Fit for purpose:
Steps to tackling Britain's sedentary working culture
A commitment to Britain’s workforce

With the rise of the knowledge economy, fast-paced, ‘always on’ working environments have become the norm. So it is no surprise that the workforce spends more time now than ever before plugged into their workstations, inactive for hours at a time.

Against this backdrop, Lendlease has invested in research to help us truly understand workplace challenges, combat inactivity and bring about change.

Our recent study, completed in conjunction with YouGov, has revealed that Britain’s working culture encourages increasingly sedentary behaviours. Findings presented in this report pinpoint key barriers to lasting change and suggest management-led solutions that can help businesses tackle inactivity at work.

As a global leader in pioneering some of the world’s best places to work, Lendlease has consistently invested in resources and research to ensure we remain committed to the bigger picture of delivering better outcomes. We know from our clients, and our own business, that innovative workplaces have the potential to influence productivity, promote health and wellbeing and inspire workforces.

Informed by our research-led approach and our breadth of experience throughout the world, we are bringing these principles to the British market. Placing health and wellbeing at the centre of our development at International Quarter London means a commitment to Britain’s workforce, providing individuals with office space that fosters an agile and healthy working community.

Our vision is an active workforce fit for purpose, not just at International Quarter London, but across Britain.

Our hope is that we inspire real change.

Jonathan Emery
MANAGING DIRECTOR, PROPERTY - EUROPE
Introduction: The rise of sedentary work

Over the course of the last half century, the Western world has seen a significant growth in professional services due to an accelerated pace of technical, digital and scientific advancement. This model of business provision is otherwise known as The Knowledge Economy.

Spending the majority of a working day static is commonplace, and while work life is physically easier as a result, this trend creates problems of its own. Sedentary working habits associated with ‘desk jobs’ have seen a steep rise in major chronic health diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, some forms of cancer and poor mental health.¹

In a report published in 2010, the World Health Organization² recommended that adults should perform a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity, aerobic physical activity every week.

Evidence uncovered in a report by the British Chief Medical Officer suggests that long periods of sitting can undo the benefits of exercise³. An adult that cycles to work and plays a sport on the weekends is in good physical condition and is meeting or exceeding suggested guidelines for physical activity. However, without maintaining a consistent level of low physical activity during the day – such as a couple of minutes of walking every hour – an individual in ‘good physical condition’ is still placing themselves at serious risk of long-term health problems.

The state of play in the Western World

Sedentary working culture is propagated by the rise in technology-dependent lifestyles. Indeed, there is a worldwide emerging trend of reduced physical activity, but the Western world is undeniably seeing the greatest rise in the number of diseases related to inactivity.

Obesity levels across Western countries in the last ten years have dramatically increased, with Britain⁴ among the nations that have seen the steepest rise. There is a reason that the first studies into the effects of sedentary work on the long-term health of individuals investigated the health of British workers.

Genesis

In 1953, Transport for London (TfL) produced a research study comparing the rates of coronary heart disease (CHD) between drivers and conductors of the London Transport Executive which formed the following hypothesis:

“Men in physically active jobs [conductors] have a lower incidence of coronary heart-disease in middle aged men than men in physically inactive jobs [drivers]. More important, the disease is not so severe in physically active workers, tending... to have a smaller early case-fatality and a lower early mortality-rate.”⁶

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¹ Aviroop Biswas, BSc; David A. Alter, MD, PhD, Ann Intern Med. (2015); http://annals.org/aim/article/2322811/sedentary-time-risk-mortality
³ Annual Report of the Chief medical Officer 2013, Public Mental Health Priorities: Investing in the Evidence
The gathering storm

In 2014, Public Health England launched the ‘Get Britain Standing’ campaign to limit the negative health consequences caused by prolonged sitting in the office. This was the campaign that coined the phrase “sitting is the new smoking”.

In 2015, research published in the Clinical Journal of the American Society of Nephrology suggested, for the first time, that walking for two minutes every hour could be enough to offset the health issues related to sitting for long periods of time.

A call to action

Since the first academic study at TfL which focused on the link between sedentary work and its negative consequences on long-term health, results have been unanimous: extended periods of sitting can be extremely harmful to an individual in the long-term. This paper addresses why these findings have not prompted a change to British work practices and outlines intervention strategies to support businesses wanting to address this growing problem.

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Inactivity in Britain’s offices

In a study conducted in partnership with YouGov among more than 2,000 workers, in both public and private sectors, it was found that over three quarters of all workers (78%) regularly sit in one place for more than an hour at a time, with more than half (56%) doing so every day of the week.

More than a third of workers (38%) eat lunch at their desk four or more times a week, and more than a quarter (26%) never use the stairs at work.

Britain’s sedentary workplace culture

Britain’s workplace culture may be the biggest factor leading to prolonged spells of heightened inactivity in the office, leaving workers vulnerable to increased risk of health problems in later life.

While workplace inactivity in Britain appears to be deeply rooted in office culture, it is not too late to change this trend. Success has been found where workforce inactivity is being addressed by a combination of business leaders, developers and office designers.

In this model, senior management lead by example, promoting active behaviour in the workplace, while developers and designers provide workforces with spaces designed to increase their level of in-work activity.

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Large numbers of workers maintain active lifestyles: almost three quarters (71%) exercise for an hour or more per week, and more than a third (36%) for four hours or more. However, vigorous exercise outside of the workplace is not enough to undo the detrimental effects of in-work inactivity to individuals’ long term health.

This is a call to action. As highlighted by the studies above, sitting is the new smoking. Warnings from the World Health Organization that inactivity is now the fourth highest cause of death among adults should be impossible to ignore. And yet, largely they are.

An appetite for change

Britain’s workforce has shown a clear appetite to increase their level of activity at work. Half of employees (50%) surveyed said that they would change their working habits if they were informed that their long term health could be improved by standing up more. More than two in every five (42%) said this information would have a lasting impact on their work habits, causing them to increase their time standing and moving around at work for a period of longer than a month.

Given this apparent appetite for change, inactivity levels at work are strangely high, suggesting that there is a widespread lack of awareness about the health benefits of keeping active at work. This may be a key barrier to tackling the sedentary work issue. There needs to be much clearer information around sedentary work for employees. But there are other, potentially more important factors at play in British workplaces than an uninformed workforce.

The need for a cultural shift

Cultural acceptance of sedentary working appears to be standing in the way of the identified appetite for change. The study identifies meetings as a major contributor. Over half of workers (56%) regularly attend meetings (i.e. once a month or more) that last for an hour or more. Of those, three in five of those (60%) stated that they would not feel comfortable standing, leaning against a wall or pacing during a meeting that lasted longer than an hour.

When asked why they felt uncomfortable, more than four in five of these employees (83%) said they were deterred because they thought colleagues, superiors and clients would find it strange if they got up during a meeting.

Almost a quarter (24%) said their workplace did not include space to accommodate movement, and over one in five (23%) pointed to a lack of furniture or fixtures that would allow employees to stand comfortably or lean during meetings.

50% said they would change their working habits if they knew about the effects on long-term health.

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Global recommendations on physical activity for health; World Health Organisation


* 9  Global recommendations on physical activity for health; World Health Organisation
For over fifty years Lendlease’s vision has been to develop the best places across the globe – from Asia and Europe to the Americas – creating environments for people where health and wellbeing is embedded at their core.

Lendlease is one of few developers that actively invests in in-house research, used to develop insights to better inform design innovations that are applied to nurture a healthier, happier and more productive working environment. It is these entrenched principles that led to a partnership with Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute and the University of Queensland to explore solutions to workplace inactivity in Australian business.

Leading the research for Lendlease was Head of Workplace Health & Wellbeing, Duncan Young, who views the workplace as an opportunity to improve employee health through interventions specifically targeted to encourage heightened levels of activity in the workplace.

Making a change: twelve-month Australian worker study

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63% of employees who would change their habits suggested that measures which are formally implemented in their workplace would be the most effective way of affecting long-term change

Management influence the greatest driver

Senior managers must be at the crux of changing office culture to nurture acceptance of activity at work. Nearly two thirds (63%) of employees who would change their habits, suggested that measures which are formally implemented in their workplace and followed through by senior management would be the most effective way of affecting long-term change in working habits. Further to this, when asked about specific ways of increasing the amount of time spent standing and moving at work, more than one in three (36%) identified that they would want their superiors or bosses to lead by example.

By comparison, just one person in every 25 (4%) stated that simply reading about it in the newspaper would have a lasting effect.

It is clear a reliance on passive information about the benefits of heightened activity is not enough. Initiatives must be implemented within the workplace to drive change.

Traditionally furnished offices were seen as a barrier by employees to encouraging heightened levels of activity at work. The physical makeup of offices goes some way towards moulding office culture, by dictating what is and is not appealing. It is the role of senior management to ensure that their offices are better equipped with standing or movement-friendly furniture (communal high tables, leaning panels in meeting areas, more accessible or appealing staircases), to cultivate an environment in which increased activity is not just officially acceptable, but also inviting.

Building on momentum

The ‘peer factor’ also plays an important role. One in three workers (33%) suggest they would be encouraged to spend more time standing and moving around in the workplace and in meetings if their colleagues did the same. The idea of how we are perceived as individuals at work, or how we fit in to the crowd, is crucial to our behaviour in the office and working habits.

Indeed, the influence of peers and management was deemed to be more effective in changing workplace behaviour than encouragement by a health expert, which would only influence one fifth (21%) of employees.

Making heightened activity at work, like taking a walking meeting, a social norm across all levels will build momentum. If a trend of individuals remaining active at work proliferates through acceptance, then we may begin to see a culture shift in Britain. But to truly make a change and disrupt the status quo, businesses must fully embrace change and take steps themselves.

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Participants

- **Average age**: 38.9 years
- **Survey size**: 153 participants
- **Gender**:
  - 54% male
  - 46% female

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"The workplace is an opportunity to improve employee health through interventions specifically targeted to encourage heightened levels of activity in the workplace"

Duncan Young, Head of Workplace Health & Wellbeing, Lendlease User Experience

To analyse the effectiveness of these initiatives, a twelve month study was conducted to observe which, if any, interventions led to long-term behaviour change among 153 Australian office workers10.

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10 Published research - ‘Evaluating the effectiveness of organisational-level strategies with or without an activity tracker to reduce office worker’s sitting time: a cluster-randomised trial’
Interventions

In week 1 all participants received an information booklet summarising the averaged activity monitor data from the baseline assessment.

All participants were sent 5 fortnightly emails developed by the research team that focussed on activity-promoting tips.

66 participants also received an activity tracker in week 1 which provided feedback through an app on their sitting, standing, stepping, sitting breaks, posture and sleep.

To visibly show support, senior executives took part in the baseline assessment and their participation in the study was communicated to participants.

Test Group 1 was provided with ‘organisational support’ initiatives, such as information booklets and fortnightly emails with activity tips that focussed on increasing the participants level of activity at work. This was supported at an organisational level and reinforced by senior and mid-level management, who took part in the activity regime. Test Group 2 received the same organisational support, but were also provided with wearable activity trackers to monitor their movement and work patterns.

Room for improvement

The results from the study suggest that there is a realistic opportunity to dramatically improve the level of activity among Australian office workers.

On average over twelve months, both test groups decreased their time sitting by 40.5 minutes per ten hour period. This equates to more than half an hour per day, 2.5 hours per normal 37.5 hour working week, and a staggering 150 hours per 52-week period.

Significantly, both groups saw time in between longer sitting bouts increased, and time accrued in long sitting bouts reduced by 41.3 minutes per ten hour period, equating to 2.5 hours per normal 37.5 hour working week, and more than 154 hours per 52-week period.

A notable difference between the two subject groups was that, while both experienced significantly more time standing during the 12-month study, the group with activity trackers also saw an increase in time spent stepping in the workplace. This group took, on average, 397 more steps during a 7.5 hour working day, equating to an additional 1,983 steps per working week, and more than 103,000 additional steps taken per 52-week period.

Interventions

The study showed strong results to support the benefit of activity trackers with this group recording a higher step count than participants who only received organisational support.

Key outtakes

The results of the study show a positive effect on both groups as a result of organisational support. The element of senior management support aligns to the findings from the survey of over 2,000 British workers, which highlighted that organisational support could increase the chances of long-term behaviour change to become more active in the office.

Also highlighted in the trial was the benefit of activity trackers. Participants from Test Group 2, which was subject to activity trackers as part of the experiment, recorded a higher step count than participants who only received organisational support. Employers who are dedicated to employee health may see this as an opportunity to implement an activity tracker initiative alongside other formal interventions in their workplace. Others may see an opportunity to encourage the use of wearable technology in their offices.

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Beyond the initial positive results from the Australian trial, the research analysts concluded that the utilisation of sit to stand workstations and other movement friendly office interiors would likely yield even better results than those produced by Test Groups 1 and 2. This presents a similar view to the 2,000 British workers surveyed who identified that a lack of appropriate furniture and fixtures was a major contributor to the level of inactivity in their workplaces.

In its entirety, Lendlease’s Australian field research suggests that the most effective method of tackling workplace inactivity – fostering long term outcomes – is the combination of the physical elements of the design and the introduction of management-led workplace interventions.

Summary
Designing a solution

With the rise of the knowledge economy has come the proliferation of hours spent sedentary at work. This is likely only to grow, but from what we know about the harmful effects of sedentary work, inactivity in the workplace must be resolved. And it is the responsibility of businesses, developers and policymakers to find a solution.

As this paper has identified, business culture plays a critical role in promoting workplace activity and adapting the working environment can go a long way in facilitating change.

It is time the property industry and businesses across Britain put employee health front and centre by embracing an inside-out approach to design and development.

By placing behavioural science at the heart of every space, businesses can not only drive positive change and save workers from long-term damage to their physical and mental health, but can also use the workplace as a tool to drive performance, innovation and growth. This opportunity for employers is evident in every element of a building.

For example, open plan layouts have been led by a need for creativity and collaboration and a desire for transparency within teams, but the design outcomes are also positive for movement. When we can physically see further than a cubicle around us, we are more likely to move and explore and we feel comfortable doing so.

Similarly, an environment with windows and natural light visually connects people to the outside world, which when supported by a culture that promotes agile working, can also encourage more movement as well as the mental health and productivity benefits that come from simply being outside.

One size does not fit all

Crucially, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to workplace design - driving change in sedentary working requires a tailor-made fit. Cultural change is not an easy fix – it takes time and commitment.

Despite current low levels of movement amongst workers, there were some encouraging results from the YouGov worker survey. Half of respondents would change their working habits if they were told about the detriment of physical inactivity to their long-term health. Business leaders must wake up to this appetite among the workforce to become more active at work and provide individuals with an environment that encourages activity and health.

From their global experience that aligns to the findings of these studies, Lendlease has identified that management support is key. If people don’t feel comfortable to use a space, move around the office and try different ways of working, they won’t. Future-thinking employers must lead this from the top, and realise that employees sitting for prolonged hours at the same desk may not be creating value – and more importantly are impacting their long term health.

Case study: Commonwealth Bank of Australia

Lendlease has been working with organisations to create cultural shifts in working environments throughout the world with high successes in Australia. Driven by research and physiology studies it pioneered Activity-Based Working (ABW) in the Australian financial services industry through design innovations at the Commonwealth Bank building in the Darling Quarter in Sydney, where over 6,000 people moved from having their own desks to a more shared environment.

Jennifer Saiz, Head of Group Property, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, said: “We have been using Activity-Based Working since we opened our Commonwealth Bank Place building in Sydney in 2012. ABW fosters an innovative, high performance culture encouraging collaboration, trust and accountability and differentiates the Commonwealth Bank as an employer. There are also the practical benefits of making the most efficient use of our space and resources, promoting cost efficiency and sustainability.”

Activity-Based Working fosters an innovative, high performance culture encouraging collaboration, trust and accountability and differentiates the Commonwealth Bank as an employer.

Built on the ‘flow theory’, the concept of ABW is about creating flexible workspaces designed to facilitate individual tasks at work – for example collaborative, focused or individual working – to encourage staff to move to locations within the office that best suit the specific task at hand, rather than rely on a single desk all day long. This in turn leads to a dramatic increase in day-to-day movement and has been shown to improve performance.

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As this paper has shown, a truly holistic approach to the workplace is needed to tackle Britain’s sedentary working culture. Activity-Based Working is only one of many workplace strategies and design considerations that can help drive change to deliver rich outcomes and maximise productivity. Dependent on the individual business, workplaces that adopt team based, agile or mobile working can be just as effective – or as this paper has shown, interventions based around cultural change or personal motivations through activity tracking can also contribute to positive results.

Lendlease’s experience and global expertise in creating healthy, agile workplaces is being brought to life in Britain for the first time at International Quarter London. In partnership with LCR, the £2.4 billion development will deliver the capital’s first entire business district that will place employee health and wellbeing at its core.

The buildings will provide the space to encourage and facilitate an agile environment. Floors will be designed to connect businesses spatially and visually with the aim of creating an employee population that feels they can explore both their office, and their external working environment. Initiatives such as installing technology into the very framework of the building, designing offices to be ‘smart’, and connecting employees and their mobile devices to the infrastructure of the workplace have already been completed. This infrastructure can interpret data to maximise efficiency and inform on future evolution of space or help plan future requirements.

In other words, offices of the future will be tailored both physically and digitally to their inhabitants. In established business areas, the idea of embracing a new design approach to the workplace can present a considerable challenge because of the extent and cost of operational overhaul. But new business districts like International Quarter London in Stratford have the advantage of starting from scratch – allowing businesses to focus on employee health and engagement from the outset and ensure their buildings align with their workplace vision and strategies. International Quarter London will be a place where workers are encouraged to move more than ever before, helping the workforce remain productive and delivering the benefits of collaboration and creativity. The workplace of the future will be a smart space that optimises mental and physical wellbeing and drives business performance. A cultural shift has begun at International Quarter London, however to create lasting change across the country Britain’s businesses must lead from the top.

Conclusion: a blueprint for Britain

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Methodology:

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2087 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 19th October 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of private business size (excluding sole traders) and of public business size (excluding sole traders) respectively in Britain.