



Can promoting physical activity in the workplace reduce absenteeism?

Introduction

One of the many benefits of having a workplace travel plan in place is that, by encouraging walking and cycling, it helps employees to exercise as part of their daily commute. Regular exercise is essential to good health and the Chief Medical Officer recommends walking and cycling as achievable ways for people to build regular physical activity into their lifestyles.

While there is already considerable scientific evidence which shows the health benefits of walking and cycling to the individual, less is known about whether these benefits will lead to a measurable reduction in the time taken off work owing to sickness. To address this question, Transport for London (TfL) has commissioned TRL Ltd and physical activity specialist Dr Adrian Davis of JMP Consulting to carry out a thorough review of the available evidence into the effects of workplace physical activity promotion on levels of absenteeism and productivity.

The evidence review

The approach adopted for the evidence review was consistent with that used by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), using similar criteria for identifying and assessing the evidence. As there is very little published research specific to workplace travel plans, it was necessary to look at a wider range of workplace physical activity studies and then consider how the conclusions might apply to walking and cycling to work.

From the initial 2,542 studies identified by a search carried out by the TRL library, 272 were selected as potentially meeting the criteria for inclusion in the review. Following more detailed evaluation, these were narrowed down to a total of 17 studies that met the inclusion criteria, and so formed the basis of the final review report.

The review covered four main study types, although it is important to recognise that there are significant overlaps between these categories:

- Workplace health promotion programmes
- Exercise programmes
- Physical activity counselling
- Physical activity and health care costs



A summary of the main conclusions in each of these areas is given below.

1. Workplace health promotion programmes

Evidence from three studies suggests that workplace health promotion programmes of at least 12 months duration can lead to increases in physical activity and reductions in absenteeism.

2. Exercise programmes

Evidence from 10 out of 11 relevant studies suggests that workplace exercise intervention programmes can lead to long term increases in physical activity and reductions in absenteeism. The studies also suggest that where physical activity is increased by more than one hour per week, absentee days may be reduced in the long term, with the most successful studies reporting reductions of 33 per cent to 50 per cent.

3. Physical activity counselling

Evidence from one study tends to suggest that counselling sessions to promote physical activity (and dietary changes) can lead to staff reporting that they have increased their level of physical activity and fitness in the short term.

4. Physical activity and health care costs

There is limited evidence from two studies to suggest that physical activity levels affect both short term (up to 12 months) and long term (more than 12 months) health care costs, including obese people and those living sedentary lives.

Implications for workplace travel plans

The review has drawn some key conclusions that have direct relevance for workplace travel plans. The most significant finding is that an increase in physical activity of more than one hour per week, easily achieved by walking or cycling to work, would be expected to lead to a measurable reduction in levels of absenteeism. This is of clear commercial benefit to employers and supports the business case for investing in workplace travel plans.

The most cost-effective physical activity interventions are likely to be those that are applied over longer timescales, ie 12 months or more, which fits well with the timescale in which a travel plan would be implemented. While successful interventions do not necessarily have to be on-site, they do need to be supported by employers.



Employer-supported physical activity programmes were found to be the most effective, suggesting that promoting physical activity through workplace travel plans will be positively received.

The greatest benefits in reduced absenteeism were achieved by encouraging employees who are currently very inactive to take up between one to two hours of physical activity each week; again a level of activity readily achievable through changed travel behaviour.

Importantly, the evidence review highlighted active travel as being potentially more cost effective than other approaches to increasing employee physical activity levels, especially among those less amenable to organised workplace activities. This supports other behavioural research that demonstrates that 15-20 per cent of car drivers wish to reduce their car use, and that health, weight management and exercise are often primary motivators.