



Group interview report

Insights on European companies' current practices, challenges and needs in order to provide physical activities in the workplace



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND	5
RESEARCH METHODS	7
RESULTS	12
THEME 1: PREVALENCE OF A NARROW DEFINITION OF “PHYSICAL ACTIVITY”	13
THEME 2: PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AS COMPANY CULTURE AND VALUES	16
THEME 3: A ‘BUSINESS FIRST’ APPROACH	18
THEME 4: IMPLEMENTATION AND SUPPORT	20
THEME 5: EVALUATION IS “WHERE THE SHOE PINCHES”	22
PERCEIVED PROS AND CONS OF CERTIFICATION PROCESS FOR ACTIVE WORKPLACES	25
RECOMMENDATIONS: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND MEETING THE NEEDS OF EUROPEAN COMPANIES BASED UPON THIS EVIDENCE	28
CONCLUDING COMMENTS	31
REFERENCES	33

Executive summary

Background

A total of 8 interviews were conducted from March to May 2023 with various groups of employers interested in promoting physical activity in the workplace. Seven of these interviews were conducted online, and one was a hybrid with the interviewer participating online and the participants on location. 6 of the interviews were group interviews, and 2 were individual interviews. The duration of the interviews was between 55 minutes and 1h 51 minutes. A total of 10+ hours recordings were collected, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Representatives of 20 different companies/federations/ministries or municipalities from different nationalities was interviewed: Five Danish, 4 Dutch, 6 French, 2 Belgic, and 3 Swiss companies. Both small-medium and large companies were represented and where possible the interviews were divided into groups of small-medium and large companies separately.

Key findings

Physical activity is more than physical exercise and sports, and yet many companies have a limited and narrow understanding of physical activity (often equating it with sport or organized exercise) and this makes it a challenge for them to implement more strategic initiatives in the workplace.

The social aspects of physical activity are important to companies. For some companies, these factors are even more important than the health benefits. Physical activity (often referred to as sport) was perceived by the companies to benefit new relationships, team building and cohesion, belonging to the company, networking, erasing unwanted hierarchical statuses, and helping employees develop leadership skills.

Company culture and values have a big impact on how companies incorporate physical activities. A lot of the companies value flexibility, voluntariness and work-life balance for their employees. Some participants feared that implementing physical activities in the workplace will compromise those values.

Some companies don't prioritize physical activities as it is not their "raison d'être". Others highlight why they will *invest* in the health of their employees as their health is an *asset* that the company will benefit from to develop and grow as a business.

Evaluation is "where the shoe pinches". A challenge is what to measure with regards to physical activity participation, how to measure it, and why. Many of the companies have a lot of ideas on how to better support the health of their employees. But they find evaluation and monitoring difficult and very time consuming.

How to meet the needs of European companies: Some recommendations

- Promote physical activity as something else than 'just' sport
- Implement physical activity during office hours in the daily tasks of employees
- Work with a captain or ambassador of physical activity promotion - the social commitment increases participation
- Incorporate and adapt the physical activities to the company culture and the values of the company for long term success
- Integrate physical activity and the health and wellbeing of employees as a crucial aspect of doing business in 2023 forward
- Provide companies with easy-to-apply procedures for monitoring and evaluation
- Connect European companies with the aim to share knowledge and experiences in the field of physical activities in workplaces

Introduction/background

Physical activity was once a larger part of work and everyday life than today. During the past century, many workplaces in Europe have undergone significant changes as work has shifted from physical labour to primarily sedentary work. This has produced new challenges to the health of employees.

Since the beginning of the 2000, a movement has started in Europe to re-introduce physical activities in the workplaces to account for the many related health benefits¹. In 2008, the European Commission stated the following guidelines² in their *EU Physical Activity Guidelines Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity*:

- *Guideline 33 – In their agreements, employers and trade unions should include requirements for the workplace which facilitate a physically active lifestyle. Examples of such requirements include: (1) Access to adequately equipped indoor and outdoor exercise facilities; (2) Availability, on a regular basis, of a physical activity professional for joint exercise activities as well as for individual advice and instruction; (3) Support for workplace-related sport participation; (4) Support for using cycling and walking as transportation to and from the workplace; (5) If the work is monotonous or heavy to the extent that it implies an increased risk of skeletal muscle disorders, access to exercises specifically designed to counteract these diseases; (6) A physical activity-friendly working environment.*
- *Guideline 34 – National health certificates could be awarded to workplaces where a healthy physically active lifestyle is given high priority.*

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/library/policy_documents/eu-physical-activity-guidelines-2008_en.pdf (last viewed on June 13th 2023).

² https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/library/policy_documents/eu-physical-activity-guidelines-2008_en.pdf (last viewed on June 13th 2023).

Based on these guidelines, many EU projects have been developed. In 2018, the first major event of the European Meetings of Company Sports (EMoCS) project took place with more than 1.000 participants³. A declaration of intent was signed to form an unique European Certification for Active Workplaces. This led to the Workplace Active Certification (WAC, in this report referred to as *the certification*) project⁴ from 2020-2022. During the project, a new certification system was created and guidelines provided to promote physical activity in workplaces. 27 organisations from 7 countries piloted the system, and 13 organisations were certified and awarded in Brussels 2022.

In 2023 through 2025 the WAC is continued into an additional project entitled 'Move At Work' (M@W). The aim of this project is to improve the certification system, the criteria, and guidelines to enlarge the network of active supporters and the sustainability of the certification.

Within this report, therefore, we outline the results of our investigation into the current practices, challenges and needs of 20 European organisations and companies in relation to physical activity promotion in their workplace. The aim of the report is to facilitate knowledge on the existing practice in order to improve the certification.

³ <https://www.emocs.eu> (last viewed on June 14th 2023)

⁴ <https://activeworkplacecertification.eu/wac-project/> (last viewed on June 14th 2023)

Research Methods

In the following, we will refer to all the participating organisations as “companies” despite the difference between a private business (company) and a non-profit-federation or a ministry department. The word company has been chosen to follow the overall terminology of the project.

Participants

A total of 8 interviews were conducted from March to May 2023. Seven of these interviews were conducted online, and one was a hybrid with the interviewer participating online and the participants on location. Six of the interviews were group interviews, and 2 were individual interviews. The duration of the interviews was between 55 minutes and 1h 51 minutes. A total of 10+ hours of conversation was recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, it was analysed through a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2023).

Table 1: Overview of the interviews, size of participating companies, and duration

Interview number	Size of companies	Duration
Interview #1	Small-medium companies	1h 24m
Interview #2	Small-medium companies	1h 15m
Interview #3	Large companies	1h 15m
Interview #4	Large companies	0h 55m (tech problems and short on time)
Interview #5	Mix	1h 33m
Interview #6	Mix	1h 51m
Interview #7	Small-medium companies	Recording error (1h 10 minutes). Second part (theme #3): 17 minutes
Interview #8	Large companies	1h 24m

In order to account for the partly anonymity of the participants, we have not stated the country or the number of companies in each of the interviews. Instead, we have highlighted the size of the companies in each interview related to the number of employees in each company (small-medium is less than 250 employees, large is 250 or more employees).

Representatives of 20 different companies of various sizes from five different countries took part in this study: Five Danish, 4 Dutch, 6 French, 2 Belgic, and 3 Swiss. Both small-medium and large

companies were represented and, where possible, the interviews were divided into groups of small-medium and large companies separately.

Table 2 lists the names of the 20 companies and the industry/sector they work within.

Table 2: Name and industry of the 20 companies

Name of the companies	Industry
Audi	Automobiles
Banque of France Sports Association	Sports association
Bellinzona Sport	Sports association
Dinero, Visma	Digital accounting platform
Dipartimento Federale Della Difesa, Della Protezione Della Popolazione e Dello Sport	Sports department, Ministry of Sports
Europe Active	Fitness and physical activities association
Fédération Francaise du Sport d'Entréprise	Association for company sports
Forbo Giubiasco SA	Flooring systems
JDC Groupe	Consultancy
L'Eurométropole de Strasbourg	Municipality
L&B Synergie	Communication agency
Lysias Advies	Consultancy
Microsoft	Computer tech and software
Ministry of Sports	Department of politics
MyMarketing.com	Consulting, marketing
Novo Nordisk	Pharmaceuticals
Pure Gym	Fitness gym
Sonar App	Digital marketing agency
SuitIT	IT consulting
SWECO	Architecture and engineering consultancy

Given the time-frame and geographical scope of the project, group interviews were considered more practicable than single interviews. This allowed us to gather more information in one interview, and to compare the companies. More importantly, it gave the companies the opportunity to listen in on each other's practices, challenges, and success stories; discussion in the interviews generated new, more collaborative or comparative findings. The group setting also facilitated networking between the companies. We aimed for 3-5 participants per interview. Nevertheless, coordination of interviews was still challenging in some respects. Due to late cancellations, two of the interviews were conducted with only one participant, and two

interviews were conducted with two participants. Conversely, several interviews had more than one “interviewer” present from the work group. This way, the participants could always ask for assistance with linguistic issues or translation during the interview, and the work group could discuss the interesting aspects of the interviews afterwards.

Interview guide and transcription procedure

During the study, we utilised a semi-structured interview schedule that used three thematic frames to direct our questions to different areas of physical activities in workplaces, and which was aligned with previous findings from the WAC project; in particular, the scoping review performed by the University of Copenhagen as part of this project (Evans et al 2020). These themes were as follows:

Thematic frame #1 focused upon the current practices and the level of focus in the company in relation to physical activities. Here, we asked about where the companies would place their current practices, or where they would start if they were going to have any. We also asked about the strategy behind focusing on this level.

Thematic frame #2 focused upon how the companies could design a future initiative or better support, monitor, and evaluate an existing initiative. Here we asked about what the companies would like to do more of, and what they already did to monitor and evaluate their initiatives. We sometimes asked about participation rates, successful initiatives, and so forth. This was particularly the case when a company representative had difficulty answering the question spontaneously and needed time to consider their answer. We helped participants to direct their focus on measures that could generate more elaboration on their practices.

Thematic frame #3 focused upon the certification and what the companies perceived as benefits and pitfalls of the Workplace Active Certification. For example, we asked participants about what added value the certification would bring their company, and if they had any speculations or barriers in order to become certified.

Overall, the interview schedule helped us to structure interviews, giving a framework and direction around which to address the research question and to support elements of comparison between interviews. The semi structured approach allowed for questions to emerge from the responses, with probes and additional discussion encouraged. This approach also gave us the scientific freedom to elaborate more on the topics that was important to the companies in each interview. This flexibility gave room for more nuanced descriptions of the practices, challenges, and needs.

Interviews were transcribed using the Adobe Premiere Pro software in order to generate text from audio files. The transcription was conducted from the spoken language into English text. The two interviews conducted in Danish were transcribed manually by the researcher (a native Danish speaker) from Danish into English text. The interview conducted in French was transcribed from French spoken word to English text through the Adobe software, and checked by a native French speaker. By listening through the interviews, any errors were corrected within transcripts. This included translation, during which speakers of a given language corrected any errors, and we included an English translation in each transcription.

Data analysis

Data analysis procedures followed the guidelines set out by Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (2006, 2023). First, we familiarised ourselves with the data through transcription, re-reading and listening to the interviews several times (a minimum of three times each interview, except from the one in French which we will explain later). The transcription is considered a key phase in the analysis as an interpretive act (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When listening the second time, notes were made on specific topics to begin generating codes.

In the end of the familiarisation with the data, initial codes were generated. All interviews were divided into smaller sections with time codes. For each section, 1-5 codes were added in the margin indicating what was discussed or described in that part of the interview. When the whole

interview was coded, all codes were copied into another document where the codes from all the interviews were collected. By sorting the codes into categories, we began establishing themes. Some of the themes were more closely related to a specific company, whereas other themes were more general and occurred across several interviews. Five general themes were generated in total. Moreover, during this analytical process the researcher began to construct more coherent text excerpts for each of the interviews, and an analytic narrative was constructed which including quotes from the interview. This analytic narrative is presented below in the results section of this report.

When all interviews had been transcribed, coded, code-categorised, and themes had been generated, the researcher reviewed the themes together with a colleague. The themes had overlaps with the findings in the previous project (WAC) and, thus, resonated with previous findings. Through the revision of the themes, three themes were highlighted as key foci. Below, they are presented according to the several sub-themes which, together, contributed to the overall theme. The selected quotes highlight key points and act to provide justifications towards the recommendations we provide (see below), and were selected according to the criteria outlined by Tracy (2010).

Results

Most of the participating companies had programmes or initiatives to facilitate physical activity and daily movement in the workplace. Nevertheless, there was a range of means through which the companies enacted these programmes. Initiatives varied from less regular ones like participation in an annual running festival, company sport tournaments, and national campaigns (Bike to Work, Step Challenge), to more systematic or “every day, all year” programmes such as taking collective breaks twice a day, encouragement taking the stairs, adjustable desks, walk-and-talks etc.

Moreover, some companies used external companies to implement and run their “health programme” including facilitating daily movement and physical activities and evaluation of the programme. Some companies had internal employees or departments (often related to the Health and Safety or HR department) to coordinate the initiatives. Other companies didn’t have a strategy to facilitate movement during the workday. Their activities were more sporadic, are conducted outside office hours, and rely primarily on the employees’ enthusiasm and interest in physical activity and sports.

Nevertheless, all 20 companies interviewed were interested in discussing and discovering new ways to implement physical activity in their workplaces. They all clearly saw the benefits of taking care of their employees’ health and wellbeing through daily movement and physical activity. In the following sections, therefore, we present the main findings in relation to the companies’ current practices and their challenges and needs.

What’s more, as we interviewed companies with very different lifespans, number of employees, organizational structure, and type of work and employees, it also became evident that every company is different and possesses concurrently varied challenges and needs. The findings here are based on the elements that were repeated by several companies. But, as it will occur in the following, what is a challenge to one company might be a benefit to another company. Also, we encountered aspects which were paradoxical and, thus, interesting perspectives to bring up to

better meet the needs and challenges of European companies in relation to physical activity in workplaces. We have used quotations from the interviews to support the important aspects and to contextualize the findings.

In the following sections, we highlight three different themes that influenced current practices with regards to physical activity promotion in the participant companies, including their support needs and challenges. We begin by outlining perceptions of physical activity, then move to examine how company culture and values influence physical activity, before moving on to focus upon an oft-described “business first” orientation. Thereafter, we outline more details on the successes and challenges with implementation and evaluation. Finally, we present some of the perceived benefits and pitfalls of the certification expressed by the companies.

Theme 1: Prevalence of a narrow definition of “physical activity”

Physical activity can have very different meanings to different people. Like the participant in the above quotation states, it is common to associate physical activity with high intensity exercise; with raising one’s heart rate to a high level, producing a blushed face and becoming sweaty, so that a participant would need a shower afterwards. One participant outlined this as follows:

“But physical activity, (...) is where you get your heart rate up, right? (...) Then I would think like, I have my next meeting and I sit there with a blushed face. That’s not nice in the middle of the day. Then I would have to go for a shower.”

(Interview #3)

High intensity workouts that last for an hour and leave employees sweaty and red-faced were largely considered less feasible in a workplace environment, leading to issues with self-presentation and perceived professionalism. Similarly, such activities were considered problematic due to the required time taking away time from the work tasks and in terms of the practicality of having showers and changing rooms available for the employees. Hence, this

narrow understanding of physical activity can be a barrier for companies to implement more physical activity in the workplace.

Despite this view being a commonly held one, not all participants perceived physical activity in the same manner, however. One of the large companies with an extensive health programme in place elaborated further on their shift in focus to facilitate more daily movement among the employees:

*"(...) one thing I think which is good to mention [is] the difference between **physical activity** and **physical exercise**. (...) We invest most of what we do right now in physical **exercise** and a little bit in physical **activity**. And we're actually shifting our focus to physical activity. Because we have like a health check in place every five years, and we recently received the results of the research which was done last year. And we don't see any improvements in the movement and the physical activities of employees during the working day. (...) Actually most of our employees, or many, have sufficient physical exercise outside working hours and they don't have sufficient physical activity during the day. So they don't use the stairs or they don't go out for a walk and they spend all their time working on their laptop. And we are actually shifting our focus to physical activity. So, I think, it might be the case that we have quite a change in the programme because now we invest, all, or not all, but a quite extensive amount of money in the sporting activities. And I think we will shift that to promoting physical activity."*

(Interview #4)

Many participants highlighted how daily physical activities were considered important to improve the health of the employees. This was, according to them, different to advocating a lot of exercise or sport outside work hours. Instead, the emphasis was placed upon encouraging employees to move more during the day (take the stairs, regularly walk to the coffee machine or other tasks, stand up at the desks, etc.). Changing this perspective has changed the focus of the health programme of the company to try to improve the activity levels, and thus health status, of the employees.

Moreover, another argument made which hinted at the importance of shifting focus away from promotion of regular sports activities towards an approach where the focus was upon daily movement was the perceived difficulty of engaging all employees in sport. Many companies mentioned how some of their employees were not interested in sports, and they were more

dedicated to the work. Consequently, the companies had a hard time motivating such employees to be active through organized sport alone. Taking a different approach where the focus is upon “nudging” movement into the daily routine at work, however, was considered a better way to engage more employees in more informal and incidental movement.

The social benefits of physical activity

Whilst employers considered physical activity important for the health of the employees, the sociable aspects of employees doing something physically active together (often referred to as sports) was considered to be of even more importance to many companies. Doing something together outside work tasks was considered beneficial to establish new relationships, foster team building and cohesion, belonging to the company, networking, erasing unwanted hierarchical statuses, and helping employees develop leadership skills. For example, one participant described how;

“(…) Times which are shared at the very heart of the company, and which are initiated by each employee when he wants to take charge of the activity. So that means that also through physical and sporting activities, we have the possibility of giving everyone the ability to provide leadership to all of their employees, regardless of their work.” (Interview #6)

A few of the companies gave the impression that the most important part of doing physical or sports activities with your colleagues was to socialize. Sports and the health benefits that comes with being physically active were more like a “side dish” or a “dessert”, where the “main course” is to socialize and have fun together. This view was primarily held by small-medium companies who did not have a strategy for health improvements and physical activity in the workplace. On participant outlined how;

“But when it just becomes fun, you're actually having fun. The main focus is, okay, we're having fun together. But sports is like (...) this side dish, the dessert that you get while having fun.” (Interview #2).

“Health” is more than physical activity

A third element we wish to highlight in relation to perceptions of physical activity is that being active was considered as just one parameter amongst many that would contribute to living a healthy life. This approach was outlined by one participant in the following manner:

*”Yeah, what we have done until now are, for example, workshops for employees, and they can just subscribe. [The workshops are] about mental wellbeing and the importance of a good working life balance. We have workshops for young parents, um, we have workshops around saying no or managing your workload. And, so yeah, so we have like several initiatives in place. It's open for everyone and they can subscribe. And also for those workshops, it's very good, I mean we get a lot of positive feedback. But also **that** I think we will shift to specific target groups and then we will, like, integrate [them] because it's not about physical and mental and emotional health all separately. I mean, they relate to each other. So we want to have, like, one initiative for one specific target group which relates to all those elements of health.”*

(Interview #4).

The companies that had “health programmes” in place mentioned, for example, mental health, stress relieve, work-life-balance, alcohol, smoking and drug policies, healthy eating, and also ergonomics, acupuncture and physiotherapy as part of the programme. This conflation of physical activity with many behaviours was illuminating, because it was accompanied by a commonly expressed difficulty measuring and evaluating their current practices with physical activities. The many different aspects of health were largely considered to influence each other, and yet focus upon specific goals related to physical activity was largely absent. Thus, any type of evaluation of physical activity programmes was limited due to many of the companies’ difficulty pinpointing what initiative or promoted behaviours had caused any potentially positive effect on the health of the employees.

Finally, the narrow understanding of “physical activity in the workplaces” as sports and physical exercise could be contradictory to promote more physical activity in the workplace. Thus, promoting daily movement in a broader sense and using techniques like “nudging” to activate employees during the workday might engage a larger part of the work force. It is also important to still reinforce the social aspect, and how to approach this will be discussed further below.

Theme 2: Physical activity as company culture and values

The type of company or organisation influences the way they view physical activities in the workplace and what they are willing to implement. One of the main benefits of becoming certified is the establishment of physical activity as a company value - and therefore physical activity as part of the culture and, thus, the future of the company. For example, one employer outlined how *"(...) [the certification gives] you a long term possibility [for physical activities] to survive as a value. And that is for me a very good reason to do the certification because then you need to stick to something long term, not only for three years. (...)"* (Interview #7). Hence, going through the certification process was connected with recognition of the company's actions, and as a way to make sure that physical activities are part of the company strategy and culture long-term.

"(...) We have five core values in our company, and one of those is "Unity above all". So from our side we would focus on initiatives that gather our team into a group. It would feel like going against our culture for us if we started with offering free fitness memberships. We might do that long-term, (...) but for a start it would not be congruent with our culture here to do individual initiatives. We would rather start with a company wide focus." (Interview #1)

"I have this feeling, it doesn't "taste" like us. (...)" (Interview #1)

Conversely, company values can also be detrimental to pursuit the certification if perceptions of the accreditation process were skewed. For example, a lot of the companies valued a sense of belonging, flexibility, voluntariness and work-life balance amongst employees, and feared that implementing physical activities in the workplace could compromise those values if enforced in too rigid a manner. Therefore, finding the right way to brand and promote the certification as a flexible tool that can be aligned to company culture and values is likely to have a considerable impact on its success.

"I think for us, we are just only beginning and it's not part of.... We have a very good culture, but like working out and sports is not part of the culture yet. And making something part of a culture takes a lot of time. So (...) in our case I guess it's just speaking out and saying this is the way, how we do it [in our company]. And if you work here, you're physically active and you are healthy and... But that's going to take months before that's [implemented] in the company."
(Interview #2)

Thus, the implementation of physical activities in the company culture are broadly considered a way to move forward. There are two approaches presents in our interviews: The physical activities that were planned for and implemented were considered to be more tightly bound to the values of the company on a strategic level from the beginning. Or the employees incorporate physical activities in their daily workdays, and it slowly evolves to become part of the culture and “how we do it here”. As expressed by one company with almost 20 years experience in relation to health promotion in the company:

“(...) We say that: “Whenever in doubt you go back to the [Company’s Value] and you find an answer.” So, we have ten [principles] and one of them is that we have a healthy and engaging work environment. So this is (...) a way of making sure that (...) it’s brought to life (...)” (Interview #8)

The company’s culture and values were also important when it came to the strategic planning of implementation of physical activities in the workplace. Such cultures, should they be conducive to supporting the importance of physical activity in the workplace, can benefit the success of both the initiatives and the certification to encourage and provide examples or ideas on how the companies can build the physical activity initiative around their values during the certification.

Theme 3: A ‘Business first’ Approach

When asked to conceptualise how promotion of an active workplace would work in practice, it became apparent that a company must first have the foundation to develop physical activities in the workplace as a strategic priority. If a company or organisation was newly established or had very few employees, physical activity was more likely to be considered less of a priority against business-oriented goals:

“I find this perspective really interesting - if the baseline is not there yet, and people are not comfortable with the basics like “I have my employment contract, I get my salary on time, I know when I have to report planned vacations...” - Those basic needs that create comfort must be covered before starting something like this process. Because [physical activity initiatives] are, in my opinion, like icing on the cake. If there is no cake, then the icing doesn’t taste that great.” (Interview #1)

Many participants suggested that the business fundamentals of the company must be well established first, for example having a clear plan for salary payments, pensions, vacations, etc. Several companies expressed that their aim of the business is not to have healthy employees but to do business well. Work tasks were to be prioritized, as outlined by one employer; “(...) *in the end, we did a lot of sport at work and that we even forgot the very essence of our raison d'être, namely to work on behalf of our clients.*” (Interview #6). Thus, physical activities were considered less favourably if they removed focus away from the business-related work and targets.

Conversely, promotion of physical activity was also considered to be related to a question of changing the business culture over time, and integrating an understanding that physical activities and sports are good for the economy into this workplace culture; both that of the company and a country in question. One participant described this need:

*“(...) We have a real question of culture of what is important in the company. I think we have a lot of evaluation on what a company, the headquarters, think about physical activities and they always say, “It's very important, we need to do that” and so on. But in reality they need to have the contract, to pay salaries to the employees at the end of the month. And it's always, even for the government, even for the Ministry of Sports, and so on. [Physical activity and sports] are always the second or the third priority, but before there are one or two priorities. So it's really important for me that these people in the political area or in the economics area **integrate** that it's very good for the economy and for the financial result of the nation or of the company to invest in sports. (...)”* (Interview #5)

Similarly, it was highlighted in another interview how it was considered the responsibility of the company to provide for a healthy working environment – and how it would benefit the company to do so:

“I think we as an employer also have the responsibility to provide for a healthy working environment and I mean, you just mentioned the research which said that health was related to an increase in productivity. I mean, that's also why we do it. So, we see that healthy employees benefit the performance of the company. And we also think it's just important. We are a very people minded company. Um, so that's also the reason why we invest and have this programme in place (...)” (Interview #4)

It was also emphasized by several companies how physical activities is also used to improve the business, for example by looking at performance, productivity, and Return of Investment (ROI).

Also to recruit new employees and retain the work force through a sustainable work life and retirement:

“It is making sure that we take care of our employees and making sure, [not only] that they don't get harmed, but actually they have a sustainable working life that when they are done, they still have energy to come home and you know, to be with their loved ones (...). When they retire (...) they have had a sustainable work life that enables them to have a good retirement as well.”

(Interview #8).

This quote highlights why a company would *invest* a lot of time and money in the health of their employees as their health is an *asset* that the company will benefit from. This very well be the change of culture asked for by the participant in interview #5. What's more, the combination of doing business and still being people-minded and taking good care of the employees was highlighted as a key consideration in promoting physical activity and engaging with the certification process. In the next section we turn our focus to the companies' way of implementing and better support their initiatives.

Theme 4: Implementation and support

Our discussions also focused upon what works well in the companies in regards to implementation and their way of supporting the initiatives. We have highlighted three aspects that reoccurred in the interviews: Leadership, captains/ambassadors and nudging. Each will be outlined in brief below.

Leadership

Congruent with the criteria list of the certification, the companies agreed on integration of physical activity programmes into strategic priorities at the leadership level as one of the most important aspects to succeed with physical activity initiatives in the workplace. One participant outlined how:

"I think, first of all, it all needs to start at the leadership level. I think your executive team's needs to be onboard with these initiatives and be able to implement it within the day to day operations that we all have in our businesses." (Interview #5)

It was considered that a physical activity initiative had to be implemented in "the day to day operations" of the specific company in order to be effective. How this is done depends on the specific company, the type of employees, the type of work tasks, the culture, the values, and the overall strategy. The importance of leadership was also mentioned in relation to the benefits of the certification. The certification was perceived to add value to the company by supporting the integration of the initiatives on an organizational level.

Captains/ambassadors

Second, the social-interactive aspect of doing physical activities together with your co-workers was often mentioned by the companies. The social aspect was even used by some companies to better support the initiatives provided, as outlined in Interview 8:

"(...) [We have] somebody who's the captain and then, you know, is taking the lead. And this is one of the reasons for [our] successful [initiatives]; it's because you have somebody that is leading this and it's not for one individual to say, "Oh, do I feel like [an active break] now or not?" (...)" (Interview #8,)

The social commitment to the working community was considered to be of high importance for the initiatives to be successful. Indeed, two aspects of using a captain or ambassador to promote and encourage physical activity in the workplace were highlighted. According to one participant, it is an effective (maybe even the most effective) way to *communicate* to the employees about the different physical activity initiatives (daily active breaks, promote national campaigns like Bike to Work or the annual health week). The other aspect related to motivating employees to do the activities (the captain does the daily breaks, takes the stairs etc. with colleagues) through interpersonal interactions. In other words, it was assumed that participation would improve once an employee committed to others in the organisation.

Nudging

As already noted, integrating physical activity into the daily tasks at work is considered as a good way to raise the physical activity levels of the employees – without disturbing them in their work and post-phone deadlines etc. Another aspect of this is, that an employee didn't have to be 'very sporty' or interested in sports to benefit from activities that are implemented through a nudging approach. The essence of nudging is to get people to behave in a certain way but without their deeper reflections. The following quotation outlines some examples of this approach.

“Yeah I think we should break through these barriers to improve. A way I would see us doing that is, as you said in the beginning, the difference between physical activity and physical exercise. I think we should focus on activity in this way, that we implement it in daily activities. For example, what I heard about the “take the stair” actions. An idea that we had was to paint on the floor how many steps you have to do to go to the company restaurant or things like that. So, you see, the little small nudges that make people do different moves during their day and within their normal activities. (...)” (Interview #5)

Furthermore, nudging the employees to do more physical activity might not be well discovered yet. Maybe it is because of the narrow understanding of physical activity as mentioned in the beginning. Nevertheless, nudging has potential for companies who seek to incorporate physical activities in the workplace in a more subtle way. Reflections upon how well these programmes might be integrated into company practice was the topic of our final area of discussion; evaluating effectiveness of initiatives.

Theme 5: Evaluation is “where the shoe pinches”

Monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of physical activity programmes was, on the whole, are lacking among most of the companies. The following quotation is an exemplar of this kind of reflection:

“(...) On the reporting side, evaluation of the programme. Yes, this is clearly where the shoe pinches. On our side, I think, we did not have it identified in our working group, like defined criteria of evaluation. It's not something that was thought about at the beginning of the

programme. We still have reports that are made by [the external health initiative provider], so that allow us to have a vision, (...) But in the end, we then have few elements of evaluation on the activity or the employees. So that, I think, is also something that we need to improve so that we can better meet the expectations of employees.” (Interview #6)

The bigger the company, the more complex they perceive the procedure of evaluation to be. For example, one company which had many different locations nationally and internationally, and many different types of workers (production line, scientists, lab technicians etc.) were concerned about the time and human resources it would require to effectively evaluate their current provision of physical activity. Despite all the initiatives that the company provided, they have not yet found a solution on how to measure or evaluate everything. Physical activity is a given in their company, and maybe because of this, they have not focused on the monitoring part. It was considered a “huge job” with only two employees working with the overall strategy and so many different locations and employees to evaluate upon: “(...) *We're talking about, [just in this country], 25-30.000 people in many different locations. So it's a huge job. And for this programme we're only two people. It's me and a colleague. That's all. So... We do our best.*” (Interview #8)

Conversely, the challenge with resources and time was also a concern among smaller companies (as the previous quote highlighted). Also, most of them have not given the evaluation procedure a thought when first implementing physical activities. There can be many reasons for this, including a lack of focus upon which specific outcome(s) a company wishes to achieve by implementation of physical activity programmes. Indeed, having a specific goal makes it possible to set up a reasonable and feasible monitoring process; without a goal, objectives cannot be achieved.

What, how, and why?

An additional perceived challenge expressed by the companies is what to measure on with regards to physical activity, how to measure it, and why it should be measured. Companies had a lot of ideas on how to better support the health of their employees. Yet the often very nuanced understanding of health as having physical, social and mental aspects often made it harder to be

concrete about what to measure and why. Results suggest that, due to a lack of theoretical understanding of the benefits of physically active workplaces, it can be difficult for the companies and organisations to decide on what is actually important to measure, as outlined below:

“To say how we evaluate it, well we don’t. It’s not like we have a [organizational] strategy behind creating [our sports and physical activity programme] to decrease sick days. It has been with the intention to do something physically and socially together with employees and strengthen the sense of belonging. And then of course that being physically active has an element of supporting the well-being is just an added bonus. But it is not like we have been measuring if we have decreased sick days after we initiated [the programme]. It is also an initiative that has been here all the time I have been in [the company] and for many years. So I don’t really know how you could measure... Or well, we could measure on the people who are not members and those who are. But those people who are not members, it could just be because they are members of their own football club where they play regularly. So it would be difficult to measure on.” (Interview #3)

What’s more, several of the companies mentioned how they had made changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. With employees working from home, several initiatives had been incorporated to ensure not only physical activity during the workday but also something to do together. The move from on-location solutions (gym facilities, sport courts, transport to and from work, the work environment, etc.) to digital solutions had continued within several of the companies after returning to the offices and more normal working conditions. Again, however, data was lacking which focused upon the participation rates or daily activity levels of the companies. This exemplifies how changes in the company require new solutions, and the evaluation procedure could benefit companies to be able to stay on track with this change.

Nevertheless, evaluation of programme effectiveness was still considered important, as outlined below by an already-certified company:

“(...) It’s not the job of the company at the beginning to organize physical activity. It could be, it must be something important for them, but they need to manage it. But it only makes sense to speak about company sports (...) if you can evaluate it. And what we see everywhere is, there is no evaluation. And one of the main aim, I think, of our European project, is to help companies evaluate with simple tools. Because even [this other company], is really a big company with a big involvement in sport. And we see, and it’s not a critique, there is no real evaluations on what

is the reality of the practice, and what effect does the practice make on the management on the ends of the company, not only of the health of the employee but also of the company.”

(Interview #5)

The certification is therefore considered a potential way to help structure more company driven initiatives and secure a solid evaluation protocol from the beginning.

Perceived pros and cons of certification process for active workplaces

Our final topic of discussion was more evaluative, and focused upon employer perceptions of the benefits, relevance and interest in engaging with a certification process to demonstrate their commitment to physical activity promotion in the workplace.

As evident from the data presented in this report, there was a recognised need for structure and concrete procedures to follow in order to support companies to develop a more solid strategy around physical activity initiatives. Our data highlights how physical activity promotion was considered essential to broaden the understandings of physical activities in workplaces to allow for more differentiated activities that are less intrusive in the workday and work tasks than regular sports. The companies wanted to learn about the benefits of physical activity in the workplace, to get feedback but also acknowledgement of their work. Having a network/community of other companies with the same ambitions would contribute to this exchange of feedback and acknowledgement, as well as to inspire and be inspired about new research, methods, and tendencies in the field.

Above, we have presented the main findings that relate to the companies’ current practices with physical activity in the workplace, the challenges and needs. Through this analysis, we have also touched upon some of the perceived pros and cons of the certification. These pros and cons included:

Perceived benefits of the WAC

- Feedback – the certification will allow for the company to get feedback on their current practice
- Approval – the certification will be a way to gain approval of the current practices
- Acknowledgement – the certification will reinforce acknowledgement internally in the company as well as from other companies
- Recognition – the certification will be a stamp of recognition for other companies to see
- Learn something new – the certification will induce new learnings on how to approach this field
- Inspiration – the certification can be a way of seeking inspiration from others as well as to be inspiring and set a good example
- Branding of the company – the certification is a way of branding the company to recruit new employees as well as aid in retention of existing employees
- Take a step away from the company to gain new perspective – the certification allows for the company to take a new perspective and optimize the company
- Create a nice workplace – the certification support a better workplace where employees (hopefully) thrive for a long time

Perceived pitfalls of the WAC

- Human resources – the certification will require qualified people to work on it
- Time – the certification takes time to complete which is hours the company use on a different task than their normal business tasks
- Someone who take the lead of the certification and the process – the certification requires strong leadership within the company to sustain the implementation
- Different work in one company – the certification might be too rigid for some companies that have many different types of work tasks, locations, and employees
- Is the company ready? – the certification is “icing on the cake” and the company must have the fundamentals in place first

- National vs international business – the certification should be adjustable to a department in a company rather than the whole workplace
- Competition with other certifications that are fundamental to the company – the certification might not be as important to the work done in a company and therefore it will be less prioritised
- Branding physical activity and health – the certification must be adjustable to the company culture and values
- Time schedules – the certification might require specific things that are not feasible with the working schedules of the employees (e.g. night shifts)
- Social economic status of employees/type of employees – the certification might be beneficial if the employees will not join

Recommendations: Addressing the challenges and meeting the needs of European companies based upon this evidence

To help European Companies develop lasting strategies and cultures around physical activities in the workplace, we now provide tentative recommendations intended to address the challenges they face, and the needs expressed through the interviews. We must, however, take into consideration that the companies are very different and have different focus areas and goals concerning their organization.

Promote physical activity as something other than just sport or organised exercise

Companies should be supported to adapt their programmes to promote a wide range of activities – not only physical exercise and sports outside the work environment. In this regard, the communication strategy/marketing of the certification: Use pictures and videos of people at work being active - not running and sports, but stretching, mobility, use the stairs, lunch walk, adjustable desks etc.

Incorporate and adapt the physical activities into the company culture and the values of the company for long term success

Sustainability of physical activity initiatives is of high importance if workplaces want to see the benefits long-term. Incorporating this notion into company culture and the values of the company could be an approach to secure that the initiatives are solid and connected to the company and not a single person in the company. Physical activity becoming normative, or unremarkable, in companies is the aim. Providing testimonials with concrete examples of how companies have incorporated physical activity in their company culture and values is of interest to test. Networking meetings could have the same beneficial value.

Work with a captain or ambassador - the social commitment increases participation

Provision of leadership is important to encourage physical activity in workplaces – and a form of leadership is having one or more people who facilitate the physical activities. This way, the responsibility of doing an active break, for example, is shared between employees. The captain or ambassador is also valuable to communicate initiative to the other employees and get them excited to join. What’s more, incorporating this approach in the certification help companies think in very concrete ways to develop their initiatives so they become sustainable.

Implement physical activity during office hours in the daily tasks of employees

Broader perceptions of what physical activity can include is likely to facilitate a larger variety of activities to be tested and, if successful, implemented in the workplace. Such activities can be part of the daily tasks of employees, for example, walking to your colleague instead of sending an email, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, going for a short walk during or after lunch, having a short break at the same time every day doing something active, using active transport to and from work, etc. Using a nudging approach could also benefit as employees would not feel interrupted in their daily tasks or deadlines. Employees who are not interested in sports could benefit from this approach too.

Provide companies with easy-to-apply procedures for monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of the different initiatives is currently undervalued, often overlooked and perceived to be costly in terms of time and resources. Having easy-to-apply yet validated and rigorous procedures and protocols on hand might help companies with this task. By delivering templates on monitoring and evaluation can help companies integrate this procedure. Education on how to use simple tools in the beginning of an initiative could also help incorporate this.

Integrate physical activity and the health and wellbeing of employees as a crucial aspect of doing business in 2023 onwards

It should be noted that the certification process for active workplaces has the potential to drive real cultural change. While the certification has the aim of supporting the individual companies, it can also take the lead on driving the cultural change among modern companies where physical activity is a crucial aspect of doing “good” business. What’s more, taking a stance to drive culture change could be explicitly included in any communication/marketing strategy.

Connect European companies with the aim to share knowledge and experiences in the field of physical activities in workplaces

Companies have great interest in learning from other companies, inspire others and get inspired. Connecting companies allow for knowledge exchange and breaking down barriers. Networking, sharing examples of good practice and collaboration are all likely to increase the effectiveness of physical activity programmes.

Concluding comments

Physical activity in workplaces is a focus area of the EU Commission since the early 2000s. In this report we have presented the main findings arising from 8 group interviews conducted with 20 companies from 5 different countries which focused upon their perceptions of physical activity in the workplace. In so doing, we discussed current practices, challenges, and needs of the participating companies in relation to promotion of physical activity.

Findings suggest a prevalence of a narrow understanding of what physical activity is and how it is performed is prevalent in many companies. Physical activity is often associated with physical *exercise* or sport. This narrow understanding created challenges and barriers for companies in order to implement physical activities in the workplace, particularly for those groups of employees who are not “into sports”. Nevertheless, the social-interactive benefits of physical activity were also considered to be of considerable importance, particularly when associated with other health and wellbeing targets. Hence, perhaps due to such definitions of physical activity, initiatives are often integrated into more generalized ‘healthy behaviour’ programmes in which physical activity is included as one amongst many behaviours being promoted. One consequence of this conflation of physical activity with a more general concept of healthy workplaces could, however, be a lack of clear goals with regards to what companies wish to achieve in physical activity promotion.

Still, the most successful companies at promoting physical activity have incorporated initiatives into their company culture. In such cases, physical activity promotion and active workplace culture can harmonize with the values of the company, making it less challenging to encourage employees to join. Hence, such approaches can be considered beneficial for the sustainability of the initiatives. Conversely, however, some companies expressed concern about physical activity as detrimental or compromising for the company values which then act as a barrier to participation.

In this regard, several of the company shared the idea that they are businesses first. Several participants were keen to emphasize how work tasks are to be prioritized over other initiatives, including physical activity ones. Such initiatives were perceived to be more possible once the key purpose of the company had been satisfied, and several considered it important that a company has a solid foundation before initiating other things like physical activities. Being good at business and people-minded at the same time is beneficial to retain and recruit employees, thus, benefitting the company economy in the long-run.

Finally, company representatives interviewed used and acknowledged several different strategies to implement and better support physical activities. These included integrating initiatives into leadership activities, working with captains/ambassadors, and nudging. Nevertheless, the monitoring and evaluation is 'where the shoe pinches' (i.e. where time and resources limitations could limit assessment of programme effectiveness), and not many companies had concrete procedures for conducting such evaluations. Most emphasized how valuable assistance in obtaining such tools would be highly appreciated.

In sum, our findings provide information to guide the development of the certification (WAC) as well as to orient stakeholders in the field. We have provided a few recommendations for people of interest in the field to consider if they want to go forward with physical activity in the workplace.

References

Braun V., & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2, 77-101

Braun, V., Clarke, V. and Hayfield, N., 2023. *Thematic analysis: A reflexive approach*. London: SAGE Publications.

Evans, A. B., Vandaele, F., Gross, M. and Heuzé, G. (2020). Scopign review: Physical activity in the workplace. European Commission ERASMUS+ Report: Workplace Active Certification.

Tracy, S.J., 2010. Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), pp.837-851.