Fit Employees: Fit Organisations

What happens when employers support employees in their personal fitness goals?

Does fitness even matter at work?

We all know that it’s ‘better’ for us to be fit than un-fit, to get regular exercise rather than being sedentary. But does this make any difference to performance at work, particularly in roles where physical activity isn’t part of the job description?

Well, actually, yes it does.

Research has shown a relationship between higher physical activity levels and better work performance (Williden & Schofield, 2013), with those who take part in physical activity outside of work generally being more productive at work (Almani & Munir, 2014). Obviously, this would be one reason for employers to encourage regular exercise. Another is that physical activity appears to help provide a buffer against the stress response (Zschuke et al., 2015), meaning that people who get regular exercise are often better able to handle the stressful and demanding situations they might encounter at work.

Some workplaces develop at-work exercise or physical activity interventions, but these aren’t always successful. They can be expensive to set up, and if uptake is low they won’t necessarily be cost effective. A ‘one size fits all’ approach is often taken, which doesn’t necessarily meet the varying needs and abilities of different employees.

So what happens when, instead of a workplace intervention to get people out and about, employers simply support the personal fitness goals that employees might already have? This was the focus of the ‘Fit Employees: Fit Organisations’ study.

Who, when and what?

Participants (who were all over 18 years of age, employed, and working toward a fitness goal), provided information on the various types of support they received from their employer, that would assist them in achieving their goal. These included provisions (eg primarily flexible hours and leave provisions), facilities (eg shower & change facilities at work, bike stands at work) and assistance. Assistance included things like ‘wellness grants,’ and contributions toward fitness related expenses such as event entry fees, gym memberships, and physiotherapy or massage treatment.

Participants also provided information on a very different form of support – social support. They recorded the extent to which they felt that those around them at work cared about their fitness goals and achievements.

The study was carried out over an eight week period, and the aim was to see whether workplace support made a difference to the way participants felt and performed at work. Each week, participants recorded their stress levels, how committed they felt to their
organisation and how engaged they felt in their job, and their levels of productivity and job satisfaction.

**Why would this support make a difference anyway?**

There are two reasons. This first you might have guessed from the information you have already read. If employers encourage and support their employees, those employees go out and get fit. And, as we know, fitter employees seem to get more done at work.

The second reason is slightly more complicated. There’s good reason to believe that employees form general beliefs about the degree to which their organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This in turn influences how much the employee gives back to the employer. It’s a reciprocal thing. If an employee gets nothing more than their salary and their contractual entitlements, then they might feel no need to do anything above and beyond what their job description requires. Someone who, on the other hand, receives a great deal of support from their employer, may be much more willing to go the extra mile at work.

**So what did the study find out?**

Some results were predictable, but some were a little bit unexpected.

The availability of facilities, provisions, and assistance, things that could help employees chase their fitness goals, didn’t necessarily make those employees better off at work. In fact, those who said that ‘provisions’ were available to them were more likely to be less committed and productive at work, and less satisfied in their job. Those who reported the availability of ‘assistance’ were more likely to be less engaged and less productive at work. Participants who reported that ‘facilities’ were available at their work were more likely to be committed to their organisation and engaged at work, but also to be less productive with higher stress levels.

It should be noted that these results were based on whether the provisions, facilities and assistance were *available*, not whether they were used. That was the next question. Interestingly, whether or not employees actually used the facilities, provisions and assistance that were available to them, from week to week, did not appear to make a difference to how they felt and performed at work.

Social support was a different story. The more that participants felt their direct supervisor or manager supported them in their pursuit of fitness goals, the more likely they were to have higher productivity levels at work. They were also more likely to have a higher level of commitment to their organisation, compared to those who felt less supported.

Over the eight weeks of the study, those who reported an increase in support from their supervisor (related to their fitness goal) were likely to have a related reduction in stress levels at work.
Where participants felt supported by their co-workers (again, with the support being related to fitness goals), they were more likely to have higher levels of engagement at work. Increases in co-worker support, over time, were related to increased engagement levels amongst study participants.

**What does this mean for employers and workplaces?**

Do employers have anything to gain by offering provisions, assistance, and facilities that might help employees pursue their fitness goals? From this study, at least, it would be hard to draw a firm conclusion. The availability of provisions, assistance, and facilities appeared counter-productive, in some cases leading to poorer outcomes at work. This is possibly a reminder that it is important to match the benefits provided, to what is actually needed and valued by employees. If there is a mismatch, or the offering appears to be ‘token’ rather than something of use, it may do more harm than good.

Employers should, however, be aware of the value and importance of social support. Generally, study participants were more committed to their organisation, and better off at work, when they felt that their leaders and colleagues cared about their fitness goals. Employers could do well to aim to develop and maintain a culture and environment where employees, at all levels of the organisation, are aware of one another’s fitness goals, and make an effort to provide one another with encouragement and support. An organisational culture of fitness might well contribute to a fit organisation.

**More information:**

If you’d like more information on the study or access to more detailed results, or if you’d just like to talk about what this might mean for your organisation, please feel free to contact me at **fleur@completeperformance.co.nz**

Reference list:


