

PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

This resource guide was created by experts from the Physical Activity Alliance's US National Physical Activity Plan, the Physical Activity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (PAPREN) and other national partners. It brings together research, real-world examples, and proven practices to make it easier for every employer, regardless of size or budget, to promote physical activity at work.

Inside, you'll find

Proven strategies – real examples from employers across the country.

Step-by-step approaches – from low-cost ideas to larger investments.

Practical tools – checklists, links, and resources you can use right away.

Why it matters

- Guidelines-based physical activity improves employee health, morale, and productivity.
- With more remote and hybrid work, there are fresh opportunities to help teams move more – no matter where they work.
- You don't need a big budget to make a big impact.



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WHY HEALTHY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY MATTERS AT WORK

Supporting healthy physical activity in the workplace is not just a “nice to have” — it’s a smart investment.

Whether it’s through ergonomic support, encouraging movement breaks, or integrating activity into the workday, employers can influence habits that improve lives inside and outside the office.

1. **Healthier employees** – fewer health risks, lower medical costs.
2. **Stronger culture** – teams that move together are more engaged and satisfied.
3. **Lower costs** – reductions in workers’ compensation, disability claims, and health plan expenses.
4. **Better performance** – active employees are more focused, productive, and energized.

Physical Activity Recommendations

Physical activity doesn’t have to mean hitting the gym. At its core, it’s simply moving the body regularly at a moderate or vigorous effort — and the benefits are clear: better health, improved fitness, and higher performance.

The key is to help employees break up sedentary time and build movement into the day. Research shows that sitting (or standing still) for long stretches is harmful to health, so the workplace is an ideal place to encourage small, frequent movement breaks. For jobs that involve strenuous exercise, it may be important to offer regular breaks and safety training.

National Guidelines at a Glance

According to the [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#), adults should aim for:

- 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week (e.g., brisk walking), or
- 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week (e.g., jogging, cycling), or
- An equivalent combination of both.
- Muscle-strengthening activity for all major muscle groups at least 2 days per week.

Quick Tip for Employers

- Encourage “movement breaks” — short bursts of walking, stretching, or bodyweight exercises — during breaks.
- Partner with health plans or clinics for physical activity prescription and follow-through, so employees hear consistent messages about the importance of physical activity for overall health.

In the Modern Workplace

Today’s workplaces come in all shapes and sizes — from high-rise offices to home offices, from coffee shops to mobile job sites. The good news: physical activity can be promoted anywhere.

What it looks like in different settings:

- Central office: Encourage stair use, walking meetings, and movement breaks on each floor.
- Remote/home office: Promote neighborhood walks, at-home stretch breaks, or short online fitness sessions.
- On-the-go/mobile workers: Suggest route planning that includes walking/biking/rolling segments, or encourage activity during natural downtime.
- Cafés and co-working spaces: Encourage employees to step outside for quick walks around the block or stretch between tasks.

For Employers of All Sizes

Workplace wellness — including physical activity — is not just for large companies. Small and medium-sized businesses can (and do) make meaningful changes. Even simple, free, or low-cost adjustments create opportunities for employees to move more during the day.

Myth Buster: Wellness Is Only for Big Employers

- Fact: Companies of all sizes can implement active workplace strategies.
- Small steps count: Even one 10-minute walk break policy can have an impact.
- Scalable: Most strategies can be adapted up or down depending on budget and workforce size.

Strategies That Work

Employers can make a big difference in employee health by shaping the environment, policies, and systems that surround daily work life.

For too long, health at work has been framed only as an individual responsibility: *eat better, move more, sit less*. While personal choices matter, they're heavily influenced by the world around us. That's where Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) changes come in.

Why PSE matters:

- Policy: Rules and expectations that encourage healthier choices.
- Systems: Organizational processes, benefits, and infrastructure that support and deliver programs (e.g., how activity challenges, coaching, or incentives are implemented and sustained).
- Environment: Physical spaces that nudge employees to move in a healthy way.

Together, these create workplaces where healthy choices become the easy choices.

Important: Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) strategies do not replace programs — they make programs more effective. Programs such as walking challenges, coaching, or group fitness classes are often what directly engage

employees. PSE strategies shape the environment around those programs, making participation easier, more appealing, and more sustainable.

The most successful employers pair strong PSE foundations with engaging programs that bring those environments to life.

Quick Examples of PSE Strategies

- Policy: Add “movement breaks” to meeting and training agendas.
- System: Offer subsidized gym memberships or office activity challenges.
- Environment: Highlight safe routes for encouraging activity, such as walking, biking, and stair climbing.

Comprehensive = Sustainable

Employers who combine multiple strategies — policy, systems, and environment — see the most significant, most lasting impact. For example:

- A policy that encourages walking meetings, stretch breaks during trainings, or flextime usage for activity.
- A benefit that promotes physical activity through incentives for cumulative activity.
- An environment with leadership role modeling on the importance of regular physical activity.

When layered together, these approaches reinforce one another and make active living a natural part of workplace culture.

Policies: Setting the Standard

A policy clarifies what behaviors are expected, ensures consistency across the organization, and ensures that support for physical activity lasts through leadership or staffing changes.

Why it matters:

- Creates a clear direction and purpose.
- Reduces confusion by setting consistent expectations.
- Promotes long-term commitment, even as leaders or staff change.

First Step: Lead from the Top

The first step in building a strong foundation is senior leadership buy-in.

- Have your CEO or senior leadership team sign the CEO Pledge for Physical Activity.
- This signals that physical activity is a priority, not just a perk.
- It also sets the tone for creating policies and programs that support employees at every level.

Quick Tip for Employers

- Include physical activity in your HR policy and procedure documents so it's not just a one-off initiative.
- Pair policy with visibility — share the signed CEO Pledge and documented strategies (at least three) widely to show leadership commitment.

Systems: Building Activity Into the Everyday

Systems change means adjusting your organization's structures and processes so that physical activity becomes a natural part of how work gets done.

Unlike one-time initiatives, systems changes are baked into operations — they reach everyone and last over time. When paired with policies, they create a robust framework that supports employees in moving more every day.

What Systems Change Looks Like

- **Flexible Scheduling:** Allow employees to combine breaks and lunch to extend their activity time or align with their unique work schedules.
- **Wellness Initiatives or Benefits:** Offer physical activity/health coaching, reimbursements for fitness facilities or programs, activity challenges, or fitness app subscriptions.
- **Onboarding Practices:** Introduce new hires to your workplace's physical activity options, including what's allowed and what's not allowed.

Quick Tip for Employers

Think of systems as the “how” behind your policies. If your policy says “*movement breaks are encouraged*,” your system is “*every meeting includes a stretch break or 2-minute walk*.”

Environment: Designing Spaces That Move People

Our surroundings shape our habits. By changing the physical environment, employers can nudge employees toward more movement without requiring extra willpower or planning.

When combined with policies (the rules) and systems (the processes), environmental strategies create workplaces that make regular physical activity the easy choice.

What Environmental Strategies Look Like

- **Walking Routes:** Mark safe indoor or outdoor walking paths around your workplace.
- **Stair Access:** Make stairs visible, well-lit, and inviting — with prompts to “Take the stairs!”
- **Active Workstations:** Provide sit/stand desks.
- **On-site Facilities:** Offer fitness facilities or spaces with equipment; Install showers/locker rooms and/or bike storage to encourage active commuting.
- **Outdoor Spaces:** Create safe routes for walking/biking/rolling or green space for movement breaks.



Quick Tip for Employers

Even small changes — like moving the water cooler farther from desks — can encourage micro-bursts of activity throughout the day.

Policy, Systems, and Environmental Foundations That Support Physical Activity Programs

The examples on the following page show how policies, systems, and environments work together to support and amplify programs that engage employees in physical activity.

Policy	Systems	Environment
Time for Physical Activity Policy: employees are permitted to engage in physical activity for X minutes of each workday during paid time ('on the clock'). Offer employees opportunities to wear casual, workout-friendly attire to work. Integrate “activity breaks” (e.g., 15-minute activity breaks) into the workweek. Provide education and information to employees about the benefits of an active lifestyle or reducing sedentary behavior.	Establish specific time(s) during work hours for employees to participate in an organized physical activity (e.g., weights, walking/rolling, group stretching). Provide free health coaching with certified health coaches and exercise physiologists. Create an employee activity club (e.g., walking/rolling club) or team. Create a onsite or virtual exercise class for employees. Create a "nudge" (e.g., e-mail, text, music) prompting employees to move. Provide wearable activity trackers for employees (e.g. Fitbit, Garmin, or other sustainable physical activity trackers).	Provide onsite or virtual fitness options for a broad range of fitness levels – classes, video, fitness room or equipment. Provide clean, safe, and attractive stairwells and encourage their use (point-of-decision prompts). Provide “active office” furniture such as stand-up or treadmill desks.

Walking/Active Meetings Policy: Employees are allowed to take active meetings or stand up/move during meetings.	Establish guidelines for active meetings (e.g., allowed attire, suggested meeting size/walking pace) and provide/post maps of indoor and/or outdoor walking paths. Add a movement break on the meeting agenda (for 2-3 mins. every 30 mins. of a meeting) and identify someone to facilitate light movement breaks.	Provide safe and attractive walking routes indoors and outdoors. Provide adjustable standing height tables for employees if they choose to stand during meetings. Provide equipment, such as headsets, speaker phones, and standing desks to facilitate sitting less during online meetings.
Flexible Working Hours Policy: Employees are allowed to flex their work schedule within specific hours or extend their lunch time to allow time to participate in physical activity or bike to work.	Reimburse/subsidize the cost of an offsite fitness center membership, and reward for regular attendance/participation. Offer or refer employees to a program that helps employees be physically active.	Provide secure bike racks. Provide safe and clean facilities for showers and/or changing and lockable storage. Offer initiatives that encourage and support physical activity among family members of employees. Support community development to make the employer's region more walkable and bikeable.

	Give free or reduced-rate memberships for bike share programs to encourage bikes as a form of transportation. Provide free or subsidized public transportation passes to encourage walking/biking as part of a daily commute. Promote parking farther away from the entrance to encourage more physical activity. Provide information about local opportunities to be physically active or less sedentary.	
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Bringing It All Together

This resource guide is designed to work for organizations of every size, budget, and structure. By layering strategies across **policy, systems, and environment**, you can:

- Improve employee health and well-being,
- Boost morale and productivity, and
- Lower healthcare and related costs.

Call to Action

- Start small: Pick **one policy, one system, and one environmental strategy** to try in the next 90 days.
- Build momentum: Share early wins with leadership and staff to inspire broader adoption.
- Make it lasting: Use the **CEO Pledge for Physical Activity** as your anchor for long-term commitment.

Case Study: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Employees served: ~11,000

Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) has become a national leader in promoting employee wellness through comprehensive physical activity programs, facilities, and partnerships.



What They Did

- Wellness Center Access: Built a state-of-the-art Employee Wellness Center featuring:
 - Walking track, strength, cardio, and flexibility equipment.
 - Regular onsite and virtual fitness classes.
 - Certified staff for individualized programs and group instruction.
 - Locker rooms and showers for convenience.
- Free Programs: Offered the Wellness Center and all fitness programs free of charge to employees, retirees, and spouses.
- Community Events:
 - Hosted annual *Walk-to-School* events with staff, students, and families.
 - Held a district-wide *Wellness Week* each spring.
- Healthcare Partnership: Contracted with Vanderbilt Health to deliver integrated healthcare and fitness services.
- Exercise is Medicine (in progress): Blending clinical care with lifestyle

management, including physical activity, food-as-medicine, and nature prescriptions.

Results

- High staff and family participation rates.
- Reported improvements in lifestyle behaviors across the district.
- Healthcare cost moderation over time.
- National recognition for visionary approaches to employee health and wellness.

Lesson for Employers

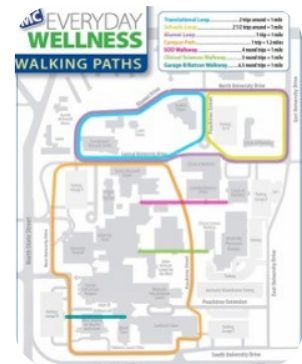
Investing in accessible, no-cost wellness opportunities (both onsite and virtual) creates high engagement and lasting impact. Partnerships with healthcare providers can extend reach and reinforce results.

 Learn more: [MNPS Employee Wellness](#)

Case Study: University of Mississippi Medical Center (Mississippi)

Employees served: ~10,000

The University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC) runs the **Everyday Wellness program**, a comprehensive approach to supporting not just physical health, but also spiritual, financial, emotional, and professional well-being.



What They Did

- **Facilities & Environment**
 - On-site fitness center available for employees.
 - Safe walking routes are integrated into campus wayfinding.

- “Point-of-decision” signs encourage stair use over elevators.
- **Programs & Activities**
 - Scheduled group walks.
 - *Walk with a Doc* sessions: providers lead walks while discussing health topics.
- **Clinical Integration**
 - Launching an *Exercise is Medicine Campus* initiative, adding physical activity as a vital sign in Lifestyle Medicine clinics.
- **Health Plan Support**
 - Through the State and School Employees’ Health Insurance Plan’s **Motivating Mississippi Program**, employees and family members have access to:
 - Online and phone-based lifestyle management support
 - Physical activity-specific coaching
 - Group coaching sessions
 - Wellness webinars

Results

- Broadened focus from physical wellness to whole-person well-being.
- Increased opportunities for employees to move daily (stairs, walking routes, scheduled walks).
- Created alignment between workplace wellness and healthcare system practices.

Lesson for Employers

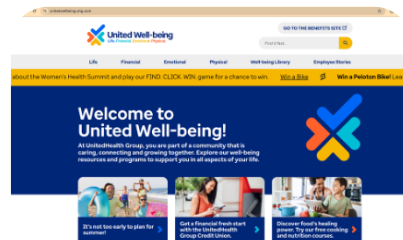
Wellness programs don’t have to focus only on fitness. Expanding to include whole-person well-being and connecting with health plans or clinics strengthens engagement and sustainability.

 Learn more: [UMMC Office of Wellbeing](#)

Case Study: UnitedHealth Group (Minnesota)

Employees served: ~ 275,000

UnitedHealth Group (UHG) delivers comprehensive well-being programs for its global workforce, combining onsite fitness facilities, digital platforms, and incentive-based programs.



What They Did

- **Facilities & Environment**

- On-site fitness centers and walking routes in multiple locations, managed by Plus One Corporate Health (an Optum company).

- **Culture & Engagement**

- Built a *United Well-being Champions Network* of 85+ leaders to promote and support wellness across the enterprise.
- Hosted the *United We Move* challenge, engaging 6,000+ employees in collective movement.

- **Digital & Discounted Resources**

- Peloton partnership: Discounted equipment + access to live and on-demand classes.
- One Pass Select: Discounted gym and boutique fitness memberships.
- MoveSpring app: Sync devices, track steps, and join global challenges.
- Rally Stride: An incentive-based program where employees can earn \$50/month by meeting step goals.
- Fit for Life Coaching: Personalized coaching to build skills, motivation, and confidence for movement.
- Educational library: Videos and resources on physical activity and lifestyle factors.

- **Integration with Optum:** Employees benefit from Optum's health and wellness solutions, which are also offered to external customers.

Results

- Wide-scale engagement through both in-person and digital channels.
- Incentive programs (e.g., Rally Stride) increased participation in activity and measurable outcomes.
- Champion network provided peer-to-peer support and stronger organizational buy-in.

Lesson for Employers

Even at scale, a combination of champion networks, incentives, and accessible tools can drive engagement. Employers don't need UHG's scale to adapt these strategies – smaller organizations can replicate the approach by combining champions, digital tracking, and rewards.

Case Study: Working for a Healthier Tennessee

Employees served: ~43,000 (Tennessee State Government)

Working for a Healthier Tennessee (WFHTN) is a free wellness program that helps state employees make small, sustainable changes in physical activity, healthy eating, and overall well-being.



What They Did

- **Policy Support**
 - The Department of Human Resources established a policy allowing employees, with supervisor approval, to combine daily rest breaks for health and wellness activities.
- **Resources & Tools**
 - Website hub with wellness council guides, communication tools, trackers, and healthy recipes.
 - Easy access to desk stretches, office exercises, walking/running programs, and outdoor activity resources across Tennessee.

- **Programs & Engagement**

- Short activities and challenges to keep employees motivated.
- Free workout video suggestions and live wellness events.
- Focused on three pillars: physical activity, nutrition, and well-being.

Results

- Created a healthy, positive workplace culture across Tennessee state government.
- Made physical activity more accessible through policy change + practical resources.
- Boosted engagement by combining online tools, live events, and on-demand content.

📌 Lesson for Employers

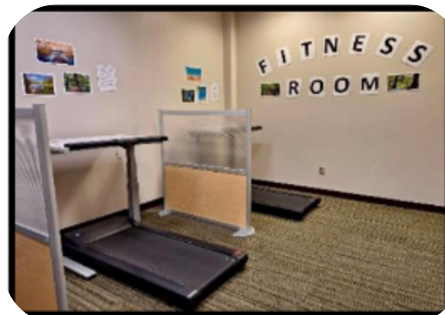
Policies that protect time for wellness activities, paired with an easy-to-access resource hub, can significantly increase employee participation — even in large, dispersed organizations.

🔗 Learn more: [Working for a Healthier Tennessee](#)

Case Study: American Heart Association

Employees served: ~3,200

The American Heart Association (AHA) promotes a “sit less, move more” culture with creative programs, supportive policies, and resources that make physical activity accessible to all employees.



What They Did

- **Quick Wins & Culture Shifts**

- *Fierce 5-Minute Breaks*: Shorten meetings by five minutes so employees can stretch, walk, or recharge.
- Posted *stair prompts* and signage throughout campuses to encourage everyday movement.

- Established *Striders Walking Routes* with indoor and outdoor options, marked by “Red Stride!” baseboards.
- **Facilities & Programs**
 - Fitness rooms with equipment and stretching mats in some offices.
 - Association-wide virtual fitness classes led by certified staff volunteers (yoga, strength, cardio).
 - Walk paths at regional offices; group walks on *National Walking Day*.
- **Learning & Resources**
 - Monthly *Well-Being Webinars* with benefit partners (topics include hydration, outdoor exercise, back health).
 - *Championing Your Well-being Guide* consolidates physical activity benefits and resources.
 - *Stay Active Plus* (MS Teams channel) hosts challenges and engagement opportunities throughout the year.
- **Benefits & Incentives**
 - Online workplace wellness program with coaching, fitness resources, and challenges.
 - Discounts on shoes, fitness devices, and equipment.
 - Incentives tied to participation in physical activity programs.

Results

- Created a culture where movement is part of the workday.
- Increased engagement through low-cost, creative programs (Fierce 5, walking routes).
- Scaled impact with volunteer-led virtual classes and technology-based channels.

Lesson for Employers

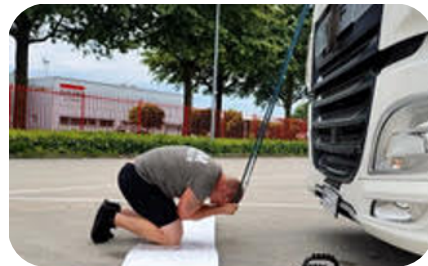
Physical activity doesn’t require a massive investment. By combining small, symbolic changes (like 5-minute breaks and stair prompts) with accessible programs and incentives, organizations can create a lasting culture of activity.

 **Learn more:** [American Heart Association – Workplace Well-being](#)

Case Study: Fit Drivers Program (Transportation Industry)

Employees served: Professional drivers across companies like Greyhound, Covenant Transport, and Sherwin Williams.

Professional drivers face significant health risks due to long hours of sitting, irregular schedules, and limited food options. The *Fit Drivers* program, developed by Bob Perry (“The Truck Trainer”), tackles these challenges with simple, practical strategies drivers can use on the road.



What They Did

- **On-the-Road Activity**
 - Promoted good posture and ergonomic principles while driving.
 - Encouraged short walking breaks and stretches during downtime or traffic delays.
 - Suggested bodyweight exercises and stretching routines before bed.
- **Nutrition & Lifestyle**
 - Advocated for healthier snacks (e.g., nuts, wraps, apple slices with peanut butter).
 - Promoted green tea and water as alternatives to sugary drinks.
- **Circulation & Movement**
 - Recommended three short walks per day to improve circulation and overall well-being.
- **Tools & Support**
 - Provided resistance bands, handouts, and phone-based guidance.
 - Collaborated with Interstate Health Group to reinforce physical activity during DOT physicals and clinic visits.

Results

- Delivered accessible, low-cost resources tailored to the realities of driving jobs.
- Helped drivers prevent injuries and manage chronic conditions.
- Created a sense of empowerment for drivers who often feel they “don’t deserve to be healthy.”

Lesson for Employers

Even in high-barrier occupations, targeted programs can make activity achievable. Meeting employees where they are – with portable tools, flexible guidance, and supportive partnerships – is the key to sustainable change.

 Learn more: [Fit Drivers Program – The Truck Trainer](#)

Organization	Employees	Key Strategies	Lesson for Employers
Metro Nashville Public Schools	~11,000	• Free onsite wellness center • Virtual classes • Annual Walk-to-School events • Wellness Week • Vanderbilt Health partnership	Provide free, accessible opportunities + healthcare partnerships to boost participation and reduce costs.
University of Mississippi Medical Center	~10,000	• Onsite fitness • Walking routes • Stair prompts • <i>Walk with a Doc</i> • Exercise is Medicine Campus initiative	Pair whole-person wellness with healthcare system integration for sustainable impact.

- Health plan coaching/webinars

UnitedHealth Group	~275,000 (global)	• Onsite fitness • Wellness champions network • “United We Move” challenge • Peloton discounts • MoveSpring app • Rally Stride incentives	Scale programs with champions, digital tools, and incentives to engage a dispersed workforce.
Working for a Healthier Tennessee	~43,000	• Policy allowing combined breaks for wellness • Resource-rich website • Desk stretches • Challenges • Webinars • Outdoor activity guides	Policy + easy-access tools create engagement across a large, diverse workforce.
American Heart Association	~3,200	• Fierce 5-minute breaks • Stair prompts • Walking routes • Virtual classes • Webinars • Resource guides • Wellness	Small, symbolic changes + accessible resources can shift workplace culture toward movement.

		champions • Fitness discounts	
Fit Drivers Program (Transportation Industry)	Industry-wide (Greyhound, Covenant Transport, Sherwin Williams)	• Ergonomics for drivers • Walking/stretch breaks • Healthy snacks • Resistance bands • Clinic partnerships • Phone-based guidance	Tailor wellness to high-barrier jobs with portable tools and partnerships that meet employees where they are.

Examples in Action: Small & Mid-Sized Employers

Not every organization has thousands of employees or a big budget. These examples show how creativity, culture, and leadership support can bring physical activity to life in smaller workplaces.

Small Tech Company – Portland, OR (15 employees, fully remote)

- **Strategy:** Virtual scavenger hunts for team building.
- **How It Works:**
 - Employees receive a list of items to find.
 - Everyone goes for a walk at the same time, taking photos and sharing them in Slack.
 - A team meeting follows 90 minutes later, keeping the activity connected to work culture.
- **Lesson:** Even fully remote teams can promote physical activity with fun, low-cost, tech-enabled challenges.

Small Manufacturing Company – Vancouver, WA (125 employees, mostly onsite)

- **Strategy:** Daily walks + ergonomic training.
- **How It Works:**
 - Frontline managers lead daily team walks.
 - Employees receive a 15-minute daily wellness break.
 - A “Silly Walk” sign outside the president’s office encourages employees to pass by with humor and movement.
 - Quarterly onsite training covers ergonomics, safe lifting, and stretching.
- **Lesson:** Leadership support and humor (“Silly Walks”) create a culture of wellness on the shop floor.

Small Senior Living Community HQ – Pacific Northwest (135 employees, mostly direct care staff)

- **Strategy:** Team-based physical activity challenges aligned with mission.
- **How It Works:**
 - Employees and community members form teams to participate together.
 - Example: A *Kentucky Derby*–themed challenge where teams track physical activity minutes on a board decorated as a horse race.
- **Lesson:** Connecting challenges to organizational mission builds community, culture, and fun.

Mid-Sized Insurance Company – Indiana (1,500 employees, HQ office)

- **Strategy:** Organization-wide wellness break.
- **How It Works:**
 - Every Thursday at 1:45 p.m., the entire company pauses for a 15-minute wellness break.
 - Wellness committee leaders lead stretches and activities.
- **Lesson:** A consistent, company-wide routine reinforces the idea that wellness is part of work, not an afterthought.

Takeaway for Employers

Small and mid-sized organizations don’t need big budgets — they need creativity, leadership buy-in, and consistency. Simple traditions and fun challenges can build lasting wellness cultures.

Company	Workforce	Strategy	Lesson
Tech Company (Portland, OR)	15 employees, fully remote	Virtual scavenger hunts → employees walk, take photos, share in Slack, then regroup in a meeting	Even fully remote teams can make activity fun with low-cost, tech-enabled challenges.
Manufacturing Company (Vancouver, WA)	125 employees, mostly onsite	• Daily team walks • 15-min wellness breaks • “Silly Walk” sign by president’s office • Quarterly ergonomic training	Humor + leadership support build a movement-friendly culture on the shop floor.
Senior Living HQ (Pacific NW)	135 employees, mostly direct care staff	Team-based physical activity challenges with community members (e.g., Kentucky Derby horse race tracker)	Tying wellness to mission deepens engagement and makes activity fun.
Insurance Company (Indiana)	1,500 employees, HQ office	Weekly company-wide wellness break, 15 minutes every Thursday at 1:45 p.m., led by wellness committee	Consistent, organization-wide rituals make wellness part of the workday.

Acknowledgments

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