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Companies should bring back smoke breaks, but for fitness

If sitting is the new smoking, workday exercise is the antidote.



Chris Sherry



Our understanding of health and workday habits sure have come a long way since the days of *Mad Men*, when smoking in the office was the norm. Not only is smoking in the workplace now a thing of the past, but we also have a better understanding of how the sedentary nature of most desk jobs affect physical and mental health.

And yet, do the same businesses who've banned smoking from the workplace encourage their employees to engage in healthier pursuits like exercise? Sure, employers can dangle discounted gym memberships as a corporate perk. But unless you're in the C-suite, you likely [don't have the clout](#) to squeeze in a midday Barre class or silence your phone and go for a run. How come those lower down the corporate ladder don't enjoy the same freedom to work up a sweat on "company time" as their superiors?

In the era of hybrid work, it's time that changed. I propose that companies try something that feels radical, but shouldn't: the return of the "smoke break", except this time, it's about making time during the workday to work out. It may sound crazy, but as you'll see for the reasons I'm about to describe, there's real, tangible value for those who mix business with fitness.

The workday isn't what it used to be.

A silver lining of the pandemic was the mass realization that many companies could run just as well — perhaps even better — when their employees work from the comforts of home. But even before 2020, the always-on connectivity of the Slack, email, and smartphone age has conspired to make "work time" bleed into "personal time" far more than most of us would like. With many still enjoying a hybrid work model, perhaps it's time the pendulum swung back towards letting folks do some personal business on what was once considered company time.

Naturally there are some professions that require their workers to stay locked in while they're clocked in. But for most businesses, the world won't come crashing down if employees enjoy a freer, more fluid workday that makes room for healthy habits. And as you'll soon see, giving employees back a little quantity of time for fitness can end up not only improving their health outcomes, but the quality of their work.

Sitting is the new smoking.

It might seem shocking to think that too much time in a desk chair amounts to a workplace health risk, but the data bears it out. According to a meta-analysis of research shared by the [Mayo Clinic](#), "those who sat for more than eight hours a day with no physical activity had a risk of dying similar to that posed by obesity and smoking." That should be concerning enough, but the shorter-term health complications that lead to those longer-term outcomes are just as concerning. Specifically, excessive sitting is associated with increases in blood pressure, blood sugar, LDL cholesterol, and body fat. On top of all that, there's no doubt that staying sedentary and staring at the same screen for hours on end probably isn't the best thing for our minds, either.

The good news? Regular moderate intensity exercise (which the CDC [defines](#) as a brisk walk) can help undo those harmful effects, especially if they're paired with a conscious effort to take breaks from sitting over the course of the day. Moving can also help avoid negative mental health outcomes, as there's a [clearly-established negative correlation](#) between exercise and episodes of depression and anxiety.

When you put it all together, it's impossible to ignore the fact that any workplace that encourages its employees to take time out for physical activity during the day is a happier and healthier one — both day-to-day and for the long haul.

An active workforce is a smarter workforce.

The mind-movement connection is about a whole lot more than just managing depression and anxiety: it's what equips employees with the brainpower to routinely do their best work.

That's because regular exercise is associated with enhanced cognitive performance across a wide range of areas, all of which add up to an organization that can both think outside the box and work smarter. Making time to stay active can [help improve memory function](#) in adults. [Other research](#) shows that regular exercisers perform better on tests of creativity, showing improvements in both convergent thinking (solving problems by applying rules and logic) and divergent thinking (generating unique ideas and novel solutions). If you find yourself struggling to stay focused, it's also worth noting that physical activity has been shown to [improve how those with ADHD perform on attention-based tasks](#).

It's also no secret that everyone's energy can wane over the course of the workday, which can lead to sluggish thinking, diminished output, and mental mistakes. As counterintuitive as it sounds, exercise can *create* energy rather than take it away. That's because [numerous studies](#) over the years have found "an association between physical activity and a reduced risk of experiencing feelings of low energy and fatigue."

Knowing all of this, companies have a choice. They can maximize the quantity of time that employees spend working, pretending that everyone is always chugging along at the optimal level of productivity. Or they can trade a little desk time for some brain-boosting exercise during the day, which can energize their teams, increase efficiency, and boost creative thinking. If I were a CEO, I know which option I'd choose.

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Between commuting, parenting, eating, and handling all of life's curveballs, it can be hard for many employees to find balance in their daily lives. That's especially true when working hours can extend well into the evening, and often why fitness is the first thing that's axed from an overstuffed to-do-list.

That's why giving people permission to exercise during their traditional workday can be such a powerful perk. Not only does it offer the physical benefits and the mental boosts described above, it helps create work-life balance by creating dedicated time for an activity that can often fall by the wayside.

In the process, a fitness-friendly employer signals to their employees that they are valued, their health is valued, and that they're trusted to get work done without a regimented, micromanaged schedule. For companies focused on recruitment and retention, this kind of pro-exercise attitude can be a powerful differentiator. And if your employee benefits package already includes discounted gym memberships, doesn't it make sense to also give them the time to actually use it?

How companies can normalize fitness breaks.

The first step is to set ground rules that ensure everyone has the freedom to actually enjoy these fitness breaks while minimizing the policy's impact on the work of others. Encourage employees to block off time on their calendars for workouts ahead of time, which can help avoid scheduling conflicts. For bigger companies who might be thinking about how to redesign their physical spaces in the age of hybrid work, consider ways you can make room for fitness and light movement in the workplace. Whether that means setting up treadmill desks or introducing dedicated fitness and wellness rooms, these can be a worthwhile investment that attracts talent and encourages existing employees to consistently come into the office.

Company culture is created through company habits. While it would be great if getting everyone in the office moving during the day was just a matter of updating a policy, the truth is that most organizations have a lot of unwritten rules and norms that can keep employees from truly internalizing that belief and acting on it. As with any cultural change, it's on the folks at the top to set an example. That's why executives and managers especially should aim to add fitness into their workdays, clearly communicating their intentions to others while encouraging them to join in. Make the effort to clarify that you don't need a certain salary or job title to "earn" the right to midday workouts.

Beyond facilitating and normalizing exercise breaks, HR teams and managers can introduce certain practices and programs designed to get people moving. Consider a company-wide movement challenge to add some outside incentive to coax those who might otherwise stay seated. If there's any kind of gym perk associated with your benefits package, rewarding check-ins can similarly create a fitness-forward culture.

For teams that have reintroduced any level of in-person work, taking walking meetings can be a great way to take a break for exercise while still feeling productive. Between moderate exercise and the removal from your usual environment, this could be a great opportunity for brainstorming. Managers can also consider one-on-one check-ins with their reports while walking or exercising. Compared to sitting across from each other in a conference room, this more active yet informal approach can reduce the tension.

Just like hitting an individual fitness goal, creating a culture that accesses the physical and mental benefits of workouts during the workday starts by letting go of old assumptions. Understand that the nature of work has changed, and celebrate this opportunity to restore work-life balance. Accept that more work time does not always equal more productivity, and acknowledge the value that active employees bring to the table. As leaders start to internalize these lessons and act on them through their own activity, the change they create will ripple outward to improve their entire team's relationship with fitness — and work itself.

When it comes to seamlessly incorporating workouts into busy workdays and helping your team get moving, look no further than Future. Our modern approach to personal training can connect each employee to the individualized, on-demand coaching that moves them towards their goals. Whether you want to cram some cardio into your lunch break or end your day with interval training, each person's Future coach can provide the workout plans, expertise, and accountability that makes it easy to exercise on their schedule and their terms. There's no better way to achieve the workout-life balance you're after.

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Lifestyle

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