



## **ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**



## *Introduction*

The workplace can offer encouragement to its employees to be physically active in a number of ways. Encouragement covers a broad range including an employer's positive attitude and support for physical activity, actual incentives and rewards, providing fitness information, and soft supports such as casual dress codes, flexible working hours, and group discounts. This section examines the prevalence of these types of supports by respondent age and sex, region, education and household income levels, marital status, community size and physical activity levels. Data are also analyzed by employment characteristics including type of work, employment sector, profession, and company size. The section concludes with an overview of the findings and policy and program recommendations.

## ***Employer attitude and support for physical activity***

The majority of working Canadians (55%) report that their employers are *not very* or *not at all* supportive of physical activity. A further 20% report that their employers are *moderately* supportive of physical activity, while one quarter (25%) report that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive. About two fifths (44%) of Canadian employees who say that they have *no* support from their employers believe that having such support would help them become more active. Seven in ten employees (70%) who already receive support from their employers say that such support does encourage them to be more active.

**Age and sex** There are no differences by age or sex in the likelihood of reporting varying levels of employer supportiveness or the extent to which such support would encourage physical activity. When looking specifically at those who do receive support, it can be noted that women aged 25 to 44 are more likely than those aged 45 to 64 to say that the support they receive helps them to be more active.

**Region** Employees in the Yukon and Saskatchewan are less likely than other working Canadians to state that their employers are *not at all* or *not very* supportive. Employees in British Columbia are more likely to report that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive. Of employees who say that they do not receive support from their employers, those in Alberta are more likely than others to say that such support would encourage them to be more active. Among those employees who already receive support from their employers, those in Newfoundland are more likely whereas those in British Columbia are less likely to say that the support helps them be more active.

**Socio-economic and demographic characteristics** Employees with the highest annual household incomes (\$100,000 or greater) are more likely than those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$59,999 to report that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive of physical activity. Employees with incomes between \$20,000 and \$29,999 are more likely than those with incomes between \$80,000 and \$99,999 to state that the support they receive encourages them to become more active. Employees with a secondary level of education are more likely than those with a university education to say the same.

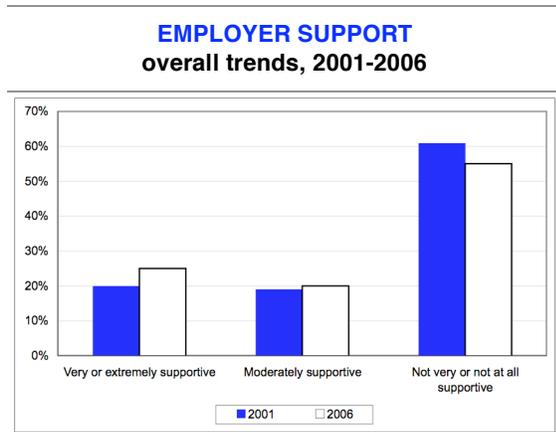
**Activity level** Active employees are more likely to state that their workplaces are *very* or *extremely* supportive compared to those with low levels of activity. In addition, less active employees are more likely than those who are active to indicate that their employers are *not at all* or *not very* supportive.

**Workplace characteristics** Canadians working in finance and service industries are more likely than those working in trade or commerce to state that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive of physical activity. Further, those working in government service industries or finance and business are more likely than those working in retail and wholesale to report this level of support. In terms of company size, those working for companies with 100 to 249 employees are more likely than those working for the largest companies (with 1,000 or more employees) to state that their employers are *not at all* or *not very* supportive. Professional workers are more likely than those in clerical positions

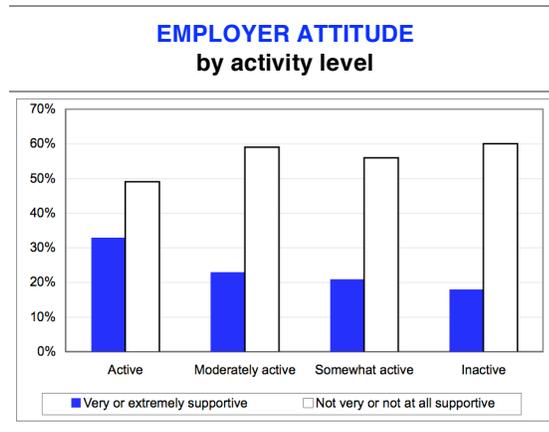
## Employer attitude and support for physical activity (cont'd)

to indicate that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive. Construction workers are more likely than those working in education, health, and social services to indicate that the support they currently receive from their employers does encourage them to be more active.

**Trends** The proportion of employees who state that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive of their physical activity has increased very slightly in the past five years, while the proportion who say that their employers are *not very* or *not at all* supportive has decreased slightly during this time. The finding that active employees are more likely to state that their workplaces are *very* or *extremely* supportive has persisted over time. The relationship between employer support and employee education level that appeared in 2001 still exists in 2006.



2001 & 2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI



2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

## *Support for physical activity at work*

Approximately one third (30%) of Canadian employees say that they are permitted to participate in community physical activity events during work hours (without loss of pay), while considerably fewer (10%) report that their employers offer rewards or other recognition for their physical activity achievements.

**Age and sex** There are no significant differences in the proportions of employees who allow participation in community events or who offer rewards or other recognition by age and sex.

**Region** Employees in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories are more likely than the average Canadian employee to report that their workplaces allow participation in community physical activity events during work hours without penalty. Employees in the North are more likely to say that their employers offer rewards or other recognition for their physical activity achievements.

**Socio-economic and demographic characteristics** With increasing level of education, there is a general increase in the proportion of employees stating that they are permitted to participate in community physical activity events during work hours. In addition, there is a general increase with increasing income in the proportion of employees indicating that they are allowed to participate in community physical activity events during work hours.

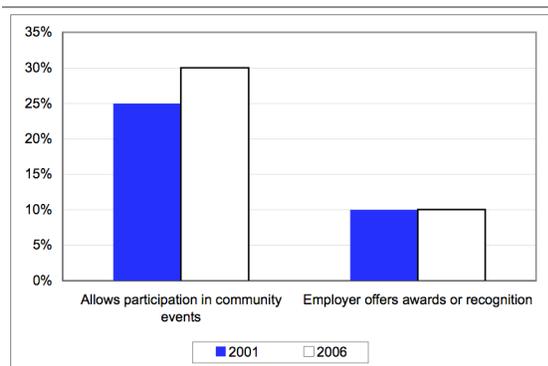
**Activity level** The proportion of employees whose employers allow participation in community events or who offer rewards or other recognition for physical activity does not appear to differ significantly by activity level.

**Workplace characteristics** Adults working the government and public sector are more likely than those in the private sector to say that their company offers rewards or other recognition for physical activity. Finance and business employees and those employed in government service industries are more likely than the national average to say that their employers allow them to participate in community physical activity events during work hours. In addition, those in management positions are most likely to say that their workplace permits participation in community physical activity events. Those working in skilled trades are less likely than professionals and managers to indicate this. Employees working for the largest companies (with 1,000 or more employees) are more likely than those working for companies with 11 to 49 employees to indicate that their employers offer rewards recognizing employee physical activity.

## Support for physical activity at work (cont'd)

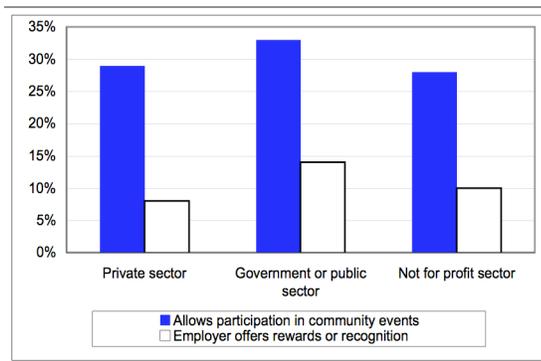
**Trends** Although the proportion of employees who are permitted to organize or participate in community physical activity events during work hours has increased slightly since 2001, the proportion who say that their employers provide rewards, recognition, or other types of motivation to be active has remained constant over time. In 2001, less active employees were less likely to say that they were allowed to participate in community physical activity events during work; however, this difference does not appear in 2006. The relationship regarding the increased likelihood of participating in community events during work hours with increased level of education persists over time. The finding in 2001 showing that employees in managerial and professional occupations were more likely to participate in community physical activity events during work hours also appears in 2006. Moreover, employees from the government and public sector were previously more likely to indicate that their workplaces offer rewards and recognition for physical activity, and this finding is still true in 2006.

**SUPPORT FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**  
overall trends, 2001-2006



2001 & 2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

**SUPPORT FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**  
by sector



2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

## ***Fitness information at work***

About one third (32%) of working Canadians report that their employers use bulletin boards or newsletters to make fitness and health information available, while one quarter (25%) report that their employers provide specific information on where to be active locally. Similar proportions report that their employers offer information on how to become more active (28%) or offer physical activity seminars or workshops (26%).

**Age and sex** There are no significant differences related to fitness information at work by age or sex.

**Region** Manitoba employees are more likely than the national average to indicate that their workplaces provide information on how to become more active.

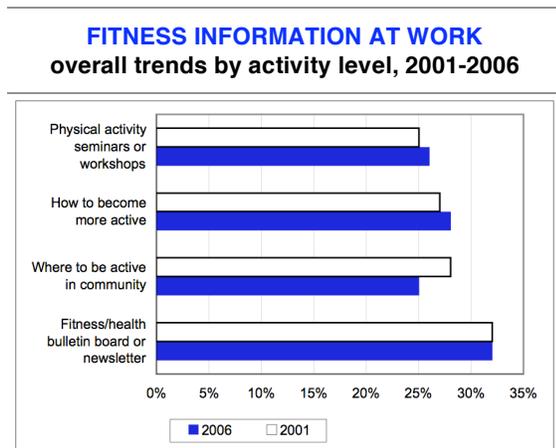
**Socio-economic and –demographic characteristics** Those with annual household incomes between \$80,000 and \$99,999 are more likely than those with slightly lower incomes (between \$60,000 and \$79,999) to indicate that their employers provide specific information on where to be active locally. Those with the highest annual household incomes (\$100,000 or greater) are more likely than those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$59,999 to indicate that their workplaces provide information on how to become more active, and are more likely than those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$59,999 to report the availability of physical activity seminars or workshops. University-educated employees are more likely than those with a secondary level of education to indicate their workplaces offer information on how to become more active. University-educated employees are also more likely than those with a college education to state that their employers offer physical activity seminars or workshops.

**Activity level** There are no significant differences in the proportions of employees who indicate the availability of information at work by activity level.

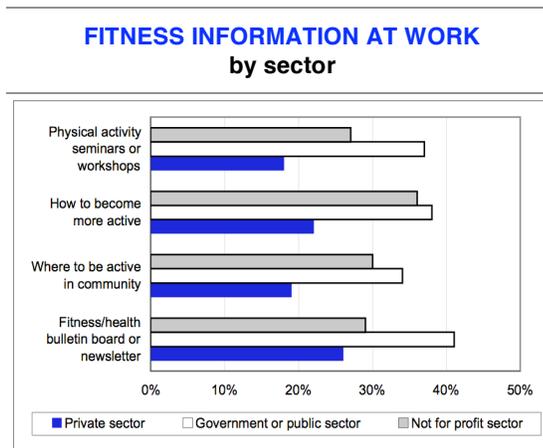
**Workplace characteristics** Government or public sector employees are more likely than those in private businesses to indicate that their employers provide fitness and health bulletin boards or newsletters, specific information on where to be active or how to become more active, and physical activity seminars or workshops. Those working in education, health, and social services are more likely than the national average to report having bulletin boards or newsletters at work, information on how to become more active or where to be active, and to offer physical activity seminars. Those in government service industries are also more likely than the national average to report having information how to become more active and physical activity seminars or workshops. Those working in finance and service industries are more likely than those in industry and manufacturing or trade and commerce to report having specific information on where and how to be active as well as physical activity seminars or workshops. There is an increasing likelihood of reporting the existence of bulletin boards or newsletters, information on where and how to be active, and the provision of physical activity seminars and workshops with increasing company size. Professionals are more likely than those in skilled trades to indicate that their workplaces provide information on where to be active locally and how to become more active.

## *Fitness information at work (cont'd)*

**Trends** Generally, there have been no significant changes in the availability of fitness information at work since 2001. Interestingly, while active employees were more likely to say that their workplace provided information on where and how to be active, and to provide seminars, workshops, and training programs in 2001, these differences with activity level do not appear in 2006. The relationships with the provision of fitness information within industry that were seen in 2001 also, for the most part, appear in 2006. Government or public sector workers and those in larger companies are more likely to report the availability of certain information at the workplace, and these are findings that have persisted over time.



2001 and 2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI



2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

## *Soft supports for activity*

Workplaces can offer a number of supportive features to their employees that can indirectly encourage their physical activity. For instance, over two fifths (42%) of working Canadians report having dress-down days or casual dress codes at the workplace and 38% report having flexible working hours. While about one quarter (26%) of working Canadians state that their workplaces provide group discounts for local physical activity facilities, only 32% of these individuals indicate that they actually use the discounts (which amounts to roughly 8% of the working population).

**Age and sex** Younger employees (aged 18 to 24) are more likely than their older counterparts (aged 45 to 64) to state that flexible working hours are allowed at work. Women aged 25 to 44 are more likely than men of the same age to state that flexible work hours are permitted at their workplace.

**Region** Yukon employees are more likely than the average working Canadian to report that their employers allow dress-down or casual dress days and flexible work hours. Those in Saskatchewan are more likely than others to report that they do *not* have group discounts available through their workplaces.

**Activity level** Active employees are more likely than those who are less active to cite the availability of group discounts at work. Similarly, active employees are also more likely than others to report that they actually use the group discounts for physical activity available at work, while the least active employees are more likely to report that they do *not* use these discounts.

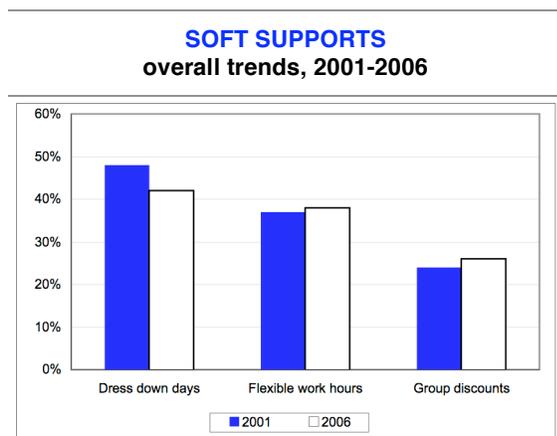
**Socio-economic and demographic characteristics** With increasing level of education, there is a general increase in the proportion of employees indicating that their workplaces permit casual dress. There is also a relationship between income and casual dress at work; those with annual household incomes between \$60,000 and \$79,999 are more likely than those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$39,999 to say that they have this option. Employees who have never been married are more likely than those who are widowed, divorced, or separated, or married to report the existence of flexible working hours. Those who are widowed, divorced, or separated are more likely than those who have never married to say that they do *not* use the group physical activity discounts available through their workplaces.

**Workplace characteristics** Not surprisingly, part-time employees are more likely than full-time employees to report that flexible working hours are allowed at work. Hi-tech and government service employees are also more likely to report having flexible work hours available. Employees within the governmental or public sector are more likely than those in the private sector to report that their workplaces provide group discounts for physical activity facilities. Those in the finance and service industry are generally most likely to report that their workplaces provide group discounts for physical activity facilities, as are those in the government service industries. For the most part, the larger the company, the more likely that employees report that group discounts are available. However, employees companies with 11 to 49 employees are more likely than those in the largest companies to actually use the group discounts available. Hi-tech and finance

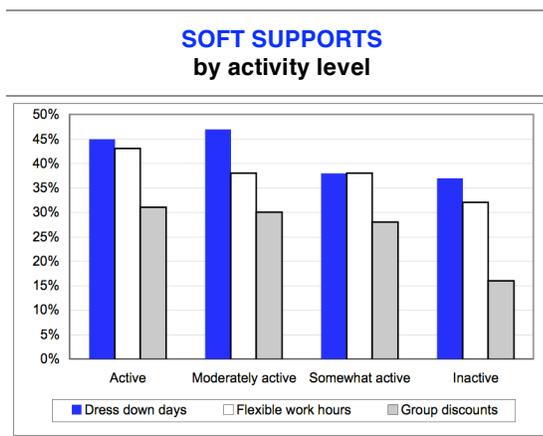
## Soft supports for activity (cont'd)

or business employees are more likely than others while those in construction or hospitality services are less likely than the national average to say that dress-down days or casual dress is permitted at work. In addition, those in professional or management positions are more likely than labourers to say that their workplace permits casual dress. Professionals are also more likely than those in skilled trades to cite the availability of flexible work hours at work.

**Trends** There have generally been no significant differences over time in employee perceptions about the availability of soft supports for physical activity in the workplace, with the exception of a slight decrease in the proportion of workplaces allowing casual dress. The age related differences associated with perceptions of the availability of these supports that appear in 2006 were not significant in 2001. The relationship between education level and the availability of dress down days has remained stable over time. Generally speaking, those in the public sector are most likely to have group discounts available, and this is a finding that has persisted over time.



2001 & 2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI



2006 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

## Summary

One quarter of working Canadians report that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive of physical activity and a further 20% report that their employers are *moderately* supportive of physical activity. However, more than half (55%) of employed Canadians report that their employers are *not very* or *not at all* supportive. Just over two in five employees who indicate that they have *no* support say that workplace support would encourage them to be more active, while 70% who do currently receive support indicate that this support helps them to be more active. The proportion of employees who state that their employers are *very* or *extremely* supportive of their physical activity has increased very slightly in the past 5 years, whereas the proportion who say that their employers are *not very* or *not at all* supportive has decreased slightly during this time.

Data collected in the 2006 Physical Activity Monitor investigated the types of encouragement for physical activity at work. Generally speaking, less than half of Canadian employees report the availability of the following supports at work:

- 42% report having dress-down days or casual dress codes at work,
- 38% report having flexible working hours,
- 32% indicate that bulletin boards or newsletters to post fitness and health information are available,
- 30% say that they are permitted to participate in community physical activity events during work hours without a loss of pay,
- 28% report that information on how to become more active is available,
- 26% indicate that physical activity seminars or workshops are offered,
- 26% say their workplaces provide group discounts for local physical activity facilities; however, only 32% of these individuals indicate that they actually use these discounts (equivalent to roughly 8% of the working population),
- 25% say that their employers provide information on where to be active locally, and
- 10% report that rewards or other recognition for their physical activity achievements are offered.

The table below summarizes the socio-economic, demographic, and workplace characteristics associated with a greater likelihood of citing various employer encouragements as they pertain to the workplace.

**Table 1. Factors associated with an increased likelihood of reported encouraging workplace features by socio-economic, demographic, and workforce characteristics**

	Socio-economic and demographic characteristics			Workforce characteristics	
	Age, sex, activity level	Region and Community size	Education and Income	Profession and status	Industry, Sector and company size
Can participate in community physical activity events during work hours		North, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland	Higher education Higher income	Management	Government service industry Finance and business
Rewards or recognition		North			Government & public sector Larger companies
Bulletin boards, newsletters					Government & public sector Education, health, social services Larger companies
Info on <i>where</i> to be active locally				Professionals	Government & public sector Education, health, social services Finance and service industry Larger companies
Info on <i>how</i> to be more active		Manitoba	University educated Higher income	Professionals	Government & public sector Education, health, social services Government service industry Finance and service industry Larger companies
Physical activity seminars or workshops			University educated Higher income		Government & public sector Education, health, social services Government service industry Finance and service industry Larger companies
Dress down days or casual dress codes		Yukon	Higher education	Professionals and management	Hi-tech industries Finance and business
Flexible working hours	Youngest employees (18-24)  Women aged 25-44	Yukon	Never married	Part-time  Professionals	Hi-tech industries Government service industry
Group discounts for physical activity facilities					Government & public sector Finance and service industry Government service industry Larger companies

## *Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations*

One of the first steps in encouraging physical activity among employees is the provision of information regarding health promotion opportunities. In fact, the WHO<sup>45</sup> states that information provision is the first level of programming that should be offered. However, only 25% to 32% of Canadians report that their employers post information, provide information on how or where to become more active, or offer physical activity seminars and workshops. While the public sector appears to be a leader in these types of supports, the supports are still only offered in less than half of their workplaces. Programming can include talks on a variety of topics related to health and well-being,<sup>46</sup> supplemented by classes, workshops, or lectures with discussion groups, videos, internet resources, books, physical activity information brochures in payroll packets, or other types of media. Promotional materials that incorporate contemporary theories of behaviour and organizational change, emphasize linkages between the workplace and external settings, expand the profile of programs to address workplace culture, and encourage management support for behavioural adjustments to the organization have been demonstrated as successful components of a strategy.<sup>47</sup> Information that facilitates active living in the workplace should include brief and practical resources and program materials that are easily deliverable.<sup>7</sup> Topics such as *Active Living and Stress Management* would catch the interest of employees. Another section of this report has demonstrated that stress is of concern to many Canadian employees. Employers could offer information such as *Canada's Guide for Physical Activity*<sup>48</sup> and information available from the Canadian Council for Health and Active Living at Work (<http://www.cchalw-ccsvat.ca/english/>), which provides an abundance of resources. Signs should be simple, use humour, involve storytelling, change frequently, and feature large pictures and words.<sup>49</sup> Cafeterias and break rooms have been suggested as the most effective places to post signs.<sup>49</sup>

Organizational culture, one that supports physical activity opportunities at work, may be an important means of facilitating active living. A study of Alberta workplaces noted that support from top level management was viewed as essential to funding initiatives and creating an organizational culture that would value and encourage active living.<sup>7</sup> However, the Conference Board of Canada<sup>36</sup> reports that work place health issues often do not appear on the list of top priorities for senior executives, and cites one survey in which 25% of senior human resources professionals rated wellness and disability management as unimportant in the development of their organizations' business strategies, and an additional 33% rated it as only somewhat important. Analysis of findings in this section reveals that while employer support for physical activity is felt to be relatively low by working Canadians, the majority generally feel that a supportive environment would help them to be more active. Indeed, just over two in five employees with no support believe that such support would encourage them to be more active, and this proportion increases to seven in ten of those who have some support and indicate that this type of support does help them be more active. This may well indicate that even having some support may encourage employees to seek further ways of fitting physical activity into daily life.

Active Canadian employees are more likely to state that their employers are supportive; however, this raises the question as to whether employer support assists more employees to be active, whether active people seek out supportive employers, or whether other factors are involved. A previous topic in this report shows that physical activity

opportunities in the workplace do not play much of a role in motivating an individual to *accept* a position in the company, but such opportunities do play a role in *retaining* employees. This is certainly an area that merits further research.

Buffet and Taylor<sup>50</sup> indicate that 64% of Canadian companies are offering some type of wellness initiative. Main reasons for doing so include the fact that they consider healthy employees a valuable asset, and the desire to promote a healthy lifestyle, reduce absenteeism, and contain the costs of benefit programs.<sup>50</sup> Perceived barriers to an existing comprehensive wellness program include a lack of resources, staffing, concern about implementation costs, lack of knowledge about employee wellness programs, and being unconvinced of cost savings. Programming that addresses these concerns by demonstrating the benefits and addressing the barriers will assist employers in becoming more supportive of physical activity. The Public Health Agency's Business Case for Active Living at Work (<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/fitness/work/index.html>), the Alberta Centre for Active Living's Physical Activity at Work (<http://www.centre4activeliving.ca/workplace/>), and the Canadian Council for Health and Active Living at Work (<http://www.cchalw-ccsvat.ca/english/>) each present useful tools and supports.

Program evaluation is an additional useful tool to assist managers in justifying sustained support. Currently, only about one quarter of wellness programs are evaluated.<sup>50</sup> Without data to support their success, senior managers may have difficult backing such initiatives. Tools such as the Workplace Physical Activity Assessment Tool (WPAAT)<sup>51</sup> and the Checklist of Health Promotion Environments at Worksites (CHEW)<sup>52</sup> can be used to plan, implement, and evaluate workplace physical activity programs by identifying needs for the development of action plans, establishing baselines, and measurement of progress in meeting identified needs over time. Once the needs are identified, the above-mentioned websites provide tools to develop programs to fill these needs.

At the workplace, larger companies can support lunch time walking or running clubs or company sports teams, offer health risk appraisals to all employees and follow-up with sedentary employees, provide facilities for workers to keep bikes secure and provide worksite showers and lockers, offer discounted health insurance premiums, and reduce co-payments and deductibles in return for employees' participation in specified health promotion or disease prevention programs. This may be a challenge in smaller workplaces. Research is required to understand how such opportunities could be made available to groups of businesses, such as those in the same buildings, or those in similar industries. Regardless of the size of the workplace, senior management could demonstrate their support of physical activity behaviours by taking part themselves and modeling such behaviours.

Beyond the workplace, support can come from encouraging employee participation in events such as Winter- or Summer-Active, Corporate Challenges, Terry Fox Runs, other community events, and company sponsorship of community physical activity programming. Only 30% of employees state that they are permitted to participate in community physical activity events during work hours without loss of pay, and this is a small proportion of Canadians overall. It also appears that those who have 'office jobs', and who work in finance and business or the government service industries, are more likely to report this type of support and that labourers and trades people are the least

likely. Employers have an opportunity to promote teamwork and cohesiveness by encouraging participation in such events.

Involving employees from all levels of the company to participate in planning physical activity programs, clubs, or events further fosters a supportive environment. Once a committee has had an experience of planning an event or club activities, a logical expansion would be to then examine the role of physical activity in the workplace on a broader level, ensuring that the needs of employees across the company are considered and addressed. Responsibilities can include the development, promotion, and execution of a physical activity program and communication with management. Input from workers in the development, organization, and administration of wellness programs and activities would further encourage their interest and participation in physical activity. Involving employees in the planning process increases their participation levels.<sup>53</sup> Allowing employees who volunteer to participate in the organization of physical activity activities, or who participate on physical activity committees, to do so during work hours may also be an option.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, over two thirds of employers feel that incentives are needed to encourage employees to participate fully in wellness programs<sup>50</sup> and focus group work<sup>49</sup> has indicated that incentives, pedometers, and competitions would increase use of such amenities as walking paths. However, data from the 2006 Physical Activity Monitor indicate that there is a low level of perceived support from employers and that one in ten of those with supportive employers cite that their employers offer rewards or other recognition for physical activity achievements. There are opportunities to provide incentives and rewards such as public recognition of employees who participate in physical activities, creating “active employee of the month” awards, ensuring that managers and senior staff verbally encourage and praise employees who participate in physical activity, and using the internal communication vehicles in the workplace (e.g., e-mail, bulletin boards) to recognize participants in physical activities or successful teams.

Finally, one approach that could be used by large and small businesses in most industries is the negotiation of group discounts. Roughly one quarter of employees report that their employers offer group discounts at local physical activity facilities, yet only one third of these employees actually use them. Employers can encourage greater participation through many of the modes of encouragement discussed in this section, such as role modeling, flexible schedules, incentives and rewards, employee involvement in planning use, and the evaluation of programs.