A HEALTHY DOSE OF NATURE IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS
Promoting Green Exercise for Employee Well-Being
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From walking programs to onsite gyms and discounted health club memberships, employers use multiple strategies to encourage physically active workers — both on and off the job. The goal makes sense: keep employees healthy and productive while reducing the healthcare expenses related to sedentary lifestyles.

But despite these efforts, plus consistent public health messages, over half of all Americans still don’t get enough exercise to reap the health benefits, and 33% get no leisure-time physical activity.¹

Clearly, employers need new and effective ways to motivate workers.

With rising rates of costly conditions linked to inactivity — like overweight, obesity, and diabetes — it’s more important than ever to get employees moving.

Compelling research points to green exercise — defined as exercising in the presence of nature — as a promising and practical way to cultivate a more physically active workforce.

Health Benefits of Green Exercise

Green exercise combines the mental and physical benefits of being active with the psychological and physical rewards of exposure to natural environments — a synergy that adds up to healthier, happier employees who are more likely to stay fit.
The number of people in physically active jobs has progressively dropped over the past 50 years in the US, with a resulting decrease in occupation-related calorie expenditure of 100+/day.\textsuperscript{2} And prolonged sitting — whether at work or in front of a TV — increases risk for serious medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.\textsuperscript{3, 4} Helping employees be more physically active is no longer just a trendy wellness offering; it’s a business imperative.

Research documents numerous benefits of exercise in the natural environment:

- Improved self-esteem and mood are evident, with the largest improvements in the first 5 minutes of outdoor activity. Exercising near the water has even greater effects.\textsuperscript{5}

- Compared to indoor walking, outdoor walking creates larger improvements in mood, revitalization, positive engagement, enjoyment, and intent to exercise in the future (see Table 1).\textsuperscript{6}

- Outdoor exercisers rate their sessions as more restorative compared to those who work out indoors — and this predicts a higher frequency of exercise.\textsuperscript{7}

- Perceived access to walkable green space links to longevity, even when controlling for age, socioeconomic status, gender, and marital status.\textsuperscript{8}

- A study of airline pilots and engineers indicates outdoor exercise is more effective than indoor exercise in jet lag recovery and resetting circadian rhythms. \textsuperscript{9}

- Postmenopausal women report more worry and frustration when walking indoors and feel the exercise is less enjoyable than walking outdoors.\textsuperscript{10}

### Green Matters

Exercise aside, scientific research offers compelling reasons for convenient opportunities to engage with nature whenever possible. The presence of a natural environment has long been linked to positive health and behavioral effects:

- Patients recovering from surgery have shorter stays and require less pain medication if their hospital windows look out on natural settings vs. walls.\textsuperscript{11}

- Functional brain scans show that the brain responds differently to natural, tranquil scenery — stimulating connections between different areas of the brain. In contrast, urban scenery causes disruptions in these connections.\textsuperscript{15}

- Office workers with a view of trees report significantly less job stress and higher job satisfaction — even after controlling for age, gender, and job category.\textsuperscript{16}

- Study participants taken on overnight trips to forested or urban areas, then tested for immune function, reveal telling results. Those in a forest environment have significantly higher levels of immune function, which lasted more than 30 days after returning. Those on urban trips show no rise in any immune function measure.\textsuperscript{17}

Work settings that include gardens, walking paths, reflecting ponds, trees, and windows overlooking natural areas give employees workday access to the restorative powers of green space — helping them mitigate stress and perform at their best.

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### Table 1: Outdoor Walking Boosts Enjoyment and Intention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indoor environment</th>
<th>Lab environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enjoyment</strong></td>
<td>7.91</td>
<td>6.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intention</strong></td>
<td>85.14</td>
<td>69.43</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Enjoyment 1-10; Intention 0-100.}

Fostering Green Exercise in the Worksite

Humans are naturally drawn to green space and water. Ocean beaches, lakes, parks, riversides, mountains, and forests are perpetually popular recreation venues. For many people, nature’s tranquility offers a much-needed respite from everyday demands and stressors. Encouraging green exercise leverages the innate appeal of natural surroundings to make physical activity an enjoyable daily habit.

Green exercise solutions don’t have to be costly — but like any business initiative, they do require strategic planning:

- Work with management leaders as well as human resources, facilities, safety, and health departments to create policies that make green exercise a priority.
- Infuse existing physical activity campaigns with green exercise messages.
- Establish buy-in and visible support from all levels.
- Conduct a workplace walkability assessment ([https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/worksite-pa/toolkits/walkability/audit_tool.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/worksite-pa/toolkits/walkability/audit_tool.htm)); use the results to make walking areas more safe, accessible, and pleasant.
- Tap into community resources — parks and recreation departments, state and national parks representatives, or local hiking and bicycling clubs may be willing to lend a hand.
- Form an employee advisory group to identify and promote opportunities for green exercise in or near the workplace.
- Create an appealing outdoor environment with plants, trees, and other green space features to draw people out for breaks and meetings.
- Make sure your health plan representatives are on board and align communications with key messages. A coordinated communication plan strengthens the selling points.

“But indeed, it is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men’s hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of the air, that emanates from the old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit.”

— Robert Louis Stevenson
Green Exercise Offers a Competitive Edge

Typical worksite physical activity programs encourage employees to exercise regularly and reduce sedentary time. Adding an emphasis on green exercise injects a positive element of fun and excitement, while pointing workers toward activities with double rewards: exercise plus exposure to nature.

Studies show that reinforcement for green exercise is built in — because most people truly enjoy spending time in natural settings, they’re more likely to stick with a fitness plan that includes green activities.

Offering these initiatives also can:
• Increase appeal to potential employees and partners
• Make the most of limited health promotion resources, maximizing program efficiency and return on investment.

As scientists uncover more health benefits about this enjoyable, restorative twist on fitness, high-performing employers will be promoting it at every opportunity.

“Live in the sunshine, swim the sea, drink the wild air.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson
12 Ways to Encourage Green Exercise at Work and Home

1. Link to websites that offer easy ways to find local outdoor areas, such as the National Park Service (www.nps.gov/parks.html) or TrailLink.com (www.traillink.com/home.aspx).

2. Organize lunch-time and break-time outdoor walking groups as well as outdoor walking meetings.

3. Hold group exercise classes — like yoga, tai chi, or strength circuit — outdoors.

4. Sponsor local fitness events such as 5K/10K fun runs, charity walks, and sprint triathlons.

5. Offer discounted group downhill ski tickets, cross-country ski trips, or other winter recreation opportunities in addition to outdoor events for other seasons.

6. Use MapWalk (www.mapwalk.com) — a free, easy tool — to plan several convenient walking, running, and bicycling courses close to the worksite, and link it to your intranet site.

7. Encourage active commuting through a bike-to-work program, with secure ways to lock up bikes, showers, and changing rooms (or arrangements with a local gym).

8. Invite commitment from all management levels to engage in visible forms of green exercise at work — like walking outdoors or shooting hoops at break time.

9. Hold a golf tournament or walk-a-thon.

10. Include short, engaging messages about green exercise in employee print and online communications.

11. Designate an outdoor recreation employee advisory group to plan hiking, kayaking, fishing, or camping trips.

12. Host family-friendly events in local recreation areas.

“In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.”
— John Muir

CONCLUSIONS

• Negative health habits hurt your organization, primarily by increasing healthcare costs and decreasing productivity.

• Research showing the benefits of social support abounds, and is one successful way to engage employees in positive, healthy habits.

• While many sources of support exist, all contribute differently to foster a culture of health, for the workplace and beyond.

“In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.”
— John Muir
Resources

- American Camp Association (www.acacamps.org)
- American Discovery Trail (www.discoverytrail.org)
- American Hiking Society (www.americanhiking.org)
- American Trails (www.americantrails.org)
- American Volkssport Association (www.ava.org)
- Health Education & Behavior (http://journals.sagepub.com/home/heb)
- League of American Bicyclists (www.bikeleague.org)
- Outdoor Family Fun (https://www.parents.com/fun/activities/outdoor/)
- National Park Service (www.nps.gov)
- Parks Canada (www.pc.gc.ca)
- US Orienteering Federation (http://orienteeringusa.org)
- US Biathlon (http://biathlon.teamusa.org)
- Walking Color Tours (www.escortedfallfoliagetours.com)

End Notes

9 Shiota M, Sudo M, Osahima M, Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine, 1996; 67,12:1155-60 Using Outdoor Exercise to Decrease Jet Lag in Airline Crewmembers.