



Sports and Society  
Accelerator

2024

# Taking the Lead on Active Workplaces

Issue Brief #3



# What are active workplaces and why do we need them?

**The recent surge in white-collar jobs in urban India coincides with a growing, inactive population. Extended work hours, long commutes, limited opportunities to be physically active, and time constraints have led to a significant rise in sedentary behavior. This brief explores evolving workplace dynamics and lays the foundation for proactive interventions by individuals, companies, and policymakers to meaningfully integrate sports and physical activity (SAPA) into India's workplaces. While we acknowledge the diversity of work patterns and trends (e.g., physically laborious work, rising work-from-home, etc.) in India, our focus is on urban white-collar offices given their substantial contribution to sedentary behavior.**

An active workplace can be defined as a physical and mental environment that is designed and structured to facilitate SAPA as a fundamental aspect of regular routines within the office. It can be viewed as a setting where movement, exercise, and wellness are substantially integrated into the defined culture of the workplace and getting to-and-from work – with a focus on improving physical health, mental well-being, and subsequently, overall productivity.

The concept of active workplaces is gaining prominence in India. Pioneering organizations

are beginning to reshape their approach to prioritizing employee well-being, guided by the aim of cultivating a culture of active living and a recognition of the contribution of SAPA to work productivity and overall well-being. This recent movement has included introducing initiatives that govern office spaces, as well as support that extends beyond the office environment. For example, entities have previously launched inventive interventions such as running challenges, subsidizing gym memberships, offering marathon coaching, and hosting sessions focused on cultivating nourishing dietary habits, all under the ambit of creating an active workplace.<sup>1</sup>

Sedentary behaviors (SB) are rising especially in urban, white-collar work settings. In modern societies, a growing number of people are employed in what can be classified as “inactive” jobs, with three-quarters of their workday being governed by SB.<sup>2</sup> As a result, in many countries, white-collar work is a major determinant of overall SB and physical inactivity. For example, a study from the Netherlands found that office workers spend almost 80% of their working time in a sedentary position, while 64% of jobs in the United States require being sedentary or only engaging in minimal PA, reflecting the need for

---

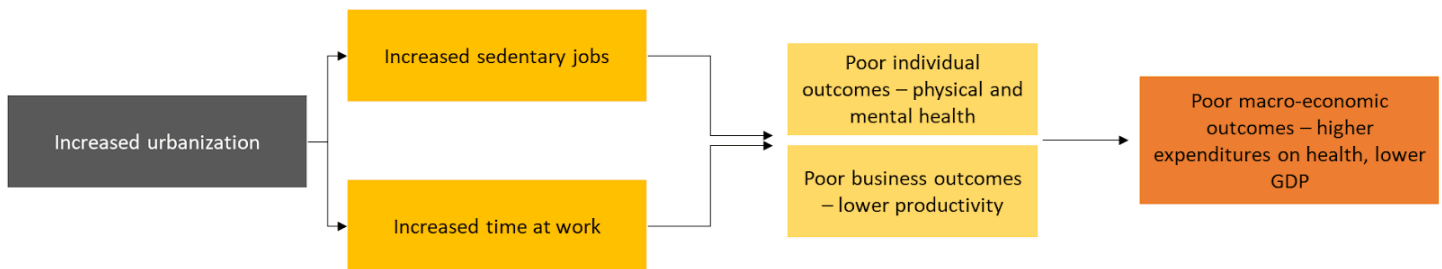
<sup>1</sup> Brinda Sarkar and Sreeradha Basu, “India Inc Walks the Extra Mile to Keep Employees Healthy,” *The Economic Times*, August 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/startups/india-inc-walks-the-extra-mile-to-keep-employees-healthy/articleshow/102455517.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>2</sup> Alicia A. Thorp et al., “Prolonged Sedentary Time and Physical Activity in Workplace and Non-Work Contexts: A Cross-Sectional Study of Office, Customer Service and Call Centre Employees,” *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 9 (2012): 1–9.

intervention and initiatives.<sup>3</sup> In India, employment patterns show that most of the population is engaged in physically demanding occupations such as agricultural labor (44.8% of the employed labor force in 2020-21) and informal jobs like construction (12.4% of the employed labor force in 2020-21)<sup>4</sup>, which are essential contributors to the nation's economic landscape. However, a notable transformation is occurring in urban centers, where sedentary jobs are on the ascent. While comprehensive data on this shift is still emerging, reports and studies indicate a noticeable trend. According to government reports and studies like the National Sample Survey and the Periodic Labor Force Survey, the share of the urban workforce in sedentary

employment sectors, including IT, finance, and services, has been steadily growing in recent years. For example, direct employment in the IT services and BPO/ ITeS sector has grown at ~6% annually from 2018-19 and is expected to reach 5.4 million in 2022-23.<sup>5</sup> This shift is further compounded by the ongoing process of urbanization, which is drawing more individuals to cities and urban areas in search of employment opportunities – about 50% of India's population in 2050 (~850 million people) will live in cities. These converging factors are presenting India with a set of shared challenges in managing the balance between physically demanding and sedentary occupations, challenges that are only expected to intensify sharply with time.

Figure 1: Negative effects of sedentary workplaces

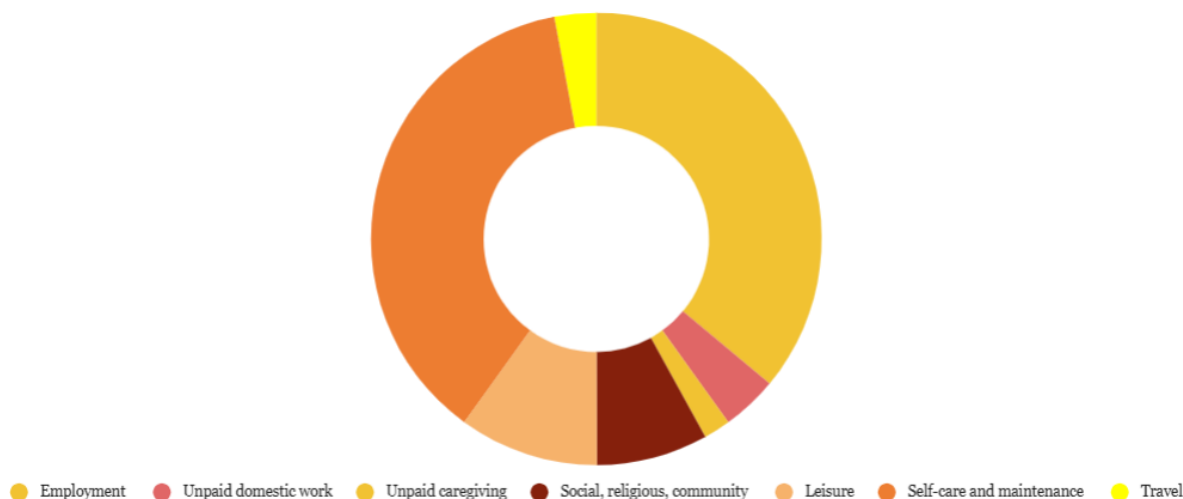


<sup>3</sup> Anna Valeria Dieterich et al., “Reducing Sedentary Behavior and Physical Inactivity in the Workplace: Protocol for a Review of Systematic Reviews,” *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine* 6, no. 1 (December 2020): 2, doi:10.1136/bmjsem-2020-000909.

<sup>4</sup> National Statistical Office's Periodic Labor Force Surveys (2020-21), 'India's unique jobs crisis explained,' Indian Express (August 2022). Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-indias-unique-jobs-crisis-8062853/>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, GOI (2023). Available at: [https://www.meity.gov.in/content/employment#:~:text=Direct%20employment%20in%20the%20IT,~%2036%20percent%20women%20employees\).](https://www.meity.gov.in/content/employment#:~:text=Direct%20employment%20in%20the%20IT,~%2036%20percent%20women%20employees).)

Figure 2: How do urban, white-collar workers in India spend their time? (indicative)<sup>6</sup>



Sedentary behaviors at work are strongly linked to heart disease and other non-communicable diseases. The link between white-collar, physically inactive jobs and heart disease has been a longstanding one, first uncovered in a journal article authored by Jeremy Morris and colleagues in 1953, titled “Coronary heart disease and physical activity of work.”<sup>7</sup> The paper indicated that “Men in physically active jobs [conductors] have a lower incidence of coronary heart disease in middle-aged men than have men in physically inactive jobs [drivers],” with the disease not being as severe as in physically active workers.<sup>8</sup>

According to some studies, the mortality rate is increased by 2% for every hour spent sitting at a desk, with it potentially reaching up to 8% per every hour when individuals spend more than eight hours of their day sitting.<sup>9</sup> Further,

data also highlights that among office workers, those who end up spending a similar amount of their time seated and facing a screen, health indicators do not make for a promising reading, suggesting the potential negative impact of sedentary time over PA levels as well.<sup>10</sup>

These statistics form a significant portion of the extensive evidence linking occupational activities to health concerns, emphasizing the need for effective workplace interventions aimed at enhancing the health of employees in the tertiary sector.

The benefits of having an active workplace are manifold. These include but are not limited to improved physical health, enhanced mental well-being, increased productivity and creativity, and reduced absenteeism and

<sup>6</sup> Purely directional and indicative. Derived from NSSO Time Use Data 2019. Available at: [https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/Report\\_TUS\\_2019\\_0.pdf](https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Report_TUS_2019_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> J.N. Morris et al., “Coronary Heart-Disease and Physical Activity of Work,” *Lancet* 262, no. 6795 (November 1953): 1053–1057, doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(53\)90665-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(53)90665-5).

<sup>8</sup> David Koh, “Sedentary Behaviour at Work—an Underappreciated Occupational Hazard?,” *Occupational Medicine* 68, no. 6 (August 2018): 350, doi:[10.1093/occmed/kqy059](https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqy059).

<sup>9</sup> David Thivel et al., “Physical Activity, Inactivity, and Sedentary Behaviors: Definitions and Implications in Occupational Health,” *Frontiers in Public Health* 6, no. 288 (October 2018): 2, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389%2Ffpubh.2018.00288>.

<sup>10</sup> Thivel et al., 3.

turnover.<sup>11</sup> These benefits co-exist at multiple levels, especially when considering employee health and motivation, workplace wellness, and from an employer's perspective, increased productivity.

At the individual level, engaging in regular SAPA yields a multitude of positive effects on mental health, constituting a valuable tool for enhancing overall well-being. Numerous studies have demonstrated that SAPA is associated with reduced stress levels, owing to the release of endorphins – all of which have an evident positive effect given the fast-paced nature of the workplace.<sup>12,13</sup> This natural mood elevation is known to contribute to improved emotional states, making SAPA a powerful strategy for managing anxiety and stress. Furthermore, there is evidence that links physical activity and exercise to increased cognitive function, as it promotes increased blood flow to the brain, which is known to work on enhancing memory, focus, and problem-solving abilities.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this, incorporating SAPA into the regular work routine can play a role in substantial cardiovascular health benefits and aid in weight management, among other health indicators. Given the context of increased SB, regular movement can effectively help counteract the nature of office

work, reducing the aforementioned health risks.<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, potentially mitigates the likelihood of developing related chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, which have also been cited as issues that are exacerbated due to increased sedentary lifestyles.<sup>16</sup> As an example, integrating short breaks for SAPA during work hours can act as a catalyst for improved productivity and creativity. These brief interludes can help on multiple fronts, working on increasing productivity as well as improving health outcomes, having a “win-win” effect.

Research also underscores the significant advantages of active workplaces for businesses. Evidence suggests that companies that encourage SAPA among their workforce tend to witness lower rates of absenteeism and employee turnover.<sup>17</sup> This is also linked to a positive trend, as more active employees experience better health outcomes, leading to fewer leave days and increased satisfaction at the workplace. Data shows that in the US, the annual cost of lost productivity due to absenteeism is as high as \$24 Billion annually among professionals, with office workers accounting for a third.<sup>18</sup> This is further contextualized by studies that show that satisfied employees can be up to 20% more

---

<sup>11</sup> Gemma C. Ryde et al., “Physical Activity in Paid Work Time for Desk-Based Employees: A Qualitative Study of Employers’ and Employees’ Perspectives,” *BMC Public Health* 20, no. 1 (April 2020): 2, doi:10.1186/s12889-020-08580-1.

<sup>12</sup> Su Hyon Chon et al., “Job Characteristics and Occupational Stress on Health Behavior in Korean Workers,” *Korean Journal of Family Medicine* 31, no. 6 (2010): 444–452.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Kouvonen et al., “Chronic Workplace Stress and Insufficient Physical Activity: A Cohort Study,” *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 70, no. 1 (2013): 3–8.

<sup>14</sup> Manish Kumar, Shobhit Srivastava, and T. Muhammad, “Relationship between Physical Activity and Cognitive Functioning among Older Indian Adults,” *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1 (February 2022): 7, doi:10.1038/s41598-022-06725-3.

<sup>15</sup> Eamon Y. Duffy et al., “Opportunities to Improve Cardiovascular Health in the New American Workplace,” *American Journal of Preventive Cardiology* 5 (March 2021): 100136, doi:10.1016/j.ajpc.2020.100136.

<sup>16</sup> Duffy et al.

<sup>17</sup> Elena Losina et al., “Physical Activity and Unplanned Illness-Related Work Absenteeism: Data from an Employee Wellness Program,” *PLoS One* 12, no. 5 (May 2017), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176872>.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Folger, “The Causes and Costs of Absenteeism,” Investopedia, May 2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/070513/causes-and-costs-absenteeism.asp>.

productive.<sup>19</sup> These positive trends translate into potential cost savings for businesses, as they reap the benefits of a more engaged and healthier workforce. As a result, the integration of regular SAPA into both personal routines and professional settings brings about a cascade of advantages, encompassing mental well-being, cardiovascular health, cognitive enhancement, and the overall prosperity of businesses.

The subsequent macroeconomic benefits further make a case for active workplaces. At all levels - individually, organizationally, and for government - there is reduced expenditure on healthcare in various forms. Therefore, as evidence suggests, the direct result of a healthier workforce is a healthier population at large. It is estimated that the elimination of adult inactivity (of which the workplace is a significant contributor) could increase India's GDP by \$50 billion annually, with the same numbers indicating that about \$28 billion of that number comes from increased workforce productivity.<sup>20</sup>

There's also a case to be made for businesses to be proactive in striving towards an active workplace. Taking the lead in designing initiatives and guiding frameworks, organizations can tailor their active workplace

programs to align with their specific values, goals, and workforce demographics. The ability to customize can lead to more effective and sustainable initiatives that resonate with employees, resulting in improved productivity, retention, and overall well-being. This also avoids a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that may emerge from increased policy-led regulation, as SAPA levels come under the scanner. This approach can further have associated monetary and non-monetary costs, which a 'first mover' advantage can avoid. Furthermore, businesses that take the lead in promoting active workplaces can shape the narrative and drive similar change in their domain. This proactive stance not only enhances an organization's reputation as a responsible and caring employer but can also position them as thought leaders in the field of active workplaces. By documenting this evidence, they can create a ripple effect on the landscape.

Creating an active workplace requires a concerted effort. It is both about the built and the created environment, i.e., a workplace conducive to SAPA in terms of infrastructure and motivation to participate. This is built on a sound evidence base of the contribution of SAPA to overall well-being.

---

<sup>19</sup> Neetish Sarda, "Increased Productivity at Workplace Can Add to Economic Well Being," People Matters, July 2019, <https://www.peplematters.in/article/life-at-work/increased-productivity-at-workplace-can-add-to-economic-well-being-22500>.

<sup>20</sup> Sports and Society Accelerator and Dalberg Advisors, "The State of Play in India Initiative: Discussion Brief," February 2023, [https://www.sports-society.org/public/images/pdf/The%20State%20of%20Play%20in%20India%20outward%20facing%20note%20\(final\).pdf](https://www.sports-society.org/public/images/pdf/The%20State%20of%20Play%20in%20India%20outward%20facing%20note%20(final).pdf).

# What are some initiatives that promote active workplaces?

At various levels – local, national, and international – ideas are emerging on what it means to have an active workplace. Some of these have been highlighted in the table below.

*Table 1: Summary of global Active Workplace initiatives – public sector-led*

Country/Organization	Key Features	Takeaway for India
<b>International Initiatives</b>		
<b>World Health Organization (WHO)</b> <sup>21</sup>	The WHO’s Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (GAPPA) 2018-2030, sets out key objectives and plans to reduce global physical inactivity by 15% by 2030. It recognizes how workplace wellness can aid productivity and suggests actions to the same end. These include encouraging design guidelines for physical-activity-friendly infrastructure, increasing opportunities and facilities for physical activity (PA) within workplaces, and encouraging research on the benefits of active workplaces.	<p>Prioritize policy development to promote PA in urban workplaces, including guidelines for employers (e.g., dedicated exercise spaces and flexible hours)</p> <p>Encourage comprehensive wellness programs with fitness, classes, and incentives.</p> <p>Ensure equitable opportunities for all employees, considering diversity and inclusion.</p>
<b>International Labor Organization (ILO)</b> <sup>22</sup>	The ILO develops international labor standards related to occupational health, promoting employer responsibility, worker participation, and the role of health services to ensure worker well-being. This also includes integrating health promotion into workplace practices. This is aimed at enhancing worker well-being, improving productivity, and reducing the burden on healthcare systems.	Encourage a holistic approach to worker well-being that considers physical, mental, and emotional health. India can learn from the ILO’s emphasis on a comprehensive approach to health promotion in the workplace.

<sup>21</sup> World Health Organization, *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018 - 2030* (Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2018), <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272722/9789241514187-eng.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Valentina Forastieri, “Improving Health in the Workplace: ILO’s Framework for Action,” Fact sheet, December 2014, [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/resources-library/publications/WCMS\\_329350/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/resources-library/publications/WCMS_329350/lang-en/index.htm).



National Initiatives		
<b>Australia (Queensland)</b> <sup>23</sup>	The Government of Queensland launched an Active Workplaces Guide outlining why 10,000 steps daily are key for good health – as part of the wider guidelines on PA. The guide highlights implementation, navigating different needs and conditions, as well as measuring progress.	<p>Emphasize the importance of clear and accessible health messaging to motivate employees.</p> <p>Share best practices, case studies, and success stories to inspire and guide employers in India.</p> <p>Encourage the use of technology, such as fitness trackers or mobile apps, to monitor daily steps and overall physical activity levels.</p>
<b>Canada - Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)</b> <sup>24</sup>	CCOHS highlights what active living looks like and promotes it widely. It has outlined guidelines for active living at work. These include developing workplace fitness policies and programs and encouraging participation and support of various ability levels.	The Active Workplace program can be put under a separate vertical under both State and Central Governments which solely focus on occupational health and work. These can further draw on learnings from the CCOHS, which include how they define physical activity, and generate awareness and strategies that they have outlined.
<b>Scotland (and United Kingdom)</b> <sup>25</sup>	Active workplaces are promoted via the Movement for Health in Scotland – which is a coalition of leading charities, national agencies, and academic institutions. They promote this through guidance on how to promote activity, training programs for employers, and rewarding good practices and employers.	<p>Encourage collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, nonprofits, academic institutions, and employers. Such partnerships can pool resources and expertise to promote active workplaces effectively.</p> <p>Establish mechanisms to recognize and reward good practices and employers who actively promote physical activity. Recognizing and celebrating achievements can motivate other organizations to follow suit and create a culture of movement.</p>

<sup>23</sup> CQ University and Queensland Government, “Active Workplaces Guide,” 2019, [https://www.10000steps.org.au/documents/212/10000\\_Steps\\_Active\\_Workplaces\\_Guide\\_2019\\_bXIMEIH.pdf](https://www.10000steps.org.au/documents/212/10000_Steps_Active_Workplaces_Guide_2019_bXIMEIH.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Government of Canada, “CCOHS”

<sup>25</sup> Movement for Health, “Active Workplaces,” 2023, <https://www.movementforhealth.scot/themes/active-workplaces>.



While these exist within the realm of public sector frameworks, a few private organizations are innovating around the concept of active workplaces – both in India and outside. These can be further dissected into two categories: companies promoting SAPA at the workplace and companies integrating it into their daily functioning.

*Table 2: Selected company-level physical activity and wellness initiatives in India*

Organization	Key Features	Takeaway(s)
<b>Companies Promoting Physical Activity</b>		
<b><i>HealthifyMe</i></b> <sup>26</sup>	HealthifyMe is a corporate wellness solution company, providing support with workplace wellness programs for companies. They provided end-to-end solutions, working on awareness campaigns, and implementable diet and training programs, as well as measuring impact to sustain interest in the wellness programs.	Employees have different fitness levels, interests, and goals. A successful corporate wellness program should offer personalized fitness plans and activities that cater to individual preferences and fitness levels. This could include providing various workout options (e.g., yoga, strength training, cardio) and allowing employees to choose activities that align with their interests and abilities.
<b><i>Stepathlon</i></b> <sup>27</sup>	Established in 2012, Stepathlon aims to improve health and well-being by breaking sedentary behavior and providing year-round guidance. This includes virtual races, ideas to achieve 10,000 daily steps and social gamification tools, promoting healthy habits.	Incorporating elements of gamification, such as challenges, rewards, and leader boards, can be highly effective in motivating employees to increase their physical activity. Friendly competition and incentives can make PA more engaging and enjoyable.
<b><i>The Active Workplace</i></b> <sup>28</sup>	The Active Workplace is a US-based organization that offers on-site fitness training for offices. Additionally, they have optimized long-term programs based on employee and employer needs and support the development of healthy workplaces. It assesses and designs fitness programs based on the needs of all stakeholders. Additionally,	The success of workplace fitness programs depends on flexibility in their implementation. One size does not fit all, so being adaptable and open to adjusting programs based on the evolving needs and feedback of employees and employers is crucial. This can involve regular assessments to ensure the program

<sup>26</sup> HealthifyMe, “Corporate Wellness Programs | Employee & Workplace Wellness,” Corporate Wellness | Employee & Workplace Wellness Programs, 2023, <https://www.healthifyme.com/corporate-wellness/>.

<sup>27</sup> Stepathlon, “Corporate Wellness Platforms - Corporate Wellness Programs - Step Counter App,” 2023, <https://www.stepathlon.com/>.

<sup>28</sup> The Active Workplace, “The Active Workplace - Corporate Fitness,” theactiveworkplace, 2023, <https://www.theactiveworkplace.com>.

	they have been focusing on increasing productivity and communication through PA.	aligns with the changing priorities of the organization.
<b>Companies Integrating Physical Activity</b>		
<b>Zomato<sup>29</sup></b>	In July 2023, Zomato, announced the hire of a Chief Fitness Officer. His role revolves around helping all employees with their fitness journeys, as well as with an in-house team of trainers, nutritionists, and wellbeing counselors - all of whom provide PA-based support to employees. This builds on previous steps at the company, which have included an in-house fitness facility at their headquarters and a specialized mental health support team.	Zomato’s model is among a growing trend of organizations recognizing the benefits of SAPA and moving to introduce programs in the same vein. Further, the move to hire a Chief Fitness Officer points to how important culture-setting is in promoting an active workplace.
<b>Zerodha<sup>30</sup></b>	In 2022, Zerodha, an Indian financial services company, kicked off a fitness challenge for employees. The features included monetary rewards for employees to lose weight and improve fitness, fitness trackers to plan and monitor progress and those who achieve 90% of their yearly fitness goals received a bonus, as did employees with a BMI of less than 25.	Zerodha’s model presents an interesting indicator that companies in India are already looking at health and wellbeing. It points towards a robust monitoring and evaluation system attached to PA levels. Their move towards attaching incentives to health goals is a promising practice for culture-setting.

The introduction of active workplace programs at various levels reflects a shift in thinking. Governments are recognizing the importance of SAPA in daily life and powering that vision by implementing frameworks and guidelines for increasing activity at the workplace. At the same time, a movement is afoot within Indian white-collar workplaces,

as indicated by Zomato and Zerodha. The way forward involves tailoring initiatives and interventions suited to local and national conditions, taking on board good practices both in India and outside. The following section lays out the base for an active workplace framework and sheds light on what’s needed.

<sup>29</sup> Deepinder Goyal, “A New Kind of CFO,” Zomato, July 2023, <https://blog.zomato.com-a-new-kind-of-cfo>

<sup>30</sup> Free Press Journal, “Zerodha Encourages Employees to Invest in Health, Offers Rs10 Lakh Reward for Losing Weight,” Free Press Journal, 2023, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/business/zerodha-encourages-employees-to-invest-in-health-offers-rs10-lakh-reward-for-losing-weight>.

# Taking the lead on active Indian workplaces

The overview above underscores the crucial need for a collaborative and systemic approach to cultivate active environments within Indian workplaces. It highlights the pivotal roles of governmental bodies and business employers in this endeavor. Regulations play a significant role in establishing and enforcing standards, ensuring compliance, and safeguarding employee rights.

However, even in the absence of regulations, businesses can proactively champion this cause. As detailed earlier, there are compelling reasons to do so from a business perspective, including benefits related to employee productivity, retention, motivation, and cost reduction. Moreover, voluntary initiatives enable companies to assume proactive responsibility, tailor their strategies to unique needs, gain competitive edges, and foster trust with stakeholders.

While it's essential to acknowledge the associated costs, the long-term advantages, such as improved employee health and performance, typically outweigh these expenses. Healthier employees can lead to reduced healthcare expenditure and decreased staff turnover. Importantly, the pursuit of more active Indian workplaces extends beyond the institutional level; individual initiatives hold equal significance. Each person's commitment to embracing a physically active lifestyle contributes substantially to the overarching goal.

Therefore, propelling Indian workplaces towards an active culture demands a

concerted effort at three levels: governmental policies, organizational practices, and individual initiative.



## Individuals

**1 In-Office:** The first step in individual initiative starts from recognizing the importance of SAPA in daily life, combined with the risks of inactivity usually associated with an urban white-collar workplace like prolonged sitting. This can foster a situation of opting for healthier alternatives like simple desk exercises or stretches to counter the situation. This further extends to actively breaking the cycle of sedentary work through integrating concepts like walking meetings and wellness breaks into the workflow or utilizing standing desks (where available).

**2 Out-of-Office:** The health benefits of a regular SAPA regimen are well documented and make for a clear case for adopting that outside the realm of the office. However, limited personal time is a challenge. Within that scenario, it becomes important to make more active choices when considering things like eating or commuting. While there are obvious constraints, individuals can choose active modes of commuting to work, such as walking or cycling if feasible, or opt for public transportation. This is further complemented by active, healthy eating habits, which can further help counter the adverse effects of a largely sedentary lifestyle and amplify the effects of healthier choices both inside and outside the office.

Figure 3: How individuals can be more active at work<sup>31</sup>



## Companies

Promoting SAPA in the workplace is not just about offering gym memberships or hosting occasional fitness challenges. It requires a holistic approach that encompasses culture, policies, and infrastructure. These three pillars must work in tandem to create an environment where SAPA is not just encouraged but becomes an integral part of the corporate ethos.

**1 Culture:** Culture is arguably the most crucial element in fostering activity at work. A workplace culture that values health and wellness can go a long way in motivating employees to stay active. Studies indicate that fitness center utilization rates are often low and tend to attract individuals who are already physically active. Consequently, these facilities may not be responsible for most of the health

improvements within a comprehensive program. Instead, the real transformative impact of programs and initiatives lies in their ability to shape organizational culture and inspire employees to enhance their physical activity levels. This transformation is further facilitated by the involvement of peers and managers who actively participate in healthy activities, collectively motivating positive changes in behavior.<sup>32</sup> The objective here is to create a culture of permissionless physical activity, where employees don't need explicit confirmation from supervisors to engage in SAPA-related activities during the workday.

- **Awareness:** Building awareness is a crucial and foundational step in cultivating this culture. Awareness-building initiatives can encompass a range of strategies, from

<sup>31</sup> Content adapted from: <https://www.westfieldhealth.com/blog/being-active-at-work>; Data on negative implications of sitting and broader benefits of active workstations from 'Get Britain Standing: Sitting Survey,' (2017) <https://yodesk.co.uk/pages/get-britain-standing>; Research on the positive health implications of walking: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/does-exercise-lower-cholesterol#does-exercise-help>; Research on the positive benefits of shorts bursts of exercise from Nature Magazine: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-022-02100-x>;

<sup>32</sup> Institute for Health and Productivity Studies, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health, 'Physical Activity in the Workplace, A Guide for Employers,' (2016); <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/61633>

informative campaigns and educational workshops to sharing success stories and providing resources that empower individuals with the knowledge needed to make informed choices about their physical health. By emphasizing the importance of awareness, organizations lay the groundwork for a culture where physical activity is not only valued but also integrated into the collective mindset and behaviors of their employees.

- **Leadership:** Explicit and visible support from leaders is another critical element. Employees often need to see leaders participate in programs and model active behaviors.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, middle managers who are often responsible for the daily activities of employees, must be brought on board as champions.
- **Networks:** Employers should actively explore opportunities to establish and fortify support networks within the workplace. Social support initiatives play a vital role in assisting employees in creating, reinforcing, and sustaining health-focused social connections. These support programs encompass activities such as forming walking clubs, establishing collective agreements on SAPA engagement, and organizing group exercise sessions within the workplace. Such initiatives effectively aid individuals in adhering to their daily physical activity objectives while fostering a sense of camaraderie and encouragement among participants.
- **Celebration:** Finally, celebrating achievements, whether big or small, can reinforce the culture of SAPA and motivate employees to continue making healthy choices. Celebrating physical achievements, recognizing employees who actively

participate in wellness programs, and creating a supportive environment through wellness champions can further reinforce this culture.

**2 Policies:** Policies are the second pillar that complements the workplace culture. While culture sets the tone, policies help solidify and sustain the desired behavior. It's crucial to ensure that the culture of SAPA is reflected in and enshrined within company policies. These policies may include integrating physical activity into the workday, such as scheduling walking meetings or designating active break areas within the office. Office design can also play a significant role by incorporating standing desks, ergonomic seating, and accessible staircases to encourage movement. Incentives like rewards for achieving activity goals can be effective motivators. Measuring physical activity levels and progress as well as setting health and fitness targets – beyond ESG – can provide valuable feedback and help employees set and achieve fitness objectives. Moreover, appointing a "Chief Fitness Officer" or wellness champion within the organization can lead efforts to promote SAPA and ensure it remains a priority.

**3 Infrastructure:** Enhancing workplace infrastructure plays a pivotal role in promoting SAPA within the corporate setting. A lot can be done to leverage and use existing infrastructure to keep the resource burden low.

- **Leverage existing infrastructure:** To create a physical environment that encourages movement, businesses can start by leveraging their existing facilities creatively. This includes utilizing underutilized spaces like stairwells, hallways, or meeting rooms

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

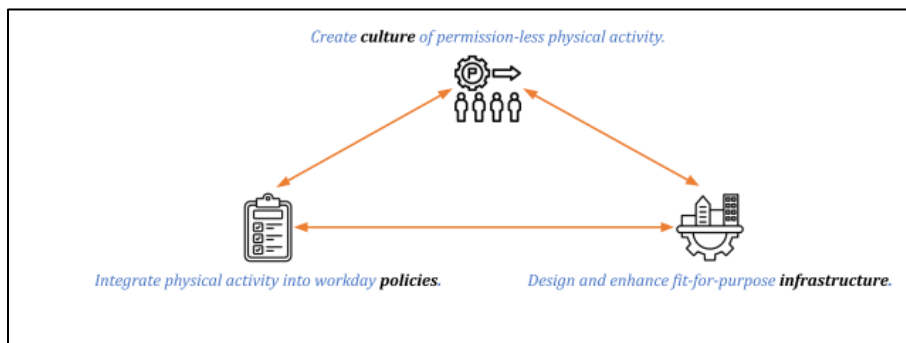
for physical activity breaks, stretching sessions, or even impromptu team workouts. Improving safety, lighting, and overall aesthetics in these areas can make them more inviting and conducive to physical activity. Place reminders or signs near elevators prompting employees to take the stairs. Similarly, having signs that suggest taking a 'stretch break' or 'quick walk' can subtly remind employees to stay active. Adequate and well-maintained bathroom facilities can also make it more convenient for employees to freshen up after exercise.

- ***Leveraging existing community resources:*** Collaborating with local community resources can expand access to spaces like parks or recreational areas for outdoor activities and group fitness classes. These partnerships not only benefit employees but also foster positive relationships with the community. In addition, engaging with governmental initiatives to enhance public walking and cycling infrastructure can encourage employees to adopt active commuting options. This not only promotes

physical activity but also reduces carbon footprints and traffic congestion.

- ***Design:*** Moreover, integrating a SAPA lens into the design of office spaces is essential. This may include incorporating standing desks, creating open and flexible workspaces that encourage movement, and providing ergonomic furniture that supports healthy postures. Dedicated facilities such as on-site gyms or fitness centers can offer employees convenient options for exercise. This also includes behavioral nudges, for example, elevators that only stop at alternative floors unless the user has a specific disability.
- ***Technology integration:*** Lastly, technology can be a powerful tool for promoting SAPA participation. Employers can invest in fitness-tracking devices or apps that encourage employees to set and achieve activity goals. These tools can provide real-time feedback and motivation, making it easier for employees to stay active throughout the day.

*Figure 4: Three pillar approach for companies to promote physical activity in the workplace*







## Government and policy actors

**1 Infrastructure:** Since the commute forms an important part of the day, there needs to be infrastructure that is ready to accommodate more public and active transportation like biking to work. In addition, common spaces of office complexes can have spaces which are equipped to enable SAPA, including parks and other walkable areas. Given the prevalence of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), they can be centers of such developed and SAPA-friendly infrastructure. As another example, infrastructure development can be about collaborative efforts between governments and local businesses that can include the creation of bike-sharing programs or incentives for public transport use, further reducing the reliance on sedentary/individual commuting options.

**2 Policy:** Policy changes complement the infrastructure development that goes along with them. There is a need for regulatory support which requires the implementation of active workplace programs wherever applicable. This can be supplemented by guidance and resources on how to implement the regulations, alongside possible training programs for the same. Further, these policies can be progressive through tax incentives or grants to organizations that invest in and implement active workplace guidelines and programs. This can be further complemented by recognition akin to the EPAE award in Scotland. As an example of further integration in the current policy landscape, employee health and fitness indicators can be added to

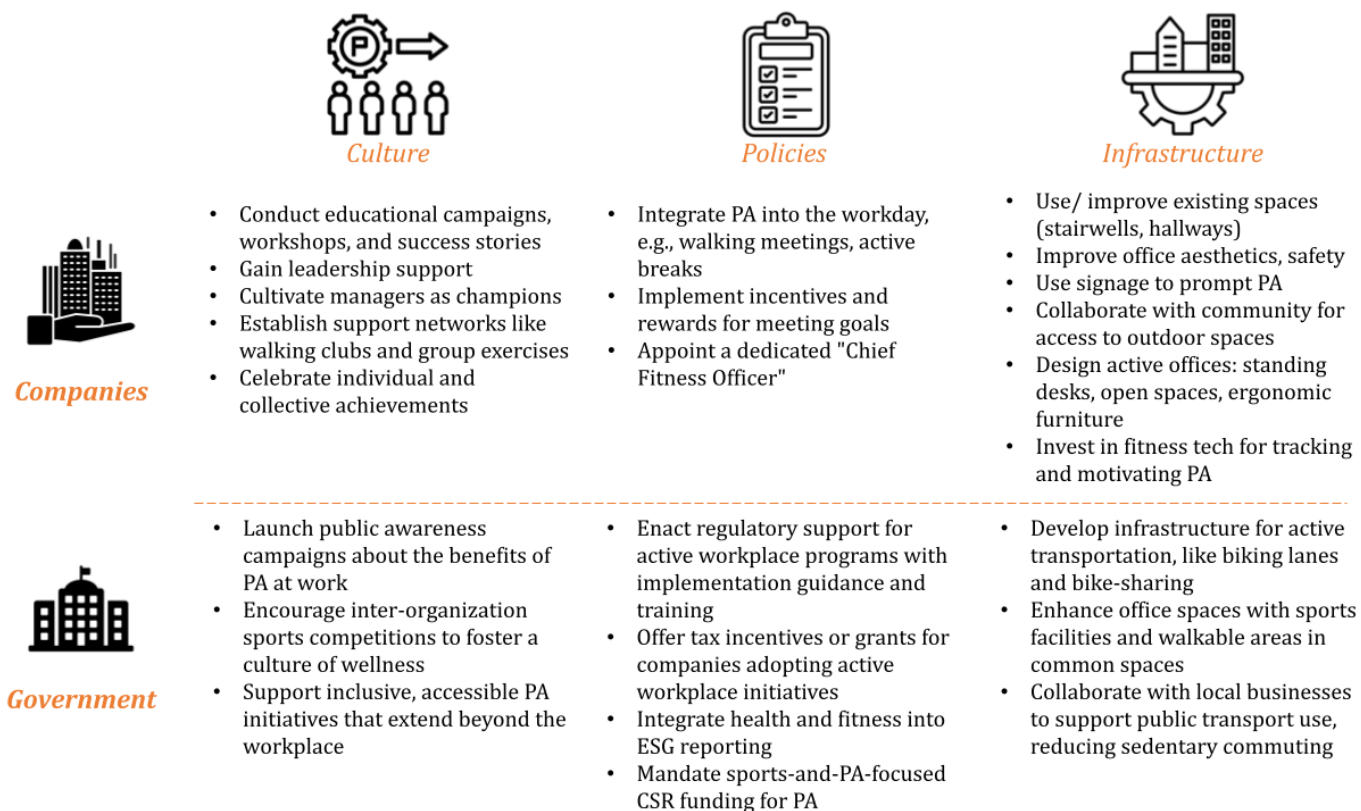
Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting, something that is already mandated under the Companies Act. Current ESG reporting includes Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and other aspects of sustainability and responsible business. Earmarking company governance to SAPA can help easily measure the implementation of policy, while providing companies flexibility on programs. This can be combined with sports-and-physical activity-based CSR funding from companies. Since companies are already mandated to report on those metrics, developing and retrofitting SAPA-related indicators would be a step in the right direction.

**3 Culture:** Regulatory support programs need to be complemented with large public awareness and action campaigns. These campaigns should focus on the benefits of taking up regular physical activity at work, and the importance of creating an environment of wellness. For example, this can include inter-organization SAPA competitions, as well as integrated with larger SAPA campaigns to adopt it both as a habit at the workplace and home.

A proposed framework like this needs to be inclusive, accessibility-friendly, and holistic - combined with a robust monitoring system in place. The creation of active workplaces in India can best be described as a joint effort between governments, companies, and employees, where the adoption of SAPA at work not only enhances employee health and productivity but also sets the stage for a wider conversation on the importance of SAPA in daily life.



Figure 5: Summary of company and government-level actions to promote active workplaces



# Conclusion: The way forward

There are several key benefits of active workplaces - physical, social, and economic. The issue brief laid out these benefits, as well as discussed, the global practices in place to harness them. Furthermore, it highlighted the potential foundational principles for a unified active workplace framework in the context of white-collar work(ers) in India. The idea of active workplaces is gaining momentum - in India and abroad. Organizations are taking the initiative to define what it means to have an active workplace in the Indian context, catering to unique local practices and needs. This pre-empts the need for policy-based regulation, which can often counteract these efforts. As a result, they are actively shaping what it means to have an active workplace, and more robust efforts will only result in positive outcomes both from an employer and policy perspective. There's a lot in place already to build upon.

This issue brief aims to be a call to action for organizations to take the lead on workplace wellness. Further, this discussion ought to span across other industries outside the white-collar, large organization context. This includes the nature of work in smaller urban and rural centers, and the importance of PA (and non-activity in many cases) in those contexts. These serve as reference points for further discussion, open to wide interpretation across organizations, regions, and regulatory contexts around the country.

This brief calls for further discussion and research on how to make Indian workplaces more active. Here are a few ideas on what should be done next to get the ball rolling.

- *From a policy perspective, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs and the Ministry of Human*

*Resource Development can foster further investigation into how an active workplace can be imagined in India. They are the foremost bodies for administering the Companies Act, 2013 and a pivotal stakeholder in ensuring changes in policy and creating a culture. They can implement a comprehensive framework and guidelines tailored to Indian corporate cultures, ensuring the adoption of best practices. This can be incentivized through financial and non-financial incentives, encouraging companies to adopt this framework and provide a monitoring system alongside.*

- *This can be coupled with a nationwide campaign to raise awareness about the importance of active workplaces and their benefits to employee health and overall organizational productivity. The campaign can be a multi-stakeholder effort, including Indian celebrities, athletes, and influencers to champion the message, giving it a broad reach and appeal through both traditional and non-traditional forms of media.*
- *Activating major associations for professionals and the corporate sector in India is also important. Such associations have played important roles in generating awareness and forums of engagement that have moved industries forward. They can invest in capacity-building programs and resources that educate HR professionals, managers, and decision-makers on the importance of active workplaces. These associations can double up as forums and platforms where businesses can share their successes, challenges, and learnings in this domain, fostering a community of continuous learning and collaboration.*

- *Lastly, consider establishing an Active Workplaces Innovation Fund.* Several pioneering companies have started developing and executing ideas for active workplaces. A fund could play a pivotal role in financially backing both start-ups and established firms that are introducing ground-breaking solutions to foster activity in the workplace. These solutions

encompass technological advancements like apps that promote SAPA and infrastructural innovations, including ergonomic furniture designs. This initiative would not only encapsulate the emerging ideas but also provide a comprehensive framework for their effective implementation.



# Sports and Society Accelerator

With the support of  
Institutional Partners

