Work(out) In Progress

A Qualitative Study Exploring How Employees Navigate Motivation and Participation in Workplace Physical Activity

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Abstract

As sedentary work patterns increase across white-collar employment sectors, organizations are increasingly turning to workplace physical activity (PA) to promote health, employee well-being and performance. Despite a growing body of evidence on the benefits of such initiatives, employee engagement remains inconsistent, limiting both individual benefits and organizational impact. This study investigates the factors shaping Swedish white-collar employees' motivation to participate in workplace PA programs, focusing on how intrinsic and extrinsic drivers and organizational conditions influence employee engagement. Addressing a gap in employee-centered research, this study examines how contextual and perceptual factors influence motivation. Through a qualitative design with thematic analysis informed by Self Determination Theory and HRM Attribution Theory, it investigates not only whether employees are motivated to participate in workplace PA, but how that motivation develops and under what conditions it leads to action. The findings reveal that motivation is a highly dynamic, socially embedded process shaped by organizational culture, social dynamics, and perceived managerial intent. Autonomy was experienced not as a fixed right, but as context-dependent. Social belonging acted as both an enabler and a constraint, depending on whether initiatives were perceived as authentic, relevant, and genuinely supportive. This study contributes to academic literature by integrating motivational and attributional frameworks to offer a more nuanced understanding of employee motivation in organizational settings. It also provides practical guidance for organizations seeking to design more effective, inclusive, and culturally supported PA initiatives.

Keywords:

Workplace Physical Activity Programs, Employee Motivation, Self-Determination Theory, Organizational Culture, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, White-collar Workers.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background & Context

The modern office environment has transformed significantly in recent decades. With 73% of work hours spent sitting, sedentariness has become a defining feature of white-collar work (Edwardson et al., 2022). As this trend accelerates, organizations face a dual challenge: rising health risks among employees and measurable losses in productivity, engagement, and well-being. These shifts reflect a broader transformation in the nature of work, where physical inactivity is not just a byproduct, but a structural feature of office work – and one of the most pressing public health and organizational challenges of our time (Chandrasekaran et al., 2024; Sonnentag et al., 2023).

The World Health Organization (2024) warns that the global rise in physical inactivity carries severe health and economic consequences, with extensive research linking sedentary behavior to various physical and psychological risks. Sedentary lifestyles contribute to chronic illnesses, reduced life expectancy, and diminished psychological well-being, while also exacerbating the effects of work-related stress (Santos & Miragaia, 2023; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). This widespread sedentariness not only undermines employee health, but also imposes substantial economic and organizational burdens.

In response to these risks, organizations are increasingly recognizing their responsibility in promoting employee well-being. With employees spending approximately 60% of their waking hours at work, the workplace has become a key setting for health intervention (Santos & Miragaia, 2023). Governments and international institutions have called for more substantial organisational efforts to support physical and mental well-being in the workplace (Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005). This shift was further reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the effects of isolation, inactivity, and stress on workers, and reinforcing the need for proactive, integrated strategies to support employee well-being (Sonnentag et al., 2023).

Physical Activity (PA) programs have emerged as a central organizational response to address the growing workplace inactivity crisis: structured initiatives designed to integrate

PA during the workday (Goetzel, 2015). Research suggests that participation in PA programs leads to greater employee productivity, lowers stress levels, and improved job satisfaction (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). In turn, white-collar workers' job performance increases, and workplace morale and culture improves (Coulson et al., 2008; Jarman et al., 2015). By positively influencing energy levels, mental clarity, and resilience, PA programs contribute significantly to overall organizational effectiveness and long-term business performance (Afrahi, 2024). This offers financial advantages to organizations, helping to attract and retain talent through better job satisfaction and employee engagement, as well as lower healthcare costs (Goetzel et al., 2001; Sonnentag et al., 2023). Overall, investing in employee physical activity programs positions organizations for long-term sustainability, as healthier, more engaged employees contribute to stronger organizational outcomes (Auerbach, 2013).

However, despite well-documented benefits, their effectiveness often falls short due to various implementation challenges, with participation rates and long-term effectiveness varying greatly (Szabó & Kajos, 2023). Nearly 70% of Swedish companies with over 50 employees offer PA initiatives, yet stress-related sick leave is rising simultaneously, accounting for over 40 % of long-term absenteeism (Försäkringskassan, 2025). This discrepancy highlights the need to explore the underlying factors that influence employee engagement, raising important questions around what drives sustained participation and how organizations can structure PA programs to better support employee engagement. To enhance PA programs' long-term impact, understanding the deeper mechanisms driving or hindering employee engagement is essential. In particular, understanding how employees perceive physical activity initiatives, what motivates their involvement, and what barriers they face is essential for designing successful, inclusive, and impactful workplace strategies.

1.2 Purpose & Contribution

While the benefits of workplace physical activity (PA) programs, as well as the organisational barriers and enablers that influence them, are well-documented, most existing research remains focused on organizational metrics and outcomes such as reduced absenteeism, improved productivity, and financial return (Goetzel, 2015). Limited research has examined employees' subjective perspectives, creating a gap in our understanding of

how they experience and interpret these initiatives (Lusa et al., 2020). Existing research shows that PA programs can be effective, but only when employees participate – simply offering a program does not guarantee results. This study responds to that gap by shifting the focus from organizational outcomes to the employee perceptions with an in-depth exploration of the contingencies that shape employee motivation. In particular, it examines how personal barriers, organisational culture, and daily routines influence participation beyond what is captured in attendance metrics (Szabó & Kajos, 2023).

To address this gap, the study focuses on how employees perceive, interpret, and respond to workplace PA programs. Through a qualitative approach, it investigates how Swedish white-collar employees experience these initiatives, with particular attention to motivational dynamics and perceived organizational support. This gap is especially pressing in the Swedish context, where strong cultural norms around autonomy and wellness intersect with some of Europe's most sedentary office environments (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023).

Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000), our study explores the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how these shape employee decisions to engage in workplace PA programs. This study aims to identify motivational factors and understand how employees interpret and create meaning in these programs. Rather than asking *if* employees are motivated, the research explored *what kind* of motivation matters, *why* it emerges or disappears, *how* it is sustained over time, and under *what* conditions it leads to meaningful engagement.

By grounding the study around employee narratives and Self-Determination Theory, this research contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of motivation within workplace wellness. If further seeks to deliver practical, employee-informed insights for designing more inclusive, human-centered, and sustainable PA programs that truly resonate with the employees they are intended to support.

1.3 Research Question

To address this gap, this study examines:

What factors influence Swedish white-collar workers' motivation to participate in workplace physical activity programs?

1.4 Delimitations

This study focuses on 12 qualitative interviews with white-collar employees across three corporate settings in Sweden. While the sample size and scope are limited by time and resource constraints, this targeted approach enables an in-depth exploration of employee experiences within diverse organizational contexts. The study is intentionally limited to the employee perspective, prioritizing subjective experiences, motivations, and perceived barriers to participation. By focusing on qualitative insights rather than quantifiable outcomes, such as health metrics, productivity changes, or return on investment, the research aims to illuminate the human factors that influence program engagement, which are often overlooked in more outcome-driven evaluations. Finally, the study is situated within the Swedish workplace context, where national policies and cultural norms, such as the wellness allowance (friskvårdsbidrag), shape how physical activity is perceived and practiced. While this context-specific focus may limit generalizability, it also allows for a more nuanced understanding of how local structures and values influence employee behavior.

2. Theoretical Background

The following section is structured around key literature that provides the conceptual foundation for understanding the research question concerning the factors influencing white-collar employees' participation in workplace PA programs. The chapter is organized into three core areas: *Conceptualizing Workplace Physical Activity Programs, Benefits of Physical Activity,* and *Barriers and Challenges to Participation.*

Workplace Physical Activity Programs outlines the rationale for positioning the workplace as a strategic site for health promotion. It defines PA in this context and categorizes

common program types, establishing the structural basis for understanding what offerings employees encounter.

Individual and Organizational Benefits synthesizes research on how workplace PA supports employee well-being and broader organizational outcomes. Understanding these benefits is essential, as they represent employees' and organizations' core value propositions.

The *Barriers and Challenges to Participation* section addresses the core research gap by examining why engagement remains inconsistent despite well-documented benefits. Subsections explore individual and organizational constraints, motivational tensions, program relevance, incentives, and cultural norms – collectively forming the analytical lens for understanding participation.

2.1 Conceptualizing Workplace Physical Activity Programs

As a primary driver of sedentary behavior, the workplace has become not only a part of the problem, but also a strategic setting for intervention (Santos & Miragaia, 2023). Consequently, PA programs are being increasingly implemented, backed by extensive evidence demonstrating their role in reducing workplace-related strain and improving overall well-being (Coulson et al., 2008; Pronk & Kottke, 2009). In addition, such programs have been shown to generate spill-over effects that extend beyond working life, by not only encouraging healthier behaviors in employees, but also positively influencing the well-being of their families (Santos & Miragaia, 2023; Szabó & Kajos, 2023).While organizations have traditionally focused on business outcomes such as return on investment (ROI), this narrow focus has been criticized for overlooking the broader value of well-being initiatives (Baicker et al., 2010; Goetzel, 2015). These programs are now viewed as strategic investments, reflecting a more profound transformation in how companies treat employees' well-being; not merely as a HR function, but as a strategic pillar of business success (Monzani et al., 2021; Simon & Fielding, 2006). However, their effectiveness depends on deep cultural integration and genuine managerial commitment, highlighting the need to shift responsibility from the individual to the organization (Antoni et al., 2017; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005).

Defining Physical Activity & Workplace PA Programs

Physical activity (PA) refers to any bodily movement produced by muscles that results in energy expenditure and includes both structured exercise (e.g., fitness classes) and incidental movement (e.g., walking or cycling to work) (Abdin et al., 2018; Caspersen et al., 1985; Li et al., 2023). In workplace contexts, (PA) programs refer to formal or informal initiatives that encourage movement during or around working hours (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). These are often part of broader health promotion strategies designed to improve quality of life and enhance productivity (Goetzel, 2015; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023).

Such programs vary in format, intensity, and delivery, but all aim to integrate movement into the workday to support sustainable employee health habits (Goetzel et al., 2015; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). They typically fall into three categories, as outlined in *Table 1*.

Program Type	Description	Examples
Structured Programs	Planned and scheduled activities, either internal or with external partners Halling Ullberg et al., 2023; Monzani et al., 2021	Fitness classes, yoga sessions, and internal sports clubs
Unstructured Programs	Informal or incidental activities integrated into routines. Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2015	Walks, active commuting, and movement during desk work
Incentive-Based Programs	Financial or policy-based incentives promoting flexible, self-directed activity Halling Ullberg et al., 2023	Wellness Allowance, subsidized gym memberships

Table 1: Typology of Workplace Physical Activity Programs

2.2 Benefits of Physical Activity

Engaging in physical activity during or around working hours has been shown to produce benefits at both the individual and organizational levels (Calderwood et al., 2020; Sonnentag et al., 2023). *Table 2* below summarizes key individual-level benefits of

physical activity in the workplace as identified in current research, which are elaborated on in the following section.

Thematic Area	Individual-Level Impact
Physical Health	Reduced risk of chronic illness, somatic symptoms, improved immune function, energy, sleep, and metabolic balance (Calderwood et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023)
Psychological Well-being	Improved mood, emotional resilience, optimism, self-esteem, lower anxiety & depression (Brown et al., 2011; Peluso & Andrade,2005; Szabó & Kajos, 2023)
Cognitive Function & Stress	Reduced stress, improved focus, emotional regulation & resistance, improved decision-making (Calderwood et al., 2020; Sonnentag et al., 2023)
Engagement & Job Satisfaction	Greater perceived autonomy, life satisfaction, & social connection; stronger sense of workplace identity. (Michishita et al., 2017; Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005)
Absenteeism & Presenteeism	Better stress resilience, energy, and mental clarity, contributing to lower individual strain. (Brown et al., 2011; Safi et al., 2022; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005)
Creativity & Performance	Improved decision speed & focus, creativity, and sustained performance through reduced fatigue and enhanced cognition (Steed et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024)

Table 2: Individual-Level Benefits of Workplace Physical Activity[1]

2.2.1 Individual Benefits

Physical activity is widely regarded as a highly effective, evidence-based way for promoting long-term health and preventing disease (Pronk & Kottke, 2009; Sonnentag et al., 2023). It contributes to stronger immune function by reducing chronic inflammation, aiding recovery from illness, supporting emotional balance, and reducing the risk of

[1] *Note: Thematic areas and outcomes are synthesized from peer-reviewed studies examining the health, psychological, and performance-related effects of physical activity in the workplace. The impacts reflect empirically documented benefits for individual employees.*

anxiety and depression (Calderwood et al., 2015; Calderwood et al., 2020). These benefits translate into improved sleep quality, reduced somatic symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and muscle tension, resulting in better hormonal balance and energy levels (Calderwood et al., 2015; Li et al., 2023).

Moreover, regular PA has been consistently linked to improved psychological well-being, shown to enhance both overall life satisfaction and work-related well-being, positioning it as a valuable element in promoting workplace health (Szabó & Kajos, 2023; Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005). Research further indicates that PA supports emotional resilience, enhances confidence and optimism, contributing to a more positive and engaging work environment (Calderwood et al., 2020; Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005). Notably, research shows that even very short exercise sessions have immediate effects on emotional well-being (Coulson et al., 2008; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005).

Regular physical activity provides a range of cognitive benefits, making it an effective buffer against workplace stress and high job demands (Calderwood et al., 2020). It reduces irritability and enhances focus, processing speed, and resilience (Calderwood et al., 2020; Coulson et al., 2008). These effects improve employees' ability to manage cognitive load and make decisions under pressure (Li et al., 2023; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). It also improves sleep quality and reduces fatigue and headaches, common signs of chronic workplace stress (Steed et al., 2019). This mental and physical recovery process is critical for sustaining performance and preventing burnout over time (Auerbach, 2013; Li et al., 2023).

As a result, employees benefit from increased creativity, better problem-solving, and higher quality decision-making in their professional tasks that ultimately translates into sustained performance and innovation at work (Antoni et al., 2017; Sonnentag et al., 2023). It is also positively associated with greater job satisfaction, improved workplace morale, and stronger interpersonal relationships (Calderwood et al., 2020; Miragaia & Aleixo, 2021). Moreover, employees in physically active organizations often report a stronger sense of belonging and emotional commitment to their workplace (Santos & Miragaia, 2023). As a result, organizations that invest in physical activity programs tend to experience higher retention rates and a more positive organizational culture (Afrahi, 2024; Santos & Miragaia, 2023).

These various benefits collectively reduce both absenteeism and presenteeism, two critical dimensions for employee performance, which significantly affect organizational productivity (Santos & Miragaia, 2023; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). Absenteeism refers to an employee's absence from work due to poor health, while presenteeism refers to attending work despite being physically or mentally unwell, leading to reduced capacity and performance (Brown et al., 2011; Nilius, 2017). Both have negative effects on mental health and burnout, especially in high workload settings (Brown et al., 2011; Sonnetag et al., 2023).

2.2.2 Organizational Benefits

Table 3 below provides an overview of organizational-level outcomes associated with workplace physical activity programs. These include measurable performance outcomes and broader strategic benefits, which are further discussed in the following section.

Thematic Area	**Organizational–Level Impact**
Workforce Productivity	Reduced productivity loss, lower presenteeism & absenteeism-related inefficiency, long-term cost, and organizational savings. (Brown et al., 2011; Santos & Miragaia, 2023))
Organizational Culture & Morale	Improved morale, stronger team cohesion, and better emotional climate. (Michishita et al., 2017; Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005)
Talent Attraction & Retention	Higher retention, strengthened employer branding, and alignment with employee values. (Afrahi, 2024; Lopes Santos & Miragaia, 2023)
CSR & Employer Legitimacy	Reinforces CSR narratives and employee trust; contributes to perceived organizational care. (Antoni et al., 2017; Lopes Santos & Miragaia, 2023)
Financial Outcomes	Reduced costs via fewer health claims and productivity loss; long-term ROI/VOI through innovation and retention. (Baicker et al., 2010; Goetzel et al., 2015;)

Table 3: Organizational-Level Benefits of Physical Activity[2]

[2]*Note: Organizational outcomes include both direct and indirect effects of PA programs on performance, retention, branding, and cost reduction. VOI = Value of Investment. ROI = Return on Investment.*

From an organizational perspective, well-implemented PA programs yield measurable and perceived organizational benefits (Antoni et al., 2023; Sonnetag et al., 2023). Organizations that actively support physical activity tend to see enhanced employee motivation, reduced burnout, as well as higher retention rates – employees who feel healthier, more energized, and better supported are less likely to leave (Antoni et al., 2017; Chandrasekaran et al., 2024). These programs also foster a more positive organizational culture and strengthen employer branding by signaling values of care, balance, and sustainability – qualities increasingly valued by current and prospective employees (Afrahi, 2024; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). Integrated PA programs also support CSR efforts, enhancing organizational legitimacy and appeal to potential employees, particularly those who seek value alignment in the workplace (Afrahi, 2024; Sonnentag et al., 2023). In this way, PA initiatives contribute not only to organizational performance and long-term vitality, but also to talent attraction and retention (Lee et al., 2010; Santos & Miragaia, 2023).

As aforementioned, a key mechanism through which PA enhances organizational effectiveness is by reducing both absenteeism and presenteeism (Antoni et al., 2017; Chandrasekaran et al., 2024). Research by Baicker et al. (2010) found substantial financial benefits – for every dollar spent on workplace wellness programs, medical costs decreased by approximately $3.27, and absenteeism-related expenses dropped by about $2.73. PA programs can also reduce insurance premiums, lower absenteeism, and increase productivity, generating long-term financial benefits (Baicker et al., 2010). However, while financial metrics have traditionally dominated justifications for workplace wellness initiatives, this framing risks narrowing the discussion (Shantz et al., 2016). The financial gains are not always immediately visible due to given time lags, which is why it is more beneficial to shift the discussion from a ROI perspective to a VOI (Value of Investment) perspective – considering the intangible outcomes such as employee morale, health equity, engagement, and CSR (Antoni et al., 2017; Goetzel et al., 2015). In the long run, companies with healthier, more satisfied employees do experience stronger financial results, while also reducing costs through lower absenteeism, improved work ability, and reduced presenteeism (Lee et al., 2010; Lusa et al., 2020; Sonnentag et al., 2023).

2.3 Barriers and Challenges to Participation

Although the benefits of workplace physical activity (PA) programs are well-documented, participation remains inconsistent, where numerous initiatives fall short due to low engagement, limited motivation, and unrealistic expectations (Calderwood et al., 2020; Szabó & Kajos, 2023). Even though these programs have been shown to work in principle, there is a lack of understanding of the employee perspective, particularly why some engage while others do not (Calderwood et al., 2020; Goetzel et al., 2015). Prior research has largely emphasized outcomes and benefits, focusing less on motivational barriers. Although these programs are introduced with the expectation that employees will benefit, simply offering such a program does not guarantee participation, as employees don't necessarily use them or even know about them (Afrahi, 2024; Steed et al., 2019). Workplace PA programs offer considerable potential benefits, but their effectiveness depends on strategic implementation, and critically, on active employee participation (Marshall, 2004; Szabó & Kajos, 2023). This underscores the importance of understanding the barriers and motivational factors that shape participation decisions to design programs that actually work (Calderwood et al., 2020; Santos & Miragaia, 2023).

2.3.1 The Role of Motivation: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

Motivation plays a central role in determining employee engagement in workplace PA programs, frequently depending on whether they view participation as aligned with their personal values or driven by external pressure (Chandrasekaran et al., 2024; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). Motivation can be classified as intrinsic, where participation is driven by personal enjoyment or well-being, or extrinsic, where engagement is motivated by external rewards such as financial incentives or social recognition (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Employees with stronger intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage in PA programs long-term, whereas those who rely primarily on extrinsic motivation may disengage once incentives are removed (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010). However, many workplace PA programs overlook these motivational differences, limiting their long-term effectiveness (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005).

Intrinsic motivation is a key predictor of sustained engagement, as intrinsically motivated employees who participate in physical activity for personal satisfaction and value

alignment tend to maintain engagement over time, unlike those primarily driven by external rewards or avoidance of negative outcomes (Calderwood et al., 2020). Moreover, employees who feel autonomous in their decision to participate in PA programs, rather than being compelled by workplace mandates, report higher engagement and satisfaction levels (Calderwood et al., 2020; Sonnentag et al., 2023). In contrast, employees are much less likely to engage if the programs are perceived as primarily benefiting corporate interests (Goetzel et al., 2015). Employees who feel they are required to participate may experience adverse effects like stress and resentment, as well as lower engagement, reduced satisfaction, and decreased well-being (Goetzel et al., 2015; Sonnentag et al, 2023). These outcomes highlight the importance of designing PA programs that support both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational needs, while maintaining a strong emphasis on voluntary participation and employee autonomy (Li et al., 2023). Organizations must therefore foster environments that genuinely empower employees, ensuring that PA initiatives are perceived as supportive, meaningful, and self-directed (Friedman & Westring, 2015; Li et al., 2023).

2.3.2 Workload, Time Constraints, and Work-life Balance

Time constraints and work-life pressures pose a significant barrier to employee participation in workplace PA programs whereas demanding job roles, marked by long hours, high workloads, and unpredictable schedules, often leave employees too fatigued to engage in physical activity, even when intrinsically motivated (Chandrasekaran et al., 2024; Santos & Miragaia, 2023). Employees working in roles demanding long hours and high psychological stress frequently prioritize rest over physical activity due to exhaustion and reduced availability of personal time, particularly evident beyond 45-50 hours, which is often the case in white collar workers (Kirk & Rhodes, 2011; Szabó & Kajos, 2023). Moreover, employees balancing intense work demands with personal and family obligations often lack the time and energy to maintain regular PA routines, further straining their work–life balance (Chandrasekaran et al., 2024; Santos & Miragaia, 2023). Consequently, workload is frequently the predominant barrier preventing consistent engagement in structured workplace PA interventions (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023; Santos & Miragaia, 2023). To address these challenges, PA initiatives must offer flexible, tailored

options that accommodate individual needs, job types, and life situations (Calderwood et al., 2020; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023).

2.3.3 Personalization and Flexibility

Strategic implementation tailored to accommodate diverse employee needs and preferences is required for effective implementation and is essential for sustained engagement, as employees vary in fitness levels, motivations, and lifestyle needs (Marshall, 2004; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). Generic, one-size-fits-all approaches often struggle to effectively engage employees, as they fail to address individual needs, limiting participation and long-term adherence (Marshall, 2004). Programs are most successful when they provide various activity options, flexible schedules, and personalized goals that align with employees' work and life circumstances (Johnson & Long, 2022). This inclusivity is essential, as conventional program formats often exclude those who might benefit the most, such as individuals with lower motivation or poor health and at the same time, already active employees gain limited additional value (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). Without thoughtful design, companies risk investing in programs that fail to attract or retain participants (Johnson & Long, 2022; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005).

Effective initiatives should promote autonomy and intrinsic motivation by emphasizing enjoyment and personal progress, rather than obligation or competition (Afrahi, 2024; Flinchbaugh et al., 2022). Incorporating lifestyle-based activities, such as active commuting or incidental movement, can further broaden participation across varied roles and routines (Peluso & Andrade, 2005; Pronk & Kottke, 2009). Ultimately, personalization is not just a feature of good program design, but a prerequisite for ensuring long-term engagement and organizational impact (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005; Sonnentag et al., 2023).

2.3.4 The Role of Incentives and Rewards

Incentives and rewards play a complex but essential role in employee engagement in workplace PA programs, while they can increase participation in the short term, their effectiveness for long-term engagement is debated (Calderwood et al., 2020; Szabó & Kajos, 2023). Financial rewards such as bonuses, insurance discounts, or subsidized memberships can boost short-term engagement (Gagné et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2010).

However, their long-term impact is limited, as participation often declines once these incentives are withdrawn (Auerbach, 2013; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010). Short-term approaches often overlook the importance of building lasting motivation, and relying too heavily on external rewards may hinder building the intrinsic motivation necessary for employees to continue once the initial novelty or reward wears off (Calderwood et al., 2020; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010). Research consistently shows that external rewards alone are insufficient; lasting participation depends on fostering internal drivers such as enjoyment, autonomy, and personal relevance (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010). Effective programs use incentives as an entry point – sparking initial interest while gradually cultivating intrinsic motivation such as non-monetary strategies, including team-based challenges, symbolic rewards, and social recognition, can enhance engagement without creating dependency (Gagné et al., 2015; Santos & Miragaia, 2023). Rather than emphasizing one-off incentives, organizations are encouraged to build a broader health-supportive culture that promotes well-being and long-term commitment, offering meaningful recognition, flexible fitness options, or ongoing accountability is often more successful than purely financial rewards (Antoni et al., 2017; Santos & Miragaia, 2023). Properly managed, these approaches avoid undermining intrinsic motivation and contribute to a workplace culture that values health and well-being, increasing attraction to top talent (Antoni et al., 2017; Auerbach, 2013; Whitsel et al., 2023).

2.3.5 Organizational and Cultural Barriers

The broader organizational environment – encompassing culture, leadership behavior, and structural conditions – plays a central role in shaping the success of workplace PA programs (Afrahi, 2024; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). In environments where productivity is prioritized over health, for example, the belief that “work always comes first”, employees may feel guilty for taking movement breaks or fear being perceived as uncommitted (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023; Chandrasekaran et al., 2024). Moreover, rigid time structures and distrust between managers and employees may create environments where wellness initiatives feel inaccessible or inauthentic (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005).

Managerial support is another critical factor, when managers actively model participation, allow time for activity, and communicate expectations clearly, employees feel empowered

to engage (Antoni et al., 2017; Friedman & Westring, 2015). Conversely, when leadership is disengaged or unrealistic performance pressures dominate, wellness efforts risk being sidelined or perceived as insincere (Auerbach, 2013; Szabó & Kajos, 2024). Moreover, employees are less likely to engage in wellness programs when initiatives are seen as serving corporate interests or as superficial branding (Afrahi, 2024; Mattke et al., 2013). Human Resource Management (HRM) Attribution Theory suggests that the success of any initiative depends not only on its design but on how employees perceive its purpose, making authenticity and transparency essential to establish trust (Shantz et al., 2016).

Infrastructure and environmental limitations also present practical obstacles to engagement (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). In open-plan offices or shared spaces, limited access to gyms, equipment, or private areas can discourage participation, especially among those already hesitant to exercise during the workday, therefore without supportive physical conditions, even well-intentioned programs may fail (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023; Whitsel et al., 2023).

Overcoming these barriers requires more than simply offering programs. Organizations must align policies, communication, and culture with employee well-being goals (Friedman &Westring, 2015; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010). This includes empowering managers, ensuring transparency, offering flexible options, and embedding wellness into the workday, not treating it as separate from work (Afrahi, 2024; Friedman & Westring, 2015). Culture and leadership support are essential for participation, while sustained engagement relies on consistent encouragement and visible support structures (Szabó & Kajos, 2023; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the study. Due to the research aim to understand not only *if* employees engage in PA programs, but *why, how,* and *under what conditions* such engagement occurs*,* the study draws on two complementary theories. The primary framework is Self-Determination Theory (SDT) – a well-established framework of human motivation that differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining behavioural engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). SDT is complemented by HRM Attribution Theory (Shantz et

al., 2016), focusing on how employees interpret the intent behind organizational practices and how this intent shapes behavioural responses. Together, these offer a dual framework that centers on both individual motivational experience (SDT) and the organizational signaling and interpretation process (HRM). This dual framework enables the exploration

3.1 Self-Determination Theory

SDT has been widely applied across fields such as health behaviour, workplace engagement, and exercise science, and is particularly relevant for understanding participation in workplace PA programs. SDT emphasizes not only whether individuals are motivated, but also *how* and *why.* SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which refers to engaging in PA for enjoyment, interest, or inherent satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external outcomes such as recognition, social pressure, or incentives. SDT emphasizes that the quality of motivation is important, not just its presence. Importantly, SDT conceptualizes motivation along a continuum of autonomy, ranging from external regulation (e.g., acting to avoid punishment or gain rewards) to integrated regulation, where behaviors fully align with one's identity and values. According to SDT, three basic psychological needs must be satisfied to foster autonomous motivation:

1. Autonomy: The need to feel volitional and in control of one's actions.
2. Competence: The need to feel effective and capable in one's activities.
3. Relatedness: The need to feel connected and supported by others (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

When these needs are met, individuals are more likely to internalize motivation, leading to sustained engagement and positive well-being outcomes (Silva et al., 2009). In workplace PA settings, research has shown that programs supporting these needs are more likely to drive lasting behavioral change (Fortier et al., 2012).

3.2 HRM Attribution Theory

To complement SDT, this study also draws on Human Resource Management (HRM) Attribution Theory (Shantz et al., 2016), which explores how employees interpret the organizational intent behind HR practices. This perspective suggests that employee responses are shaped not only by what is offered (e.g., PA programs) but by *why* they

believe it is being offered, whether as a sincere investment in well-being or a performance cost-driven strategy.

This distinction is particularly relevant in workplace wellness contexts. Programs perceived as inauthentic or instrumental may reduce perceived autonomy and diminish motivation and engagement. In contrast, initiatives perceived as genuine and aligned with employee values can build trust and enhance intrinsic motivation.

By integrating SDT and HRM Attribution Theory, this study adopts a holistic lens on motivation, recognizing it as shaped by both individual psychological needs and the broader organizational environment, including messaging, culture, and leadership behavior.

4. Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative research design to explore factors influencing participation in workplace PA programs. The following sections outline the study's design, the rationale for focusing on Swedish white-collar participations, sampling strategy, data collection process, and analytical approach. Further, the abductive logic and application of the Gioia method, along with reliability, validity, and research ethics considerations.

4.1 Research Design

Given the study's aim to understand subjective experiences, perceptions, and motivational drivers, a qualitative, abductive research design was adopted (Langley & Abdallah, 2011; well suited to capturing the nuances of complex and context-dependent phenomena (Bell et al., 2022), especially when seeking to explore how individuals make sense of organizational practices such as workplace PA programs. This design aligns with the study's exploratory focus, not testing fixed hypotheses but understanding how individuals interpret and relate to PA within their work environment (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Given the study's focus, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection (Flinders, 1997). This allowed for rich, open-ended questions and discussions and flexibility in adapting follow-up questions tailored to each participant while maintaining consistency across key themes (Bell et al., 2022).

4.2 Sample and Participation

This study centers on white-collar employees in Sweden, a country known for progressive wellness policies, yet one in which participation in workplace PA programs remains uneven (Gånedahl et al., 2015). While physical activity (PA) programs can benefit employees across sectors, occupational context profoundly shapes their design and impact. In Sweden, a country with a long-standing tradition of promoting workplace health, backed by national policies such as the *friskvårdsbidrag*, employers are expected to support employee well-being (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). This makes them particularly relevant for exploring PA motivation and organizational influence among this population.

Twelve white-collar employees working in Sweden were recruited through LinkedIn and connections established at career fairs. This sampling strategy aimed to capture a broad range of workplace cultures, expectations, and work structures that might shape behaviours and motivational patterns.

Further, the sample was selected without prior knowledge of participation, physical activity levels, lifestyle habits, or involvement in workplace PA programs. This approach was designed to minimize selection bias and allowed for a comprehensive exploration of both active and inactive individuals' experiences. Efforts were made to ensure gender diversity, with a final distribution of seven women and five men, contributing to a balanced and inclusive representation.

4.3 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted between March and April 2025 via Google Meet, each lasting approximately 25 to 35 minutes. An online format offered both logistical convenience and flexibility, enabling consistent scheduling across geographic locations and participants' professional routines (Bell et al., 2022). Both authors conducted all interviews, with one leading the discussion and the other managing logistical aspects such as note-taking and recording. Interviews were audio recorded using smartphone apps, allowing the authors to remain fully present and attentive to the dialogue in real time.

The interview guide (*see Appendix A*), shaped by the dual framework of SDT and HRM, was structured around five key thematic areas: participants’ general physical activity

routines, motivation to engage in physical activity, social influences in the workplace, perceptions of organizational culture and support, and perceived barriers to participation. This design ensured comparability across interviews, and the semi-structured format provided the flexibility for emerging unexpected themes and follow-up questions (Bell et al., 2022).

Before each interview, participants were briefed on the general research focus, framed broadly as an exploration of ‘mental and physical well-being at work’, without explicitly mentioning physical activity programs. This decision aimed to minimize bias, ensuring the responses reflect authentic experiences rather than being shaped by expectation or social desirability (Bell et al., 2022).

The authors transcribed all interviews manually, supporting deep familiarization with the data and allowing early analytical reflection. Each transcript was reviewed and cross-checked against the original recordings to ensure consistency and accuracy (Bell et al., 2022). Verbatim transcriptions were prioritized to capture participants' exact phrasing, tone, and nuance, ensuring the integrity of the data.

Table 4 below summarizes the interview participants, detailing their sector, professional role, gender, interview date, and duration. This overview provides transparency regarding the diversity of the sample and contextualizes the data collected during the fieldwork.

Interviewee	Company	Sector	Work Role	Gender	Date	Duration
Interviewee 1	1	Consulting	Commercial Consultant	Male	2025-04-03	33:06
Interviewee 2	1	Consulting	Project Manager	Female	2025-04-03	25:58
Interviewee 3	3	Tech/Consulting	SAP Consultant	Male	2025-04-03	25:04
Interviewee 4	3	Tech/Consulting	Strategy Analyst	Female	2025-04-04	27:07
Interviewee 5	3	Consulting	Technical Engineer	Male	2025-04-04	28:45
Interviewee 6	3	Consulting	Retail Consultant	Female	2024-04-04	25:18
Interviewee 7	1	Consulting	Management Consultant	Female	2024-04-04	26:19
Interviewee 8	1	Consulting	Business Analyst	Female	2025-04-08	28:36
Interviewee 9	3	Tech/Consulting	Business Analyst	Female	2025-04-09	27:54
Interviewee 10	1	Consulting	Junior Consultant	Female	2025-04-12	27:45
Interviewee 11	2	Finance	Partner Corporate Finance	Male	2025-04-12	32:10
Interviewee 12	2	Finance	Intern	Male	2025-04-12	30:01

Table 4: Summary of Interview Sample Characteristics

4.4 Analytical Approach

The interview data were analyzed using the Gioia Method, a structured approach to qualitative research designed to systematically move from empirical data to theoretical insight (Gioia et al., 2013). Although inspired by foundational principles of grounded theory (Scott & Glaser, 1971), the Gioia Method is distinct in its use of a structured coding hierarchy and its emphasis on researcher reflexivity and theory elaboration. The method has become widely adopted in organizational and management research for its rigor and transparency in capturing complex, socially constructed phenomena.

The analytical process consisted of three levels of coding. Firstly, identifying first-order concepts that closely reflected interviewees' language and experience. In the second stage, the first-order concepts were grouped into second-order themes that represented broader, researcher-led interpretations and abstracted patterns. The final coding step was to synthesize the second-order themes into aggregated dimensions, forming the analytical foundation of the study's findings and structuring the core categories addressing employee experience and motivation.

The analytical process was abductive in nature, allowing theoretical concepts to emerge in dialogue with empirical patterns (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). While our interpretation was informed by sensitizing concepts from motivation theory and workplace health literature, we remained attentive to unexpected insights and contradictions that surfaced through the data (Gioia et al., 2013). A detailed breakdown of the coding structure of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions is illustrated in *Appendix 3*.

4.5 Reliability & Validity

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the research process was a central concern throughout the study. Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalizability, it must meet standards of credibility, trustworthiness, and analytical rigor (Bell et al., 2022). All interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed by the authors, allowing for early familiarization with the data and reducing the risk of misinterpretation. Each transcript was reviewed and checked against the original recordings to ensure accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both researchers were actively involved in the analytical process, discussing coding interpretations and refining themes

throughout the data structuring. This collaborative approach contributed to internal reliability by ensuring consistent understanding and use of codes across the dataset.

Interpretive validity was strengthened by applying the Gioia Method (Gioia et al., 2013), which allowed for systematically organizing participant perspectives into higher-order themes. While the study does not aim for statistical generalizability, the inclusion of participants from different industries and roles supports the analytical relevance of the findings beyond a single organizational context. The use of sensitizing concepts from motivation theory and organizational literature informed the analysis, while openness to new or unexpected insights ensured that findings were grounded in the participants' own experiences.

Given the qualitative nature of this study and the specific context in which it was conducted, the findings cannot be generalized to all populations or settings. While the results reflect the experiences of participants in this particular context and may offer insights into similar situations, their transferability to other contexts is limited and should be considered with caution.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards and GDPR requirements were carefully adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before each interview. Participants were informed of the study's purposes, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and how the data would be handled confidentially.

All identifying information was removed during transcription to protect participant anonymity, and findings were reported without personal identifiers. Interview data were securely stored and accessible only to the authors, ensuring compliance with data protection standards (Bell et al., 2022).

5. Findings & Analysis

The following section presents the findings derived from the 12 interviews. The results are organised around the themes identified through the Gioia methodology, reflecting participants' perceptions of, and engagement with, workplace PA programs. The structure

follows the key dimensions that emerged during the coding process: intrinsic and extrinsic factors and organizational conditions. Each theme is illustrated with selected quotes to highlight common patterns, contradictions, and the nuances of employee experiences. A visual overview of the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and overarching dimensions is presented in *Appendix 3*.

5.1 Participant and Organizational Context

This section provides contextual background on the participants' professional roles and physical activity routines to illustrate how movement is integrated into their everyday lives. As outlined in *Table 4,* participants held various roles across three white-collar organizations; one investment banking firm and two consulting firms. Reported PA levels ranged from 0 to 7 sessions per week. Most described an average workweek of 40 to 55 hours, with some exceeding 60 hours during peak periods. This variation in workload and working structure shaped how, when, and to what extent physical activity was incorporated into daily routines. Participants fell into three broad categories: *highly active, intermittently active,* and *low activity*, which emerged consistently across the interviews. *Table 5* below provides an overview of these profiles.

Activity Level	Description
Highly Active	Small subset that consistently engaged in both structured exercise and incidental movement, often supported by active commuting. These individuals had consistent routines and frequently exercised during early mornings or lunchtime workouts, as well as evenings and weekends.
Intermittently Active	Majority of participants. Had established routines but faced frequent disruptions from workload or life logistics. PA varied week to week and was mostly scheduled outside work hours, often before or after work.
Low Activity	Small group with minimal workday activity, often relying on passive commuting and sporadic movement. Although they expressed a desire to be more active, they struggled to maintain consistent routines.

Table 5: Emerging Participant Profiles[3]

[3] *Note: Categorization is based on self-reported behaviors and perceptions during interviews. The categories are analytical abstractions and do not imply fixed or mutually exclusive participant identities.*

All three companies offered some form of workplace physical activity (PA) initiatives, but the extent varied. A shared feature across all organizations was the provision of the *friskvårdsbidrag* (Swedish wellness allowance) to all full-time employees. Incentives ranged from full subsidies to partial discounts, and PA programs were either centrally organized by designated teams or informally driven by employees.

Company 1: Offers a highly extensive range of daily structured physical activity options, including daily external group fitness classes (e.g., Barry's Bootcamp, Ignite) and informal employee-led initiatives like running clubs and team sports. Activities were bookable via a dedicated company app. Offerings were fully sponsored, with additional budgets available for employee-organised initiatives. The company also provided membership discounts and subsidized more niche or high-cost activities such as horse-riding, golf, climbing, and skiing trips.

Company 2: Offered substantial structured physical activity options, including external fitness classes and swimming lessons with a trainer, all fully funded by the company. Activities were available several times per week. Informal initiatives included a running club and participation in races or events, which the company also sponsored.

Company 3: More limited offering. Provided free in-office gym access and bi-weekly personal trainer classes, fully covered by the company. Employees also received discounts on sports equipment (e.g., bicycles and external memberships). There were also various employee initiatives such as a running club.

Perceptions of PA offerings

In this study, employee perceptions of workplace physical activity (PA) offerings are conceptualized as a moderating factor influencing whether motivation leads to participation. These perceptions function as a contextual filter, reinforcing or weakening the translation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation into behavior. Prior research has shown that even when motivation is present, participation may not occur if PA initiatives are perceived as irrelevant, inaccessible, or uncomfortable (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). Including perceptions as a distinct theme in our findings

therefore reflects their role in shaping how motivation is interpreted, enacted, or constrained within real organizational settings. See *Appendix 2* for the illustration.

Participants expressed a range of impressions about the workplace physical activity (PA) offerings, with most highlighting a positive view. Most appreciated the existence of structured programs and interpreted them as a sign of company support, for example, as a "great offer from [employer], such a luxury" (Interviewee 8; Company 1). Some noted that these offerings made it easier to stay active, describing them as motivating and well-intentioned. This positive framing was especially strong among those who felt that the activities were relevant to them and aligned with their preferences or routines. Although the quantity of offerings varied by company, the positive perceptions did not.

Many participants even described a shift in how they relate to physical activity since entering full-time work. For some, physical activity had become more important or intentional as they adjusted to more sedentary routines. Several reflected that while their activity level hadn't necessarily increased, their mindset had changed, and they now planned more consciously to include movement throughout the week.

> *"Movement feels more important now because I sit a lot. I have to plan my workouts intentionally." (Interviewee 4; Company 1)*

> *"Overall, my perception about it has become a lot more positive. Just because people here are pretty active." (Interviewee 12; Company 2)*

However, not all participants felt the programs suited their needs. Some described a mismatch between the activities offered and their own fitness level or preferences. These interviewees expressed a desire for more beginner-friendly or varied options, suggesting that the current range skewed toward more advanced or intense workouts.

> *"The threshold should be lower, and the things that are offered right now are pretty high fitness standards. I would like more beginner-friendly [activities]" (Interviewee 8; Company 1)*

Others highlighted that even when the offerings were appreciated, logistical issues could still hinder participation, such as limited session spots. Additionally, a few participants noted low attendance in certain group workouts, which they felt reduced motivation and

overall atmosphere. In these cases, positive impressions of the initiative did not necessarily translate into regular use or engagement. The findings suggest that while the program was generally well-received, its effectiveness in supporting physical activity depended on other factors.

5.2 Intrinsic Factors

Perceived benefits

Interviewees frequently described physical activity (PA) as a powerful source of immediate enjoyment, emotional relief, and mental clarity – motivators that were central to sustaining engagement. Rather than exercising for long-term fitness goals, participants often framed PA as a daily reset or a way to manage short-term stress. Many interviewees noted shifts in their cognitive state after physical activity, describing clearer thinking, reduced stress, and improved focus. Interviewee 5 (Company 3) likened the effect of a workout to a "reboot that improves the day".

> *"It's a game changer! That's why this is a reminder to myself to do it more. You get more energy, resistance to stress, and [it is] mood changing. You show up to the job and you are a more fun colleague and have more confidence." (Interviewee 8; Company 1)*

This aligns with previous research highlighting the role of immediate emotional effect of PA, known as affective reward that plays a key role in sustaining long- term engagement. Thøgersen-Ntoumani and Fox (2005) emphasize that emotional uplift can be a stronger predictor of exercise adherence than distant health benefits. Similarly, Li et al. (2024) stress the importance of day-to-day mood regulation over abstract long-term goals. Our findings support this: interviewees were more likely to engage in PA when it offered immediate psychological benefit, primarily to 'reset' during demanding work days rather than to meet abstract fitness targets.

Yet this intrinsic motivation was often fragile. The very periods when PA was most needed, during high stress or fatigue, were also when participation dropped. This reveals a central tension: organizational demands created the emotional need for PA but simultaneously constrained employees' ability to engage in it. Even when motivation was high, competing responsibilities or fatigue made participation feel impractical or guilt-inducing. This

pattern is consistent with previous research showing that demanding job roles – marked by long hours, intense workloads, and unpredictable schedules – often leave employees too fatigued to engage in physical activity, even when intrinsically motivated (Chandrasekaran et al., 2024; Santos & Miragaia, 2023).

> *"When things are stressful, that's when I need it most. But that's also when it feels impossible to prioritize it." (Interviewee 7; Company 3)*

This suggests that although intrinsic motivation thrives when autonomy and competence is supported (Deci & Ryan, 2000), our findings highlight how stress, guilt, and time pressure can quickly undermine it. Even intrinsically motivated participation therefore depends on organisational conditions that legitimise breaks and protect employees from feeling guilty about using them. This underscores a central point: if companies aim to sustain intrinsic motivation for PA, they must create the conditions that enable employees to act on it.

Routine & Discipline

For several participants, motivation to engage in physical activity was not described as a daily decision but rather as an internally driven product of consistency and habit. Over time, PA became integrated into daily routines, requiring little active thought and was described as a "natural part of a normal day" (Interviewee 11; Company 2). This sense of rhythm was often reinforced through discipline: participants emphasized the importance of following through regardless of how they felt in the moment. Routine was not only what enabled participation, but also what made it sustainable over time. For some, this regularity also became part of their identity. This routinisation aligns with SDT theory: when behaviours become self-endorsed and identity-driven, they require less deliberate motivation to sustain (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

> *"Planning out your workouts and sticking to something you told yourself you would do. That's a really good motivator for me. I think it's just a lot about mindset. I try not to think too much about motivation, but rather just going there, knowing that I'll like it once I'm there. I don't try to feel too much. It's more about discipline." (Interviewee 4; Company 1)*

However, other interviewees pointed out how fragile this habit could be. When disrupted, several described a rapid decline in motivation and a sense of falling out of sync, making it

much harder to resume the habit again. As interviewee 7 (Company 3) pointed out: *"Unfortunately, I think it's a negative spiral. When I don't work out, I get more tired, and then it's harder for me to get back into a routine."* This suggests that external disruptions can override strong intrinsic motivation even when habits are internalized. Our findings highlight a critical tension: intrinsic drivers like identity and enjoyment are not always enough to sustain engagement when conditions become unfavourable. While most participants described supportive environments, these did not consistently protect routines from breaking down. This nuance refines SDT by showing that autonomous motivation, once interrupted, is challenging to recover, even when deeply embedded. This highlights that motivation is not only context-dependent, but also vulnerable to disruption over time, particularly once momentum is lost.

5.3 Extrinsic Factors

Workload & Role Conflicts

Time constraints and demanding workloads were among the most common barriers to physical activity participation. Even when intentions to be active were strong, participation was often deprioritized in favour of more immediate tasks like meetings or client demands. These barriers were not only about limited time, but also about how time was unpredictable. Energy depletion further compounded the issue: late work nights or high-intensity weeks left employees physically and mentally drained, even when time was technically available. Participants described having windows for PA, but the windows were too narrow or unstable.

> *"Yes, I'd say workload affects it a lot. When they [clients] schedule meetings around 1 PM, I hate that! It makes everything tighter, and I usually end up skipping my workout or doing something shorter at home." (Interviewee 5; Company 3).*

> *"If you've been working half the night, it's hard to get up early for swimming in that case." (Interviewee 12; Company 2)*

As aforementioned, stress and other unfavorable conditions disrupt intrinsic motivation. What emerges more clearly here, however, is a structural dynamic: high-intensity work periods not only affect how employees feel about their ability to participate in PA, but also shape the design of their day in ways that actively prevent it. Client demands, back-to-back

meetings, and shifting schedules often absorbed all available capacity – leaving employees physically and structurally unable to act on their intentions. While previous research consistently identifies time pressure as a barrier (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005), our findings extend this by showing how time scarcity in white-collar roles, particularly consulting and client-facing roles, is often the result of specific organisational tempo. This aligns with prior research showing that when working hours regularly exceed 45–50 per week, as is common in such roles, employees increasingly prioritize recovery over physical activity due to cumulative fatigue and lack of personal time (Kirk & Rhodes, 2011). PA programs are offered and supported in theory, but not synchronized with the work rhythms of the employees they're meant to support. This misalignment turns motivation into a background variable: irrelevant if participation is structurally unfeasible.

Work-Life Balance & Guilt

Some participants also described how obligations beyond work shaped their physical activity decisions. For some, particularly those with children, PA was not compatible with their current life stage – after work hours were reserved for family responsibilities or rest. Others described a need to protect their limited free time, especially after long workdays, leading them to avoid PA that clashed with personal recovery.

> *"I sometimes feel like I don't have the time personally and I want to prioritize other stuff. Like spending time with my girlfriend if I've worked late." (Interviewee 12; Company 2)*
> *"I already have so little time in the evenings. If the company puts on a 6pm run, I'm not going to use that as my one hour of freedom." (Interviewee 8; Company 1)*

Participants also often experienced guilt for taking time out for physical activity during the workday, even though it was formally allowed and encouraged by all three companies. Several noted feeling uncomfortable leaving their desks or taking part in visible PA breaks, worried that it might signal a lack of commitment or professionalism.

> *"You want to be healthy, but you also want to be available and not seem like you're prioritizing the wrong thing." (Interviewee 3; Company 1)*

Our findings show that participation is not only shaped by availability but by employees' internal negotiation of professional norms. Even when activities were encouraged, many participants described feeling that taking time out risked being misinterpreted as uncommitted or less productive, consistent with a psychosocial barriers rooted in cultural expectations around visibility, responsibility, and self-management, particularly in environments in which 'work always comes first' (Halling Ullberg et al., 2023; Chandrasekaran et al., 2024). When employees anticipate judgment or feel compelled to justify their actions, the motivational climate shifts from autonomous to controlled (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, this aligns with HRM Attribution Theory: employees may opt out entirely when they are unsure about the genuine purpose of initiatives (Schantz et al., 2016). In this way, emotional hesitation around PA is not merely personal, but profoundly shaped by how people interpret the meaning and social acceptability in their organisational context.

Social Dynamics

Social influence played a central role in shaping participants' engagement with physical activity. Many described how active colleagues and shared routines supported participation, especially when individual motivation was low. Peer visibility, casual encouragement, and group habits helped normalise PA and created a subtle sense of accountability.

> *"If I'm very tired today and I've had a stressful day... that's why I like this kind of group thing, because then you just can't skip out." (Interviewee 2; Company 3)*

Seeing others prioritize exercise was a source of motivation for many, while others simply felt encouraged by the presence of an active culture. It was also framed as a source of social connection, encouraging interaction across departments and cultivating a more relaxed, inclusive work environment. Participants valued opportunities to build new friendships and feel more integrated into the workplace.

> *"It's not just about staying healthy, it's about enjoying being at work, feeling connected. When you meet someone first at training and then you run into them again at the office, you kind of have a new friend you can chat with at the coffee machine." (Interviewee 4; Company 1)*

However, these same social dynamics could also take on a more ambiguous tone. While PA was technically optional, visibility and group participation made non-attendance more noticeable in some cases, prompting guilt or anxiety. Others described how encouragement could blur into obligation, especially when participation was interpreted as a signal of commitment or professionalism.

> *"Sometimes it's like, 'Yeah, why didn't you show up?' It's not in a negative way… but it makes you feel like you have to."* (Interviewee 2; Company 3)

While participation is technically voluntary, subtle social expectations can reshape how "free" a choice feels, especially when visibility and workplace norms reward participation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Our findings show how the same social environment can simultaneously enable and constrain engagement. Significantly, these pressures also interacted with participants' competence beliefs: anxiety often emerged in response to perceived fitness norms or skill comparisons. Rather than feeling inspired, some felt self-conscious or inadequate. This highlights the need to nurture competence as part of social encouragement, aligning with SDT's view that support for autonomy must go hand-in-hand with support for competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When participation is inclusive and informal, it fosters belonging. But when it becomes linked to visibility, reputation, or perceived standards, it risks undermining both autonomy and engagement

Balancing Intrinsic and Extrinsic Drivers

Importantly, many participants described experiences where extrinsic and intrinsic motivations coexisted. For example, a wellness benefit might encourage initial participation, which becomes enjoyable and self-sustaining. This transition from extrinsic to more integrated forms of motivation is supported by SDT and illustrates the potential for thoughtful program design to foster deeper engagement over time (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants noted that when exercise aligned with their personal goals or values, external incentives felt less controlling and more motivating, illustrating how integration occurs. Our findings affirm this trajectory while pointing to its fragility: extrinsic motivators may disrupt rather than facilitate internalization if they are perceived as manipulative or overly directive.

Together, these insights suggest that extrinsic motivators play a nuanced role in workplace PA engagement. Extrinsic rewards and pressures must resonate with employees' own values and sense of competence: only then can they complement autonomy rather than undermine it. Their impact depends not only on the incentives themselves, but on how they are situated within broader organizational culture and individual interpretation. Recognizing this complexity is key to designing interventions that leverage extrinsic motivation without compromising autonomy or long-term adherence.

5.4 Organizational Factors

Autonomy and Flexibility

Across interviews, autonomy emerged as a foundational condition for engaging in physical activity. Participants valued being able to choose when, how, and whether to participate, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and the absence of formal pressure. This autonomy was often framed as part of a broader culture of trust and self-management, where participation in PA was not enforced, but enabled.

> *"I have enough flexibility to participate when I want to. No pressure to be at the office at a certain time or anything." (Interviewee 2; Company 3)*

These accounts reflect a perception of freedom highly valued by employees, particularly in organisations where output-based performance models enable day-to-day autonomy. However, this flexibility was not equally experienced across all roles or situations. Client-facing staff, for instance, described more constrained windows of autonomy, where they felt that stepping away for physical activity during working hours, though formally allowed, would be viewed as professionally inappropriate. Notably, autonomy was sometimes framed as a responsibility; something to be handled with care. Participants described how flexibility came with a sense of responsibility to align with professional expectations. In practice, this meant making ongoing judgments about whether using time for PA felt appropriate, particularly during busy periods. Employees considered how their choices might be interpreted even in supportive environments, suggesting that autonomy was negotiated, not simply granted.

This finding highlights a distinction between formal and experienced autonomy. As aforementioned, from a Self-Determination Theory perspective, autonomy depends not only on the availability of choice, but on whether individuals perceive those choices as viable and acceptable within their work context (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In deadline-driven roles, employees often monitored themselves, weighing whether participation in physical activity would appear legitimate or appropriate. Thus, autonomy was shaped as much by informal expectations as by formal policy. Providing structural flexibility may enable participation in theory, but it is insufficient if employees do not feel free to act on it in practice. Organisational support must therefore include both policy and clear cultural signals that reinforce the acceptability of using that autonomy.

Supportive Culture of Health

Many participants described a workplace culture that actively legitimised physical activity, reducing internal resistance and making participation feel acceptable. PA was not seen as questioned or frowned upon, even during busy periods, and several interviewees noted that this cultural tone helped lower the psychological barrier to taking breaks. Participants framed physical activity as part of a broader culture of well-being, and initiatives were viewed as genuine efforts to promote balance and health, contributing to a positive perception of the organizational environment. Participants also highlighted the influence of managerial behaviour; when managers visibly blocked off time for exercise, this contributed to PA being perceived as an accepted norm, reinforcing evidence that leaders' own health behaviours set powerful normative expectations (Antoni et al., 2017).

> *"We're trying as much as we can to have a good balance between work, time off, and physical activities. I think we have managed to create a culture that people like to work in. Apart from pure physical activities, we try to do other activities together – to build an environment where it's a social place for everybody. So whether it's an after-work event, a dinner, or another activity, we try to foster that environment."* (Interviewee 11; Company 2)

These impressions reflect research that leadership support and visible role-modelling are critical to embedding physical activity into organisational culture and enhancing participation. Research highlights that organisations that cultivate a strong culture of

health, rather than simply offering programs, see stronger engagement and more sustainable behavioural change (Friedman & Westring, 2015; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010).

However, some noted limitations. A few mentioned the absence of action after internal wellness surveys, or that participation still relied heavily on individual initiative, raising questions about how deeply wellness was prioritized. This reflects broader concerns in the literature that perceived insincerity, lack of follow-through, or poor visibility can weaken trust and undermine internalisation of wellness goals (Shantz et al., 2016). This also highlights the need for organisations to support both autonomy and competence; employees need not only the freedom to act, but an environment that enables and normalises those actions through reliable systems and credible leadership signals (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Our findings show that a culture of health, while broadly motivating, is not inherently sufficient: its effectiveness depends on consistent managerial reinforcement, visible follow-through, and the translation of shared values into everyday operational norms. This nuance helps clarify how perceived support can drift toward performative if not anchored in tangible, sustained practices.

6. Discussion

This section discusses how the motivational dynamics behind participation in workplace physical activity (PA) programs are shaped, drawing directly on the study's research question: *What factors influence Swedish white-collar employees' motivation to engage in workplace PA programs?* Building on the empirical findings, the discussion explores how motivation is influenced by contextual shifts, autonomy, social belonging, and perceived organizational intent. These themes are critically interpreted using Self-Determination Theory and HRM Attribution Theory to examine not just whether employees are motivated, but how and under what conditions motivation translates into action. The discussion aims to clarify the complex interplay between individual drivers, social expectations, and organizational culture in shaping engagement outcomes.

Fluidity and Contextual Shifts

Participants described motivation to engage in physical activity (PA) as highly context-dependent and sensitive to shifting workplace conditions. Workload fluctuations and other daily stressors regularly changed how employees related to PA, often within the same day. An activity initially experienced as personally rewarding could quickly become a source of stress when organisational demands intensified or communication became unclear. Prior literature has examined how situational demands affect recovery and motivation, and our findings align with these by showing that motivation is not fixed but highly responsive to evolving work conditions (Calderwood et al., 2020; Sonnentag et al., 2023). However, the immediacy and subtlety with which participants described shifts in motivation, sometimes occurring within the span of a single day, suggest a temporal nuance that may be less emphasized in existing research.

Our study contributes to this literature by illustrating how even well-internalised motivation can diminish without enabling structures. Contrary to SDT's suggestion that intrinsic motivation becomes self-sustaining once basic psychological needs are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we found that value alignment alone was often insufficient. Even interviewees who deeply valued PA described being unable to act on their intentions during periods of stress, fatigue, or high workload. This highlights a critical tension: the very conditions that made PA feel most essential also made it practically inaccessible. Notably, this pattern was particularly evident in client-facing roles, where unpredictable schedules and externally driven priorities created distinct constraints. These findings point to the need to move beyond generalised accounts of "white-collar" work and consider how specific organisational contexts shape the viability of motivation. We suggest that intrinsic motivation is not only context-sensitive, but also dependent on the continuous presence of structural, temporal, and cultural support.

Moreover, our findings show that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations often coexisted and shifted over time. External incentives like wellness subsidies often initiated participation, but only led to sustained engagement when the activity was emotionally rewarding or aligned with one's sense of identity. This supports SDT's account of internalisation but adds a contrast: the success of internalisation depends on how organisational signals are interpreted. When incentives were seen as misaligned with personal goals or perceived as

performative, they diminished autonomy and disengaged participants. Our study offers a practical perspective on how these motivational dynamics unfold in complex organizational environments, shaped not only by program design, but also by how support is interpreted within everyday pressures.

The Autonomy-Pressure Paradox

A recurring theme in the interviews was the paradox of autonomy. Many participants valued the flexibility to choose how and when to engage in PA, viewing autonomy as a motivating factor. However, when this formal freedom was not accompanied by visible organisational support or normative legitimacy, it often generated a sense of internal pressure. Several participants described feeling that they "should" be participating, even when their workload made it unrealistic. These accounts resonate with prior findings that emphasize the need for genuine autonomy support, rather than simply the absence of pressure, in sustaining motivation (Antoni et al., 2017; Szabó & Kajos, 2024).

While previous literature has highlighted autonomy as a key condition for engagement in workplace PA, it often conceptualizes autonomy in structural terms, such as the voluntary nature of programmes (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2005). Our findings nuance this by showing that autonomy is not just about the availability of choice, but the subjective perception that those choices are free from judgment, obligation, or subtle social expectations. Participants consistently highlighted that even well-intentioned reminders from colleagues or managers, such as invitations to join a session, could shift motivation from self-endorsed to strategic compliance. The perception that one's actions were being watched or interpreted often produced guilt, rather than motivation, especially when tied to implicit cultural expectations of being "healthy" or "committed."

This distinction between formal and perceived autonomy is underexplored in existing research on PA participation. We build on recent studies that acknowledge the influence of social context by showing how even informal cues, like workplace banter, manager tone, or group norms, shaped whether employees felt truly free to opt in or out (Calderwood et al., 2020; Halling Ullberg et al., 2023). In some cases, this pressure was internalised as a sense of obligation to conform to a health-conscious image or to avoid disappointing teammates. In others, the absence of explicit managerial endorsement created uncertainty about whether participation was genuinely encouraged or merely tolerated. Direct

assurances that opting out was acceptable helped some employees restore a sense of volition, but this was inconsistent across organisations and roles.

Our findings highlight that autonomy in workplace PA is not binary but relational, experienced through a complex interplay of social signals, perceived legitimacy, and organisational climate. While formal structures may offer freedom, autonomy is only motivating when a culture of psychological safety and recognition accompanies it. This challenges overly individualised accounts of motivation and suggests that fostering sustained engagement requires careful attention to how choice is socially framed, not just whether it exists.

Social Belonging vs. Social Conformity

Our findings reveal that social interaction in the workplace plays an ambiguous motivational role. While prior research has consistently shown that peer environments can enhance motivation through relatedness and social support, our study highlights how the same mechanisms can generate conformity pressure when participation becomes tied to social norms or identity expectations (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2010). We show how social support and pressure often coexist and are intertwined in the same interactions.

Employees frequently described a shift from community to compliance when participation began to signal belonging, discipline, or reputation. The value of being part of a health-positive group was clear, but so was the negative: pressure to perform, fear of letting others down, or discomfort at visible recognition practices. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature suggesting that group dynamics are not uniformly inclusive (Calderwood et al., 2020). In particular, we show how the interaction between relatedness and competence can shape perceived legitimacy. Participants who felt less fit or confident were more likely to interpret group-based activities as exclusive or performative, undermining their motivation to participate.

We find that social belonging and conformity operate not as opposites, but as dual forces shaping the quality of motivation in real organisational life. Relatedness is not inherently positive: it can tip into obligation or anxiety when left unmanaged. For organisations, this highlights the importance of cultivating PA cultures that balance inclusivity with

psychological safety, where participation is genuinely voluntary, and social encouragement does not drift into normative pressure or performance expectations.

Support vs. Instrumental Intent

A final theme examined how employees interpreted the authenticity and intent behind managerial support for workplace PA programmes, and how these interpretations influenced their motivation to engage. While almost all had positive views of the offerings and described a positive and supportive culture in relation to PA, perceptions of organisational intent still varied. Some viewed the initiatives as genuine investments in employee well-being, especially when senior leaders actively modelled participation. Others were more sceptical, perceiving the initiatives as symbolic or instrumental – designed to signal care, promote productivity, or enhance employer branding. This aligns with research on HRM Attribution Theory (Shantz et al., 2016), which shows that employees' interpretations of *why* HR practices exist shape their motivation and engagement.

Our findings suggest that trust in organisational intent is shaped through ongoing experiences with leadership visibility, communication tone, and follow-through on employee input. Participants described how initial enthusiasm could erode when initiatives felt disconnected from employee realities, or when leadership failed to model participation consistently. While perceived support may increase receptivity (Friedman & Westring, 2015), our study shows that participation depends equally on whether support is viewed as credible, responsive, and sustained.

We also contribute by emphasizing that provision alone does not ensure meaningful engagement. Participants noted that they often failed to integrate with actual routines and needs, even when initiatives were appreciated. This echoes findings in broader workplace wellness research while extending them by highlighting how interpretations of intent mediate the gap between motivation and action (Szabó & Kajos, 2023). Initiatives perceived as performative or generic often lacked resonance, leading to disengagement despite positive attitudes. Our findings suggest that participation improves when employees perceive initiatives as personally relevant, co-created, and authentically supported – conditions that build trust and reinforce motivational alignment over time.

7. Managerial Implications

These insights suggest that motivation in workplace PA programs is shaped not only by structural and relational factors but also by how employees interpret and respond to them. Programs that are flexible, well-communicated, and ingrained in a culture of genuine support are more likely to foster sustainable engagement. This requires attention not only to what is offered but also to how it is perceived and legitimized by those it aims to reach.

To help managers foster sustainable participation in workplace physical activity (PA) programs, four strategic recommendations are presented below.

1. *Align initiatives with a clearly communicated purpose.*
   Employees engage more readily when they see a direct connection between a documented need, such as stress-survey results, and the PA opportunities offered. Management should establish this link at program launch, report progress at regular intervals, and visibly participate themselves (for example, by scheduling their own sessions during core hours). Such consistency and transparent communication signal that exercise is a legitimate part of work rather than a symbolic add-on.

2. *Provide flexibility that is supported by explicit structure.*
   While flexibility is valued, it must be supported by structural clarity. Otherwise, ambiguity can turn autonomy into pressure. Organisations should offer multiple formats (brief energy resets, longer classes, beginner-friendly options, digital options) and publish clear participation norms: attendance is voluntary, workload reprioritization is acceptable, and opting out carries no penalty. Concrete logistical cues, such as booking links, facility-capacity indicators, or reminder e-mails, translate choice into action.

3. *Remove financial and social barriers.*

   Cost-free or fully subsidized classes eliminate a key obstacle. Equally important is cultivating a supportive climate that avoids implicit comparison. Peer-led groups and stories highlighting diverse activity types (stretching, walking meetings, meditation) endorse participation without mandating a single “correct” mode.

Visible encouragement should not slip into attendance monitoring or public leaderboards, which risk shifting motivation from voluntary to compliance-driven.

4. *Integrate PA into workload rhythms and iterate responsively.*
   Participation drops when classes clash with project deadlines or peak demand periods. Managers can protect engagement by positioning sessions at natural slack points (e.g., late afternoon) and adjusting schedules during intensive project phases. Combining attendance data with brief qualitative feedback each quarter allows underused offerings to be retired and new formats to be piloted. This iterative approach demonstrates organisational responsiveness and sustains relevance over time.

When PA initiatives are purpose-led, flexibly structured, cost-conscious, socially supportive, and routinely updated, employees are more likely to view participation as a self-endorsed component of their working day rather than an external obligation.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing Swedish white-collar employees' participation in workplace physical activity (PA) programs, focusing on how motivation is shaped and sustained in everyday organizational contexts. By shifting the lens from program design to employee experience, our findings underscore a central insight: motivation is highly contextual, fluid, and sensitive to both structural and social environments. Even deeply held intentions to be active can be disrupted by time pressure, shifting norms, or ambiguous cultural signals, revealing that participation is not merely a matter of willpower, but of organizational design and interpretation.

While Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that fulfilling basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters sustained motivation, our findings complicate this picture. Intrinsic motivation – such as emotional regulation, enjoyment, and identity alignment – was often present, yet fragile. During periods of high stress or client demands, these drivers were easily overshadowed by logistical constraints or feelings of guilt. This highlights a critical paradox: the conditions that make physical activity most needed are often the same conditions that make it least accessible.

The experience of autonomy emerged as relational rather than absolute. Although employees were formally free to engage in PA, their perceived autonomy was shaped by implicit norms, team dynamics, and managerial behavior. Autonomy was often negotiated, and subtle social or managerial pressure frequently shifted motivation from self-endorsed to compliance-driven. This distinction between formal and felt autonomy underscores that motivation is embedded in its social context. Social dynamics further illustrated this complexity. While group activities fostered belonging and motivation for some, they also introduced comparison, anxiety, and conformity pressure, particularly for those lacking confidence. Belonging and conformity thus coexisted, influencing both participation and the quality of motivation. Finally, employees' interpretations of organizational intent proved critical. Even well-resourced programs had limited impact if perceived as instrumental rather than genuine. Drawing on HRM Attribution Theory, this finding highlights the role of trust, authenticity, and consistent leadership in sustaining long-term engagement.

In conclusion, workplace PA programs must be designed not only around access and incentives but also around a nuanced understanding of employee experience. Motivation is not fixed – it shifts with context, culture, workload, and perception. Organizations seeking to foster long-term engagement must therefore go beyond structural provision to build cultures that genuinely support autonomy, normalize self-care, and adapt to the lived realities of their workforce. These findings have important implications for theory and practice, offering a more human-centered and context-aware approach to workplace wellness.

9. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into how Swedish white-collar employees experience and interpret workplace physical activity (PA) programs, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a relatively small sample of twelve participants, drawn from three companies within the Swedish corporate sector. While efforts were made to ensure variation in roles, industries, and activity levels, the sample is not representative of the broader workforce. As participation in the study was voluntary, self-selection bias is possible, as individuals with stronger options or interest in PA may have been more inclined to take part. Despite efforts to reduce social desirability bias,

perceived expectations may have shaped responses. Additionally, each participant was interviewed only once; the study captures a moment in time. Although participants reflected on fluctuations in motivation related to workload, stress, and social dynamics, longitudinal or diary-based research could provide richer insight into how these dynamics evolve over time. Finally, the study focused on Self-Determination Theory and HRM Attribution Theory to explore motivational dynamics. Future research could benefit from integrating complementary theoretical perspectives to better understand how norms, emotions, and identity shape participation. Exploring differences across demographics or job roles may also reveal how structural and social conditions differently affect engagement. Together, these avenues offer potential to deepen understanding of how workplace PA initiatives can be designed to be not only inclusive, but meaningfully supportive of diverse employee needs and motivational patterns.

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AI Transparency note

The authors independently produced all content and analysis, and no AI-generated material was included unless critically reviewed, verified, and refined by the authors themselves. Table 5 below summarizes the tools used to support the writing and editing process.

Table 5: Digital tools used

Tool	Purpose	Use Description
Mybib	Reference generation	Used to generate APA citations. All entries were manually reviewed and cross-checked for formatting accuracy and source integrity.
Chat GPT-4	Language refinement and structural improvement	Used to improve clarity, sentence flow, and academic structure. No original content was generated; all outputs were based on author-written material.
Grammarly	Grammar and language correction	Used to correct grammar, spelling, and syntax issues. Helped enhance overall language quality and academic tone.

Note: The authors critically evaluated all tool outputs and took care to avoid overreliance. All facts, arguments, and interpretations are based on the authors' own work, and raw data was not uploaded to external platforms. Potential risks of misinformation were mitigated through manual fact-checking and critical review.

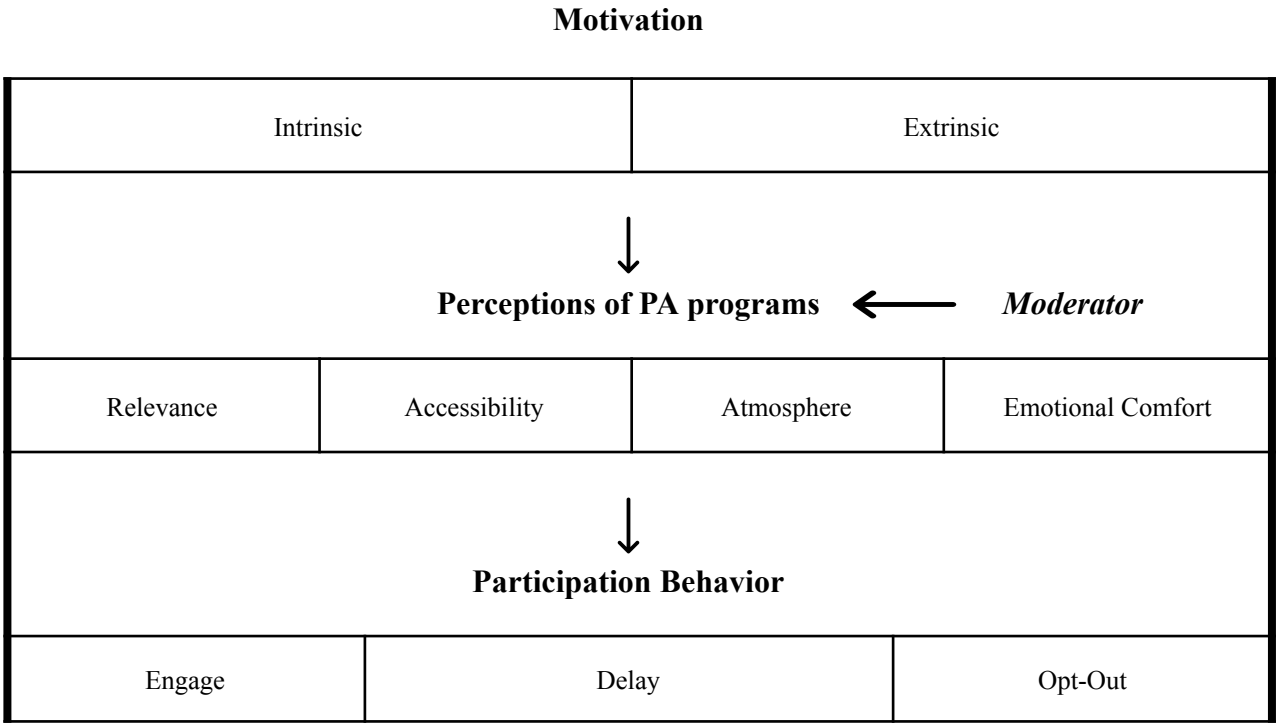
11. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide in English

Section	Topic	Questions
Opening	Role & Daily Life	- Could you tell me a bit about yourself—your role, the kind of work you do, and what your workday typically looks like? - What are your current working hours like?
1. Workday Movement & Activity Opportunities	General Physical Activity	- What role does physical activity play in your life more broadly? - How would you describe the amount of movement in your day-to-day life? - When during the day do you usually work out?
	Company Initiatives	- Does your employer offer any physical activity initiatives or programs (e.g., gym access, group classes)? - Have you taken part in any of them? What was your impression—appeal, effectiveness, relevance? - If not, why do you think you haven't participated?
	Environment & Change	- How does your work environment (time, culture, physical setup) influence your ability to be active? - Has your relationship to exercise changed since starting your current job? - How does being active—or not—affect how you feel at work (e.g., energy, mood, stress)?
2. Motivation in Everyday Life	Motivational Factors	- What usually motivates you when you choose to be physically active (at work or outside of work)? - What demotivates you? - Are there any patterns that affect your motivation (e.g., time of day, energy level, social context)?
	Company vs. Personal	- When you do physical activity during the workday, is it through the company or something you do independently? - Can you describe a time when it was hard to engage in activity? What made it difficult?
3. Social Aspects & Belonging	Social Influence	- How do your colleagues influence your physical activity habits (positively or negatively)? - Have any group activities made you feel more connected to your coworkers?
4. Incentives, Culture & Flexibility	Support & Rewards	- To what extent do you feel supported by your employer or colleagues to stay active? - Has your employer offered any rewards, recognition, or encouragement for participation? How did that affect you? - Are these free of charge? Was budget allocated (e.g., Friskvårdsbidrag)?
	Workplace Culture	- How would you describe the culture around physical activity in your workplace?

5. Barriers & Ideal Setup	Challenges & Suggestions	- What tends to hold you back from being physically active during the workweek? - Do you feel free to choose when and how to be active? - Do you ever feel pressure to participate? Do you feel autonomous? If not—why? - If you could design a workplace activity setup that really works for you, what would it look like?

Appendix B: Conceptual Model: Perceptions of PA Offerings as a Moderator Between Motivation and Participation Behavior



Appendix C: Thematic Coding Table Using Gioia Methodology

Second-Order Themes	First-Order Concepts: Representative Quotes
Aggregate Dimensions	
Perceived Offerings as Moderators – Shaping the Translation of Motivation into Behavior (affecting both intrinsic & extrinsic drivers)	
Positive Perceptions	- *"I really like them. I love to train together, and I need that as a motivator. "But I really think it's a good initiative and I support them, and I have a positive feeling for them." - Interviewee 2* - *"Yeah, for me, I like them a lot - Interviewee 1* - *So, I would say that it's very broad, and many things are relevant to me." - Interviewee 4* - *Great offer by employer; such a luxury. Tailoring fitness levels is nice [referring to PT] - Interviewee 2* - *"Yeah, I'm really impressed because that is not obvious. I think that the company offers that wide of a program." Interviewee 9* - *I had a good impression—10/10. Spinning and CrossFit are very relevant to me. It's convenient and feels accepted. Free and close to the office. - Interviewee 10*
Organizational Support & Accessibility	- *"Company initiatives make it easier to work out regularly" and I don't have to do anything. There's not that much more they can do - Interviewee 2* - *"It's really nice because you don't have to think for yourself and if someone has planned it for you... it's already in the calendar." - Interviewee 1*
Intrinsic Motivation	
Health & Well-being	- *"I know I feel so much better... even if I'm going at 4 kilos weight... doing something super intense... the day after will be better in general." Interviewee 1* - *I can really tell that when I work out, I don't have as much pain. So that's been the motivator for me — keeping in good shape to feel good in the body and keep the injuries away." Interviewee 4* - *It's important to work out and be healthy. Both in the short term and long term. You really can fall into a bad spiral if you don't do it, so I always try to remember that even something small is better than nothing." Interviewee 5* - *"I need to exercise in order to not feel sad, especially in the winter." Interviewee 6*
Stress & Regulation	

	- *" - Lunchtime workouts feel like a 'reboot' and improve day, without exercise, feels like a 'sack of potatoes Interviewee 8* - *it's a game changer! that's why this is a remind to me to do it more, you get more energy, mood changing, resistance to stress, you show up to job and you are more fun colleague and have more confidence, - Interviewee 8* - *"Cycling in the middle of the day is really physically demanding, it gets your heart beat up. Almost feels like... I don't know, reborn. It's a good feeling. You feel like you have extra energy and it's much easier to focus." Interviewee 12*
Routine & Discipline	- *"Planning out your workouts and sticking to something you told yourself you would do. That's a good motivator for me" -Interviewee 4* - *Not really. It's just a pattern, a habit. I've been working out at lunch for like five years now, and it feels like that's just how it should be. My body's prepared for it. It's the only time that really fits my life. - Interviewee 5* - *Nowadays, since I've been doing it for such a long time, it feels more natural, and it feels more awkward if I'm not physically active during the day. It's very much a natural part of a normal day nowadays."-Interviewee 11*
Social Motivation	- *Yes and no. I wouldn't say it's about specific colleagues encouraging me to work out. It's more about the community — like, when you sign up for something, it's a nice way to try new things and meet new people. So, I'd say it's more about the networking and community part than someone actually influencing my physical habits directly." - Interviewee 4* - *"Training is a social thing—meet colleagues, chat, and exercise together." Interviewee 9* - *My colleagues influence me a lot—they share tips on how they fit PA into busy schedules. - Interviewee 10*
Extrinsic Motivation	
Workload & Role Conflict	- *I should try to do it [exercise]. I mean, I have that thought for the most part, but then always something comes up. So, I'm like, no, I can't do it this week either." - Interviewee 12* - *Yes, I'd say workload affects it a lot [exercise]... I've been at this client for about a year and a half, and in the beginning, you're always more on your toes, trying to learn fast, stay sharp. - Interviewee 5* - *"Workload. That's always a mental challenge—because ironically, it's when you need it the most." - Interviewee 7*
Work-Life Balance & Guilt	- *I sometimes feel like I don't have the time personally and I want to prioritize other stuff. Like spending time with my girlfriend if I've worked late." - Interviewee 12* - *"Might feel like letting people down if I prioritize something else over PA." - Interviewee 10*

	- *If I'm not done with my tasks, it feels wrong to go to the gym - Interviewee 6*
Social Dynamics	- *Usually, the reason I skip PA is a perceived expectation—like if I'm helping a partner or have a task, they might expect me to stay. I have autonomy, no one says no—but I might feel I'm letting someone down. - Interviewee 10* - *some like to have that [physical activity] as an independent thing outside of work, which I can resonate with. So, they don't want to live at work all the time, which is fair." Interviewee 2*
Balancing Intrinsic & Extrinsic	- *Even though you know it would probably help, your energy is not there after a long day of work – Interviewee 7* - *I have problems with my back.* *[But you don't participate in the run club and what's the main reason for that? Just that you don't like it?"], "I want to, but I can't run." - Interviewee 1* - *Many times, I've felt like today would be a really nice day to do something. However, I really don't feel like I have the time. I have this and that and this and that which I have to get done. I don't know that this will take forever. So, I really don't feel like I can prioritize [PA] - Interviewee 12*
Organizational Support & Culture	
Authentic Culture of Health	- *"I haven't thought about that, but I think my work environment is really good. - Interviewee 9* - *Yeah, I would say that our work promotes an active lifestyle. - Interviewee 7* - *"The programs are part of a broader effort to encourage activity and maintain work-life balance. They also involve clients and network contacts, creating social and business engagement alongside physical activity."- Interviewee 11* - *I mean, it's very supportive, super positive. Quite a strong culture about people doing things and working out—both at the junior level but especially at the more senior partner level. I'd say that those are the most physically active ones. - Interviewee 12*
Voluntariness & Autonomy	- "Even now when you're on a super short deadline and we need to get a lot of things done, if I would say I want to go for an hour workout at lunch, then it wouldn't be a problem at all." - *Interviewee 1* - *For the most part, yes. I'd say it's very flexible. Hours are flexible. It's acceptable to take hours off or work from home, rearrange schedule."- Interviewee 8* - *It's hard to say right now because I'm not on a project. So now, I can leave early and go for a workout. But normally, when I am staffed on a client project, then no—I wouldn't say I feel completely flexible.* *It wouldn't be acceptable to say, 'Hey, I'm going to the gym at 2 p.m.' when working with a client. But we can always work out before work, during lunch, or after work." - Interviewee 6*

Social Integration & Belonging	- *Yeah, for sure* [makes me feel more connected to others at work] *Because when you meet someone first at training and then you run into them again at the office, you kind of have a new friend you can chat with at the coffee machine. It just makes the whole atmosphere more friendly and relaxed." - Interviewee 4* - *It felt like good networking, and maybe even some future opportunities could come out of it. - Interviewee 5* - "Absolutely, [If it makes you feel more connected to others at work] mean, it means that you have to socially interact and build better relationships with colleagues. You don't have the group of senior people that never speak with the analysts." - *Interviewee 11*