boundaries around what their workday at home looks like, which then leads to employees not focusing on their self-care. Leaders need to set an expectation of when it is inappropriate for employees to work. 'You should not send that e-mail at 8 pm unless that is your normal shift.' And it is leading by example. When you are home, you tend to feel like you are always working."

What Are Strategies to Achieve/maintain Equity in Physical Activity and Sedentary Reduction Through the Worksite?

Ms. Chang: "We do not have proven interventions yet about changes during the past two years, but I think strategies to improve equity across occupations, to benefit those who are required to work in

person may include more pay, more time off, or more control over their schedules. Technology capabilities like scheduling apps make that easier now, allow people more control over when they work.

“It is important that employees feel some control. Giving people paid time to be physically active is important. If you feel like you have more control over your own work environment, that same locus of control could then extend into your personal life. If you feel like everyone at work is telling you what to do, and everything’s out of your control, out of your hands, then outside of work, you could carry that same feeling of dis-empowerment.”

Ms. Ziemer: “Equity is the whole case for on-demand and accessible programs. We did a research study in 2017/2018, and most people reported they would use an on-demand, accessible program if their employer funded it, because they could not afford a lifetime fitness gym or have the time if they are working multiple jobs to get to a gym.”

Ms. Wyatt: “It’s also going the next step, as the employer, to tie it all together. Making it very easy and in one system, where they can access everything, so it’s not tied to an actual on-site fitness center or offering something virtually. So the employer makes it easy for the employee to access all of these things, so they have the options.”

Ms. Petersen: “One way to do some of this is to pay, which also is a big motivation. Many companies provide some type of a wellness stipend based on employees’ physical activity. When worksites offer multiple ways to earn that bonus or stipend, it allows for more inclusivity. The employer does not need to require participation in a specific competition but can offer multiple ways for people to demonstrate that they are being active.”

Ms. Chang: “One caution - although incentives can be popular, employers must be careful with what and how they incentivize to assure the incentives are not coercive or limit access to health insurance, which can increase disparities across the workforce.”

Dr. Buman: “Offering flexibility to employees regarding the ability to work remotely is terrific. Offering flexible work hours on those days gives people the freedom to be able to spend an hour to exercise, to fit it into their day. This increases their locus of control, so they feel like they have some control over their day. Employees want to improve their health, but not at the cost of their job. There is still this perception that ‘if I’m not at my desk, I’m not working hard,’ and that has carried over into the home environment. If an employer says, ‘We want to support your health and encourage you to be active when you work,’ this requires a cultural norm change, which starts from the top, giving employees permission to be active while they work.

“At the heart of some of this is the physical activity paradox, which is the observation that occupational physical activity does not confer the same health benefits as leisure time physical activity. The difference may be attributable to limited availability for leisure time activity, along with many social determinants that are likely driving that difference. From a research perspective, it is

critical to better understand what is driving that physical activity paradox. Then these drivers need to be addressed structurally, in a whole host of workplaces and sectors, especially not just knowledge workers. That will go a long way to addressing those inequities.”

Conclusion

Each of these perspectives added valuable insight into how employers are advancing health while responding to changing work environments. Employers are concerned with employees’ well-being, work culture, employee burnout, and retention. Although physical activity is not currently a priority for employers, it is an evidence-based solution to many challenges that employers are experiencing (eg stress, mental illness, worker isolation, poor productivity, burnout). Employers would do well to promote physical activity through role modeling and the implementation of innovative programs, policies, and environmental changes, regardless of the work environment.

Author’s Note

The findings and conclusions in this presentation are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

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