

Moving Together

A Qualitative Study Exploring How Workplace Physical Activity Initiatives Shape Employee Motivation and Group Dynamics

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Abstract

Workplace physical activity initiatives (WPAI) have gained widespread attention as organisations seek to promote employee well-being and performance. However, existing research primarily focuses on quantitative health and productivity outcomes, leaving the motivational and social mechanisms behind these effects insufficiently understood. This thesis investigates how WPAI shape employee motivation and group dynamics within high-performing consulting environments. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory and the concept of In- and Out-groups, the study examines how psychological needs and relational processes influence employees' experiences of WPAI. The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm and abductive approach, using 14 semi-structured interviews with consultants who actively participate in WPAI. A thematic analysis identifies four key empirical domains: workplace culture, organisational support, relational outcomes, and motivational effects. The findings reveal that while WPAI can strengthen relatedness, competence, and collaboration, they simultaneously introduce pressures to join and perform and can unintentionally foster subtle forms of exclusion. Motivation is shaped less by the workouts themselves, and more by the social belonging and structural conditions surrounding participation. The thesis contributes with a qualitative, mechanism-focused understanding of WPAI, demonstrating their dual potential in which they can enhance workplace engagement and cohesion, yet risk undermining autonomy and belonging when poorly aligned with organisational constraints.

Keywords:

Workplace Physical Activity Initiatives, Employee Motivation, Group Dynamics, Self-Determination Theory, In- and Out-groups

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Definitions

Workplace Physical Activity Initiatives (WPAI)	Initiatives that are arranged, supported, or promoted by the employer or employees, and that occurs on a regular basis (e.g., weekly or monthly). Include group-based activities such as company workouts, team sports, or exercise sessions during or in close connection to work hours.
Physical activity (PA)	Refers to any bodily movement that requires energy expenditure. It can include a broad range of activities such as exercise, sports, active and everyday movements performed at work or during leisure time (The World Health Organisation, 2024).
Group dynamics	The interpersonal processes and patterns of interaction occurring between employees. This includes how members communicate, engage, build trust, form subgroups and relate to each other.
Motivation	Process that drives individuals to initiate, direct, and sustain behaviour. It operates as a reciprocal cycle, where motivation and outcomes reinforce each other, and is shaped by contextual factors such as productivity, organisational support, and well-being (<i>APA Dictionary of Psychology</i> , 2018).
Organisational support	Employees' perception that their organisation cares for their well-being and provides adequate resources, attention, and encouragement.
Consulting industry	Consists of professional service firms that provide expert advice and support to organisations. Characterised by dynamic and high-performance environments, assisting clients in areas such as strategy, management, assurance and technology, to improve business outcomes.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background & Problem

Physical activity (PA) has long been recognised as a fundamental part of human health and well-being. Beyond its role in reducing the risk of chronic diseases, regular movement is associated with improved mental health, higher life satisfaction and greater resilience to stress (Bull *et al.*, 2020; Doh, Do and Kim, 2024; Ryan, 2025). Yet, despite this well-documented knowledge, The World Health Organisation (2024) has recognised a decline in PA which is now described as one of the most pressing global challenges. In Sweden, the proportion of people physically active has been stagnant at 65% over the last decade (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020). This is especially visible in the workplace, with office workers spending around 60% of their day sedentary. As organisations recognise the impact of inactivity on both health and productivity, they have increasingly turned to workplace physical activity initiatives (WPAI) to enhance both individual and organisational performance (Santos and Miragaia, 2023).

Organisations implement WPAI for multiple reasons that go beyond improving employee health. For instance, such initiatives are seen as strategic tools to enhance productivity, engagement and organisational commitment (Ginoux, Isoard-Gautheur and Sarrazin, 2019; Marin-Farrona *et al.*, 2023). They are also seen as means of strengthening organisational culture, teamwork and cross-departmental interaction, as they often occur in teams (Signorini *et al.*, 2022; Doh, Do and Kim, 2024). Moreover, WPAI serve as part of employer branding efforts in order to signal organisational care and position the workplace as attractive (Chakraborty, Sharada and Anand, 2024; Doh, Do and Kim, 2024).

Simultaneously, scholars and practitioners have begun to raise concerns regarding potential downsides of WPAI. Studies and business reports point to unintended negative effects from WPAI such as pressure to join, perceived surveillance of personal habits, or exclusion of employees who do not participate. It is also stated that when these initiatives are implemented in a way that feels mandatory or overly performative, they may lead to guilt, stress, or resentment (Thissen *et al.*, 2023; Emergent Africa, 2025; Croft, Parks and Whillans, 2024).

As PA becomes increasingly embedded in organisational culture, understanding its broader effects on employees and workplace relations becomes crucial. While many organisations

implement WPAI with the aim of improving health and performance, their influence may extend further than just measurable outcomes.

1.2 Purpose & Research question

The purpose of this study is to explore how workplace physical activity initiatives influence employee motivation and group dynamics. As such initiatives increasingly become part of workplace culture, it becomes important to understand not only their physical or performance-related outcomes, but also how employees experience them on a more personal and social level.

This led to the following research question:

“How do workplace physical activity initiatives shape employee motivation and group dynamics?”

To address this question, the study adopts a qualitative approach and draws on *Self-Determination Theory* and *In- and Out-group* perspectives as distinct yet interrelated theoretical lenses to understand how motivation and group dynamics are formed through WPAI. Through this question, the study will contribute to a growing body of research seeking to understand the impacts of WPAI. By shifting attention from measurable outcomes to the underlying processes that shape motivation and group dynamics at work, it extends existing literature. In doing so, it also provides organisations with valuable insights into how WPAI can be designed and implemented to genuinely support motivation, strengthen the sense of belonging and foster a positive workplace culture.

1.3 Scope

The scope is limited to WPAI within the consulting industry. Consulting firms are a relevant context due to their high performance demands, project-based work and close team collaboration, factors likely to influence how WPAI affect motivation and group dynamics (Sturdy, Wylie and Wright, 2013; Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020).

The research is limited to WPAI arranged, supported, or promoted by the employer or employees, occurring on a regular basis (e.g., weekly or monthly). Initiatives include group-based activities such as company workouts, team sports, or exercise sessions during or in close connection to work hours.

Lastly, the study is positioned within the Swedish workplace sector, where employee health is highly prioritised and supported through national incentives such as the *wellness allowance*

(friskvårdsbidrag) (Skatteverket, n.d.). Focusing on this environment aims to enable a more comprehensive investigation of how local values and organisational structures interact to shape employees' experiences of WPAI.

2. Literature Review

This literature review is structured to build a foundation for understanding how workplace physical activity initiatives may influence employees' social and motivational experiences at work. It begins by reviewing WPAI literature to clarify how such initiatives are currently conceptualised and what outcomes are emphasised. Next, research on workplace group dynamics is introduced to explore social processes and how these may unfold in relation to WPAI. Lastly, literature is examined to uncover why employees are motivated to work to understand why employees may respond differently to WPAI.

2.1 Workplace Physical Activity

Physical activity has become a recurring topic in organisational research due to its broad relevance for employee health and organisational performance. As focus in this research area has long been on the physical benefits, studies have increasingly started to examine PA as a mechanism promoting productivity, engagement and well-being within the workplace (Ullberg, 2022; Marin-Farrona *et al.*, 2023; Rocha *et al.*, 2024). Most existing studies evaluate WPAI through quantitative indicators such as productivity, absenteeism and workability which has generated robust evidence of its positive effects but has also left the social and psychological mechanisms less understood (Thissen *et al.*, 2023).

As this research has grown, scholars have begun to differentiate between individual and group-based forms of PA at work, recognising they may influence employees in different ways (Doh, Do and Kim, 2024; McDonough *et al.*, 2025). The following sections distinguish between individual and group perspectives, clarifying how each contributes to workplace outcomes.

2.1.1 Individual Physical Activity

From an individual perspective, research consistently demonstrates that individual engagement in PA improves vitality, reduces stress and burnout and supports long-term mental health (Zhang *et al.*, 2025; Rocha *et al.*). Research on the effects of individual exercise within the organisational context has found positive effects on focus, resilience and day-to-day energy (Marin-Farrona *et al.*, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2024). These findings underline the importance of exercise in shaping employees' well-being.

At the same time, studies acknowledge that employees vary in their fitness level, workload and motivation for exercise, which can lead to different experiences of WPAI (Han and Ha, 2025). This recognition of individual differences emphasises the importance to also consider the role of collective forms of PA at work.

2.1.2 Group Physical Activity

Studies examining collective forms of PA extend the discussion by showing how shared exercise can foster social connection and increased collaboration (Signorini *et al.*, 2022; Doh, Do and Kim, 2024; McDonough *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, quantitative studies report positive associations between participation in WPAI and job satisfaction, organisational commitment and performance (Brinkley, McDermott and Munir, 2017; Doh, Do and Kim, 2024). This suggests that group PA may offer added value beyond physical benefits.

Moreover, researchers also note that group participation can take different forms depending on context, workplace culture, or employee preferences. While some highlight that joint exercise improves communication and camaraderie among colleagues, others caution that such initiatives can also reinforce social boundaries, excluding those who do not or cannot participate (Signorini *et al.*, 2022; Thissen *et al.*, 2023). Some evidence indicates that employees might experience implicit pressure to join, particularly in competitive or high-performance environments (Thissen *et al.*, 2023; Croft, Parks and Whillans, 2025). This suggests a tension within the literature. While physical activity is widely documented as positive for health, productivity and collaboration, it can generate negative social and motivational consequences when associated with pressure or exclusion.

2.2 Group Dynamics at Work

In literature, group dynamics in the workplace are argued to have a central role in shaping how employees experience work, interact with colleagues and develop work motivation (Paul, Drake and Liang, 2016; Sweet *et al.*, 2023). At its core, group dynamics concern how individuals form, maintain and navigate relationships within teams which in turn influences trust, cohesion and performance (Paul, Drake and Liang, 2016). Mutual trust among colleagues and effective team coordination have been found to strengthen cohesion, while subgroup formation risks being damaging in terms of team collaboration (Sweet *et al.*, 2023).

In the research field of group dynamics, belonging has emerged as a widely studied subject within management literature as it has shown to enhance engagement, creativity and well-being within the workplace context (Sharma and Nambudiri, 2020). Belonging is defined as the sense of being accepted, valued and connected to others within an organisation (Chakraborty, Sharada and Anand, 2024; Petitta and Ghezzi, 2025).

Literature suggests that management-led initiatives, such as feedback/wellness programs, when perceived as genuine organisational care, increases the sense of belonging (Katsaros, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Chakraborty, Sharada and Anand, 2024). Furthermore, belonging is not merely an individual feeling but a social process evolving through everyday interactions and shared practices at work (Filstad, Traavik and Gorli, 2019; Thissen *et al.*, 2023). Yet, when initiatives appear performative or selective, they may produce inequality and pressure rather than belonging (Thissen *et al.*, 2023; Dalessandro and Lovell, 2024). To reduce the risk of perceived exclusion, Thissen *et al.* (2023) argue that belonging should be embedded within the social interactions.

2.3 Work Motivation

Work motivation is a fundamental component in organisational research as it directly influences how employees approach tasks, interact with colleagues and contribute to organisational goals. Motivation in the workplace can broadly be understood as the mechanism initiating, directing and sustaining work-related behaviour (Ryan and Deci, 2000). A motivated workforce is associated with higher organisational support, job satisfaction, work engagement and productivity, yet these same factors also serve as important sources of motivation. This highlights an interconnected dynamic in which motivation and its outcomes mutually reinforce each other (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2021).

2.3.1 Organisational Support

Motivational scholars often highlight the importance of organisational support in promoting engagement, satisfaction and motivation (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Sustained and comprehensive efforts to promote positive experiences by the organisation generate growth, responsibility and feelings of being cared for (Shanafelt and Noseworthy, 2017; Michel *et al.*, 2021). Intuitively, these are factors that in turn enhance work motivation to reciprocate through stronger performance and commitment (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001; Ohly, Sonnentag and Pluntke, 2006).

However, more recent research highlights a threshold after which organisational support may overload employees and result in it being perceived as controlling, overwhelming and excessive, resulting in decreased motivation (Stan *et al.*, 2012; Burnett *et al.*, 2015). Gillet *et al.* (2013) found how organisational support mostly results in greater job satisfaction but that too little or too much support (controlled motivation) results in decreased job satisfaction. This shows how employers must balance employee support and autonomy to prevent decreases in motivation and performance.

2.3.2 Work Engagement & Job Satisfaction

Work engagement is described by management scholars as the energy and dedication an employee feels towards work, and represents the motivational opposite to burnout (Shanafelt and Noseworthy, 2017). Engaged employees are more enthusiastic, creative and persistent in their work, reinforcing their motivation over time (Kleine, Rudolph and Zacher, 2019). Crucially, work engagement is shaped by positive emotional experiences at work, and in turn, enjoyable and socially rewarding activities in the workplace foster motivation and greater job satisfaction (Michel *et al.*, 2021). Since job satisfaction itself strengthens the motivation to remain committed and contribute, these emotional and relational benefits can become drivers of sustained motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

2.3.3 Productivity

As highlighted in previous research, productivity and motivation are connected, where increases in motivation tends to support increases in productivity (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Cerasoli, Nicklin and Ford, 2014). However, studies point to a broader constellation of interrelated factors, such as interactions between employees, energy levels and the organisational conditions shaping daily work experiences (Puig-Ribera *et al.*, 2015; Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, studies have shown how physical activity improves alertness and productivity, while prolonged sitting periods are associated with lower productivity and well-being at work (Puig-Ribera *et al.*, 2015; Marin-Farrona *et al.*, 2023). Simultaneously, scholars note that productivity is shaped by individual differences and argue that no single motivational approach uniformly enhances productivity among employees (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2021).

2.4 Research Gap in Existing Literature

Overall, prior research on workplace physical activity has primarily focused on quantitative outcomes such as productivity, absenteeism and physical health (Signorini *et al.*, 2022; Marin-Farrona *et al.*, 2023; Rocha *et al.*, 2024), leaving the underlying motivational processes largely unexplained. Although studies on group physical activity highlight social benefits like cohesion and cooperation (Doh, Do and Kim, 2024), and broader work motivation literature emphasises the importance of autonomy, social interaction and support (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2021), these perspectives are rarely combined to understand WPAI as part of everyday work life. Thus, little is known about how WPAI simultaneously shape relational dynamics and motivation in the workplace. To address these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore employees lived experiences, by bringing together research that is typically treated separately.

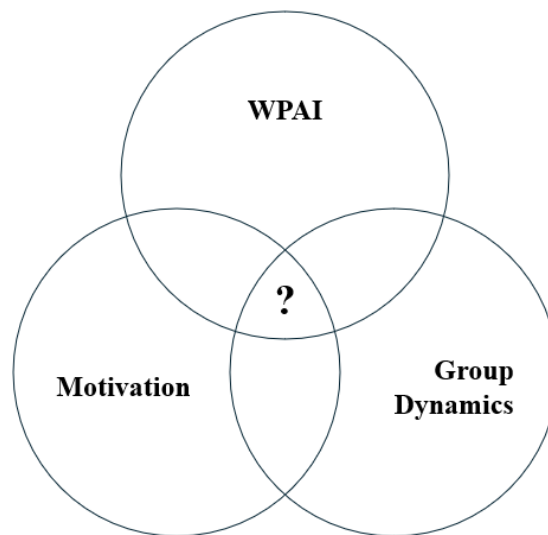


Figure 2.4: *Research Gap*

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws primarily on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain how workplace physical activity initiatives influence motivation and complements it with the concept of In- and Out-groups. Whereas SDT specifies the psychological conditions under which motivation flourishes, In- and Out-group mechanisms help explain *how* social belonging is formed. Together, these perspectives create a theoretical foundation suited to examining motivational and relational outcomes of WPAI.

3.1. Self-Determination Theory

Seeking to explain why individuals engage in activities beyond external rewards, Ryan and Deci (2000) pioneered the study of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation by demonstrating the importance of the innate psychological needs of *competence*, *autonomy* and *relatedness*. A traditional focus on external rewards and punishments has been replaced by a focus on goal-related efficacy in the last decades (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Guo, 2023). In contrast, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a more comprehensive perspective, asserting that a full understanding of goal-directed behaviour and psychological well-being requires consideration of the three innate psychological needs previously outlined (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

3.1.1 Autonomy

The need for autonomy reflects the desire to act with a sense of choice and ownership over one's behaviour (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Autonomy is fostered when employees are given meaningful choices, can decide how their work is carried out and perceive that their work is self-endorsed rather than externally controlled (Gagné and Deci, 2005). Environments supporting autonomy have been linked to greater job satisfaction, work engagement and persistence (Guo and Chelliah, 2024).

3.1.2 Competence

Competence captures the need to feel effective and capable of achieving desired outcomes. It is satisfied when individuals are presented with optimally challenging tasks, feedback and opportunities to grow and learn new skills (Deci and Ryan, 2000). In organisational contexts, employees who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation and maintain long-term engagement (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2021).

3.1.3 Relatedness

Lastly, relatedness concerns the need to feel connected to others and experience a sense of belonging (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It is particularly important in collective organisational activities, where social interactions and collegial bonds play a central role. Research shows that relatedness enhances both intrinsic motivation and the internalisation of organisational values (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

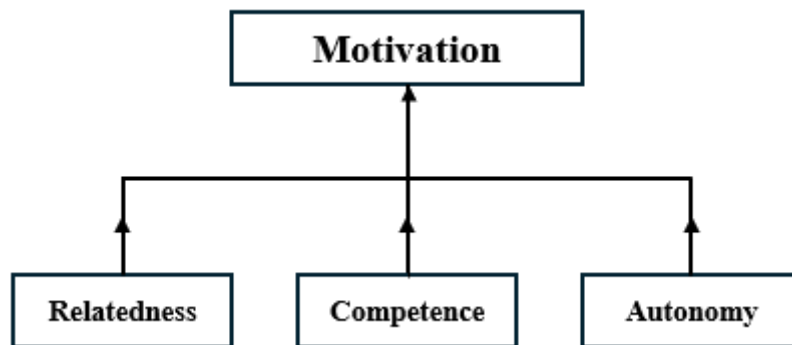


Figure 3.1: *Self-Determination Theory*

3.1.4 The Effect of Social Contextual Pressures

Importantly, SDT stresses that motivational dynamics cannot be understood through need satisfaction alone. *Need thwarting* refers to social-contextual pressures that obstruct the individual's innate psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). In organisational settings, controlling leadership, excessive pressure and relational exclusion has been identified as key sources of need thwarting, undermining internalisation and fostering disengagement (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2016; Howard, Slemp and Wang, 2025). The distinction between lack of support and active frustration is theoretically crucial since environments may on the surface seem neutral but can still contain subtle forms of pressure or control. Even the subtle influences can undermine individuals psychological needs which in turn harms both motivation and well-being (Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013).

3.2 In- & Out-groups

While SDT demonstrates how social connection fuels motivation, it does not fully explain how such connections emerge or why some employees feel included while others do not. Since workplace physical activity initiatives unfold in collective settings, understanding group development becomes central to exploring their effects on the workplace. To capture these dynamics, this study draws on the concept of In- and Out-groups from Social Identity Theory.

Social Identity Theory proposes that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups based on perceived similarity, forming In- and Out-groups (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Belonging to an in-group provides access to emotional support, shared identity and influence, reinforcing cohesion and collective trust (Stets and Burke, 2000). Moreover, it reduces uncertainty and strengthens self-esteem, making social belonging a powerful motivational driver (Hogg, 2007). The strengthened belonging can in some cases result in hostility towards out-group members, protecting the in-group when threatened (Hornsey and Imani, 2004).

However, the same processes can produce negative outcomes for those positioned outside the in-group. Out-group members may experience reduced visibility, informational disadvantages and lower psychological safety, limiting their participation in workplace interactions (Pinter and Greenwald, 2011; Jeon *et al.*, 2021). Over time, such subtle exclusion can hinder belonging, undermine confidence and strain broader team collaboration (Ferris *et al.*, 2014; Wu *et al.*, 2016).

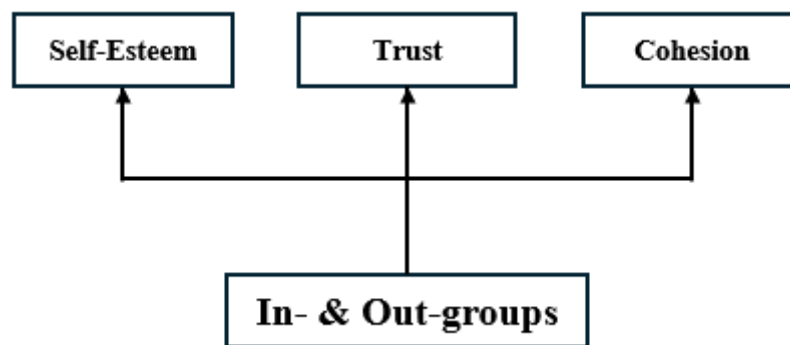


Figure 3.2: *In- & Out-groups and its effects*

3.3 Theory Usage

Given that SDT encompasses several sub-theories, the focus here is specifically on the three innate psychological needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy, as they constitute the core explanatory mechanism behind why motivation increases or decreases (Ryan and Deci, 2000). This narrowing allows for theoretical depth by concentrating on the processes most directly aligned with the research question. Additionally, while SDT distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, these needs primarily relate to intrinsic motivation, and the study uses *motivation* as an umbrella term for analytical simplicity.

Moreover, while SDT is widely used in motivational research, a limitation of SDT is its “unchallenged premise” where it is criticised for treating its core needs as universal and

unquestioned. It does not consider cultural or other contextual variations that occur in practice (Koole *et al.*, 2019). To address this gap, the qualitative design emphasises employees’ subjective, situated experiences, ensuring that contextual nuances are acknowledged rather than imposed.

Furthermore, the concept of In- and Out-groups strengthens the theoretical framework by directly highlighting the impact workplace physical activity initiatives have on group dynamics. Whereas SDT narrows the lens toward understanding how employees’ basic psychological needs influence motivation, In- and Out-group dynamics broaden the scope to include relational processes such as trust, cohesion and self-esteem (see Figure 3.1). Although In- and Out-group dynamics can be examined through theories such as Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), its focus on leader-follower relationships is not aligned with the collective nature of the study and is therefore not included. In this study, In- and Out-group mechanisms are integrated with SDT to show that relational belonging is not only a social outcome, but also a motivational mechanism. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, SDT and In- and Out-groups interact both at theory and outcome level. By combining these perspectives, the framework explores how group dynamics and motivation reinforce one another within WPAI.

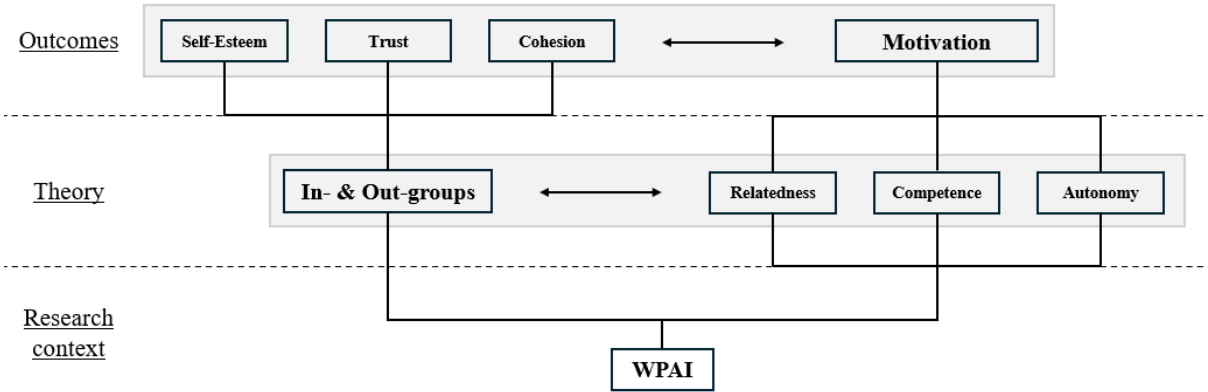


Figure 3.3: *Theory in Action*

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy & Approach

4.1.1 Research Paradigm

This study is based on an interpretivist paradigm which focuses on discovering multiple subjectivities in order to understand and explain the situation, rather than attempting to change it (Saunders, 2019). The paradigm explains how employees perceive motivational and social effects from workplace physical activity and why these perceptions occur, making it particularly suited to this research. The core idea of interpretivism is to work with the subjective meanings in the social world, acknowledging their existence to understand them but without distorting them (Goldkuhl, 2012). In the research context, the interpretivist paradigm helps explain how employees' subjective views on motivation and group dynamics emerge in response to WPAI.

4.1.2 Research Approach

The research adopts an abductive approach, combining deductive and inductive elements (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Existing theories create the theoretical foundation, while openness to emerging insights allows the framework to develop if new themes arise during data collection. This flexibility enables the exploration of ideas not previously captured in theories and ensures a deep and nuanced understanding of the research question.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen to understand the complex social constructs underlying employees' perceptions, interpretations and actions. This study explores motivation, group dynamics and underlying subjective themes, and a qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding, difficult to capture through numerical data (Saunders, 2019). A quantitative approach would be inappropriate in this case since it would reduce the nuanced perspective to numbers, resulting in contributions to an already explored research area. In a qualitative approach, both interviewees and researchers take part in the data collection. The interaction between them is essential, as this communication creates the synergy needed to generate rich and meaningful data (Saunders, 2019). To address this, thorough data analysis

through thematic coding and reflexivity is taken into consideration, aiming to mitigate researcher bias.

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected to collect data because they offer flexibility while still allowing researchers to explore key themes related to employee perceptions. This method gives opportunities to ask prepared and follow-up questions, adapting to participants' responses to understand their experiences. This flexibility can, however, lead to inconsistencies across interviews creating difficulties when comparing results.

4.2.3 Design of Interview Questions

The interview guide (see Appendix 1) was developed to explore how employees experience and interpret WPAI. It was designed around motivation and group dynamics, the main areas identified in the theoretical framework, while remaining flexible to allow new themes to emerge. The structure followed five main areas: 1) background and work context, 2) personal exercise habits, 3) participation in WPAI, 4) perceived effects of WPAI and 5) reflections on relationships and organisational culture.

Questions were formulated to be open-ended, enabling participants to elaborate freely on their experiences and perceptions. Follow-up questions were used when needed for clarification and to ensure depth. This structure allowed participants to guide the discussion based on their personal experiences while ensuring that core topics were consistently covered across all interviews.

The interview guide was reviewed and refined after two interviews to ensure clarity, logical flow of questions and relevance to the research question. Both authors participated in all interviews, allowing for flexibility in follow-up questions and immediate reflection on the quality of the collected data.

4.3 Data Collection

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

This study used purposive sampling to identify consulting firms that fit the research scope, followed by voluntary, self-selected, participation from employees within those firms (Saunders, 2019). The authors reached out to HR representatives and internal contacts through email/LinkedIn (see appendix 3 and 4) who connected the authors with employees active in

WPAI, after which individuals choose whether to take part. The final sample consists of 14 participants from seven different consulting firms with variation in gender and nationality (see Appendix 2).

While the sample provides insight into employees lived experiences, its size limits transferability to other contexts. Additionally, all participants were physically active in their personal lives, which may have introduced a positive participation bias. This is acknowledged and remains consistent with the study's aim to explore experiences among employees actively engaged in WPAI.

4.3.2 Interview Process

All interviews except two were conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams. In person interviews can provide a better connection and capture non-verbal cues which is why it was suggested when possible. However, in most cases, online interviews were preferred by the participants due to scheduling issues and convenience for both parties. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was recorded using the built in recording function in Microsoft Teams with the participants consent. Each interview was held in either Swedish or English depending on the participants preference.

The quotes taken from interviews held in Swedish have been translated to English. Despite careful work to keep the original meaning and context, some nuance in language and tone may not have been fully captured. To mitigate this risk, translations were cross checked with the original Swedish transcripts to get accurate reflections of what participants intended to say.

4.4 Thematic Analysis

The data was analysed through a thematic approach, aiming to identify and interpret recurring patterns and meanings across participants' experiences (Saunders, 2019). The authors' background in sports offered valuable contextual understanding of WPAI but also introduced a risk of interpreting participants' experiences through preconceived notions. At times, this made it challenging to separate personal interpretations from the insights emerging in the data. To mitigate this potential bias, the analytical approach was iterative and reflexive, moving between data and interpretation to ensure depth and accuracy, aligning with the study's abductive approach.

The first stage involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts that were generated through the built in transcription feature in Microsoft Teams. Since the transcripts were

automatically generated, they were cross-checked against the interview recordings and manually corrected to ensure accuracy in the interpretation of results. During this stage, familiarity with the data increased and initial notes were made on emerging patterns.

Next, the initial codes, represented in quotes that summarised meaningful parts of the interviewee’s statements, were generated to capture what was regarded as the most significant features of the data. The coding was done manually and first separately by the two authors to reduce individual researcher bias and to ensure multiple interpretations of the data were considered. This process helped identifying both overlapping and divergent insights, discussed to reach a nuanced, shared understanding.

Lastly, the codes were grouped into four higher-order themes; 1) workplace culture, 2) organisational support, 3) relational outcomes and 4) motivational effects, based on similarities. Gradually, these themes were organised into eleven lower-order themes that captured key patterns within the data and differences within the higher-order themes. Themes were continuously reviewed and adjusted to ensure they accurately represented the sample.

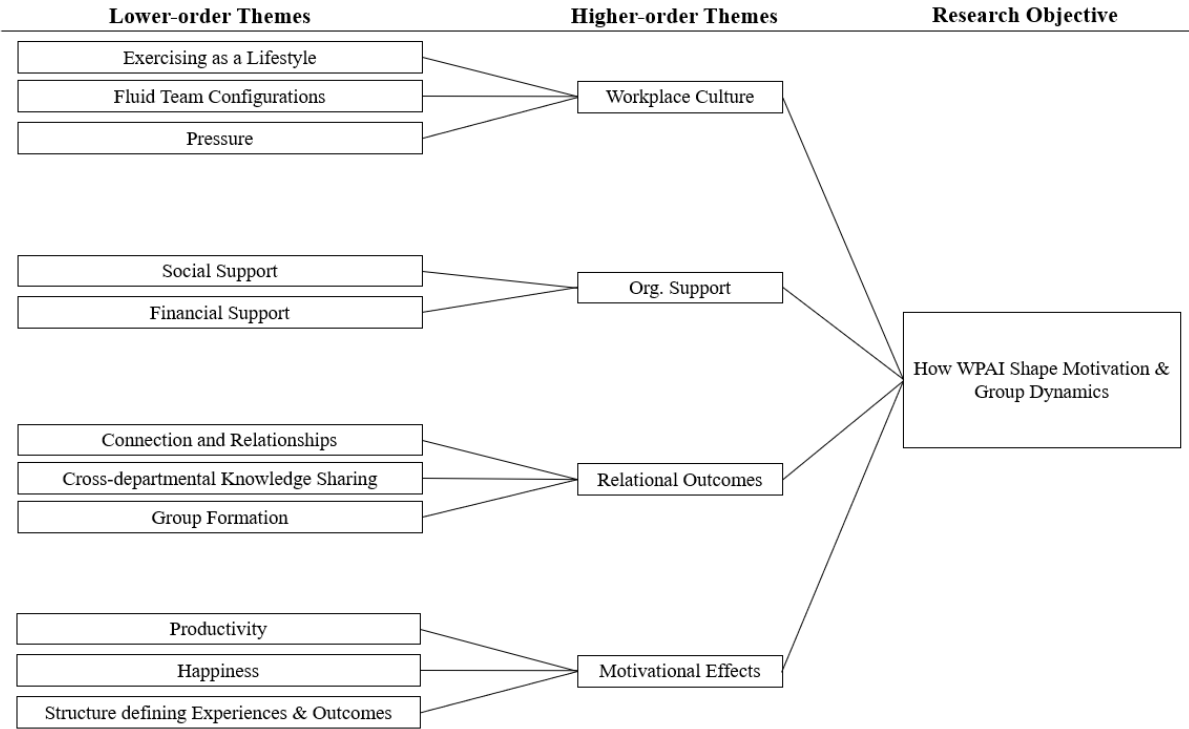


Figure 4.4: Overview of Empirical Findings

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully considered throughout the study to ensure participants' integrity. Thus, before the interviews, all participants were informed about the objectives of the study, anonymity and right to withdraw at any time. The participants were also given the opportunity to ask any questions before the interview began to ensure a comfortable interview environment. Anonymity was upheld by replacing real names with pseudonyms and removing any identifying information such as age, workplace details or company specifications of the interviewees. Transcripts and recordings were securely stored with access limited to the authors and data were handled in accordance with SSE guidelines and GDPR regulations.

4.6 Usage of Artificial Intelligence

AI was used as a supporting tool in specific components of this study to make the research process more efficient. Microsoft Teams' AI transcription feature was used to transcribe interview recordings, with all transcripts being carefully reviewed by the authors, ensuring accuracy. ChatGPT-5.1 was used to identify potential research articles and support refinement of grammatical precision. This streamlined the process of collecting sources and ensured the study could be presented in an academic way without interfering with the analysis.

5. Empirics

The following sections present the findings from the interviews structured into four parts. Firstly, the broader workplace culture is described to understand the conditions influencing how employees interpret exercising with colleagues. Secondly, workplace physical activity is examined as a form of organisational support to understand what limits and enables participation. Thirdly, the relational outcomes are highlighted to explore the impact of workplace physical activity on group dynamics at work. Fourthly, the motivational impact of the initiatives is examined.

5.1 Performance & Exercise in the Culture

5.1.1 Exercising as a Lifestyle

Across interviews, all respondents answered that they worked out on a regular basis. Physical activity was described as a hobby for some and as a more integrated part of their daily life for others, highlighting physical activity as a priority, despite demanding work.

“I work out three to four times a week on a regular basis.” - Emil

“I would say I work out five days per week to be honest... that’s my realistic number...I get really annoyed when I don’t train for a day.” - Daniel

“I work out very often ... I aim for five days a week and I usually succeed.” - Simon

For Alex and Leo, exercise was emphasised as fundamental for their lifestyles. It was described as especially important for mental clarity, suggesting that exercise can be a coping strategy for stress and a way to build emotional stability.

“For me, working out is incredibly important, especially from a mental perspective. It untangles things when my thoughts are stuck...it clears my head.” - Alex

“For me, working out is an internal thing...like it is part of who I am.” - Leo

Mia drove the discussion further, expressing how exercise served as a stabilising routine that enabled her to function at work, emphasising how regular physical exercise is essential for performing in professional contexts.

“Working out is extremely important for me, it is almost as important as sleep. It is a prerequisite for me to function at work at all.” - Mia

Together, these accounts show that physical activity was something already embedded within personal routines for the respondents, suggesting that workplace physical activity is experienced as something complementing existing habits.

5.1.2 Fluid Team Configurations

Participants also described a work environment shaped by shifting project teams and temporary client assignments. All were in some way part of one or several project teams with a few other colleagues.

“We work in different constellations depending on the client project...We have different project teams for different projects.” - Mia

“There are different colleagues for every project and while some overlap, the teams often vary.” - Emil

“You can say I work in many different teams across different projects.” - Sara

This fluid structure normalised frequent transitions between teams and created a work culture where building new relationships is a recurring part of everyday work.

5.1.3 The Pressure of a High Performing Environment

Within this fluid and highly active work culture, respondents also emphasised the consulting industry as fast-paced and competitive, where ambition and engagement are both celebrated and expected. Several interviewees highlighted a pressure underlying the high-performance environment.

“People here like to work a lot, they like to work hard, and they even enjoy the tough periods...This is something that makes me motivated and you don't want to fall behind.” - Emil

“To last ten years in the consulting industry is tough. It is not for everyone, and it attracts a certain type of person.” - Nora

Underlying pressure also directly shaped participation in workplace exercise. For some, pressure surfaced because of high engagement in the initiatives. Julia mentioned that high engagement not only led to increased pressure to join but directly connected the increased pressure to decreased motivation.

“There’s high engagement in these activities, which is both good and bad. Some people feel pressured to join, and it can actually reduce their motivation.” – Julia

Participants also described experiencing performance-related pressure, which appeared to arise from two different sources. Mia noted that participating in team-based exercises introduced an added expectation, as she worried about “pulling others down,” which contributed to a heightened sense of pressure to perform. Simon, meanwhile, referred to a more internalised form of pressure, linked to a desire to present himself favourably to colleagues. In some instances, this internal pressure was described as discouraging employees from participating, due to concerns about being perceived as less competent than their peers.

“If you do it in a team, you get both motivated but also stressed since you don't want to bring the team down with you.” – Mia

“It's quite nice to not be the worst person there, especially if you're surrounded by colleagues you want to impress or make friends with...It can be quite nerve wracking, and I think for lots of people that prevents them from joining.” - Simon

These experiences illustrate how the broader performance climate within the consulting firms shaped employees' interpretations of the initiatives to be both energising and pressuring.

5.2 The Organisation’s Role in Supporting Employees

5.2.1 Encouraged Participation within Structural Constraints

Participants generally described a high level of autonomy when it comes to both initiating and participating in activities. They felt they could take lead if they wanted and found employers supportive of such efforts both financially and socially.

“You always get support for your initiatives. I have never heard of anything that someone wanted to do that did not happen.” - Alex

“The company provide you with time and space for your personal and mental health through the initiatives.” - Leo

Both Julia and Marcus emphasised that meaningful support is not only about providing options but enabling employees to make use of them through time and freedom. Without flexibility in daily schedules, workplace physical activity cannot realistically be integrated into the workday.

These reflections highlight that participation can be limited by structural constraints such as time pressure and workload.

“A big reason for why people don't participate in this stuff is because they're working so hard anyway. They simply don't have time, or they don't want to give more of their time to the company.” - Marcus

“The company's role is not necessarily to organise the workouts but to give the employees freedom to schedule their day.” - Julia

Altogether, even though support was perceived as genuine in principle, it did not always match the structural conditions of time pressure and workload. This illustrates a tension between the organisational intentions and everyday constraints that risks limiting participation.

5.2.2 The Importance of Financial Support

Financial support further emerged as one of the clearest and most tangible signs of organisational support. Participants consistently highlighted that having activities funded or subsidised by the employer made participation easier and was perceived as a highly valued benefit.

“It is quite expensive, and these kinds of workouts are probably something I would not have prioritised if the company did not pay for it. It becomes a really nice benefit that you get the opportunity to do it like this.” - Sara

“I really appreciate the initiatives...and I appreciate that they put money into it...it makes me like my workplace more.” - Sofia

As highlighted by Oliver, some initiatives seem unlikely to remain viable without organisational funding, suggesting that financial support plays a dual role: it covers essential costs while offering value-adding benefits.

“I'm not going to lie, I like that they pay for it. That's like the best perk that comes with the initiatives, which sounds silly, but I mean, the fees can become really expensive, and they also cover kick-off dinners and such...I don't even think the initiatives would survive without the financial support.” - Oliver

These remarks suggest that financial support is practical as it removes cost barriers, enabling participation, and a sign of organisational care.

5.3 Social Outcomes of Workplace Physical Activity

5.3.1 Seeking Connection & Building Relationships

One of the most prominent themes was that employees engaged in workplace exercise primarily for the social connection it enables. Participants described the initiatives as a powerful tool for social integration and belonging.

“When you go with your colleagues, you start to associate more with the company. The closer you are with your colleagues, the more likely you are to stay at a company... if you have friends at work, it makes your threshold for leaving much higher.” - Oliver

“It makes people feel the company cares about them...that there is more than just my salary that makes me want to continue working here...there are additional benefits that are social and so on.” - Jonas

“By doing things together, it increases the team spirit...it is about doing things that are outside of your regular tasks and not just for the sake of making profits for the company.” - Elin

Several participants emphasised that the initiatives facilitated an improved sense of integration into the workplace. For Jonas, the activity itself was less important than the opportunity to meet colleagues, while, as for Simon, the shared interests or enjoyment of a specific activity created an immediate social link. This suggests that there are different motives for engaging at first, but that in the end, lead to the same outcomes of feeling more connected to colleagues.

“You don’t necessarily participate due to an interest in the sport in itself, but you do it to meet colleagues.” - Jonas

“I could, if I wanted to, just sit by myself and not meet anyone at work, but it’s quite nice to have friends in the office and this gives me an opportunity to meet people with similar interests.” - Simon

Emil also directly highlighted that WPAI lead to increased motivation towards work because of the friendships that are formed during the sessions.

“I get more motivation from feeling safer at work and that comes from having people to hang out with and that you even become friends with.” - Emil

Working out together built friendships, strengthened trust and made employees feel more comfortable in the workplace. The sense of community created through shared experiences contributed to employees’ motivation, retention and identification with the organisation.

5.3.2 Cross-departmental Knowledge Sharing

Beyond building friendships, workplace exercise also provided opportunities for interaction across teams and departments. These encounters were often spontaneous but valued to expand one’s internal network.

“There are times when I meet someone during a workout and we start discussing ideas... and then they work in for example, tech on something cool that I think like 'Wow, we could bring that into the work we do.' ” - Simon

The initiatives were depicted as distinct in their way of bringing people from different departments together. This was deemed especially important in big offices where other opportunities for connection were rare.

“Building your internal network is something that you don't get from any other team than the one which is doing the initiative together...we are a lot of people in this office so you would not have even met otherwise.” - Daniel

Others also noted how different people join the initiatives every time, highlighting how the initiatives enable ways to share experiences, appearing as valuable spaces for both social and professional encounters.

“When you are new, it is a great way to meet people in smaller groups, but also from different departments so you can share experiences.” - Marcus

“For these initiatives you get to know new people every time.” - Leo

By bringing together employees who rarely interact, workplace physical activity facilitates knowledge exchange, broadens professional networks and offers accessibility for integration. In this sense, the benefits extend beyond social bonding and contribute to organisational learning.

5.3.3 Group Formation Through Collective Activities

Participation in workplace exercise often led to the formation of smaller social circles centred around shared interests or repeated participation. Many interviewees viewed these relationships as natural outcomes of engagement in the initiatives that also became visible in the workplace.

“You start gravitating to the people that participate in the same activities as yourself and whom you have similar interests with even outside the sessions.” - Nora

“After being out on a morning run with the colleagues, you find a connection that I believe would not have been there if it were not for the activities...and you start having lunch together and hang out more during office hours.” - Marcus

“You get a bit closer with those you work out with at work...you have something in common.” - Sofia

Others, however, did not believe that the initiatives contributed to any clear groupings. Elin especially highlighted that the social nature of the project-based work culture was part of this, suggesting that the working environment has influence on how groupings are perceived.

“I do not feel it creates clear groupings since we already socialise a lot, so that line blurs quickly anyways.” - Elin

“It is very inclusive, so it is not something that makes us who participate closer...or exclude others’ in any way at work.” - Alex

These contrasting views illustrate that some participants noticed new social circles forming while others perceived the workplace as already highly social, without clear groupings, making new formations less noticeable.

5.4 Movement as a Source of Motivation

5.4.1 The Productive Power of Movement

Most interviewees noted how regular movement provided energy, enhancing their alertness and efficiency during work. Both Elin and Jonas described how motivation was experienced not only emotionally, but also physically.

“During periods when I work out more, I feel more energetic and then I feel I can handle more work...I feel sharper.” - Elin

“You know, I feel more alive during the day when I feel I have pushed myself physically.” - Jonas

Additionally, Emil and Sara emphasised that the anticipation of a workout shaped their work routines, making them more motivated to get work done in time for a session. This suggests that motivation from structural constraints also occurs as an outcome of engagement in workplace physical activity.

“I would say my energy lasts longer when I engage in the morning workouts...and the same goes for when I have a session to look forward to, I feel the day goes faster and I feel more motivated to work in that sense.” - Emil

*“When I have a workout or something that I need to get to, I will not do my work slowly...you make sure to get the work done in time so you can go to the workout.”
- Sara*

Taken together, these accounts highlight how the initiatives, both through their energising effects and the structure they introduce into the workday, can enhance motivation and support more sustainable work routines.

5.4.2 Happiness Through Participation

Beyond physical effects and productivity, working out also contributed to emotional well-being and an overall more positive outlook on work. Several participants associated group activities with improved mood and greater enthusiasm, creating an emotional boost carried into the workday as well.

“I don't know if I perform better in my work because of the exercise, but it is more the sense of belonging that the sessions bring and it makes work in general feel much more fun.” - Julia

“I really feel more energised after the workouts we do together, and it is especially more fun to come into work when we have a session...so in that sense, my motivation is very much increased.” Sofia

“Above all, it is fun. It makes me look forward to the day.” - Marcus

These positive effects arise not only from participation in the initiatives themselves but also from the increased opportunities to socialise, which were shown to contribute to more positive emotions to work itself.

5.4.3 Structure Defines Experience & Outcomes

Most participants saw the same benefits in terms of physical exhaustion and mental benefits when working out individually compared to participation in physical activity at work. The only difference was the additional social aspect from workplace exercise.

“If I just think of the physical part, I would not say there is much of a difference between my individual workouts and the workouts we do together as a group, but then there are also a lot of positive feelings connected with hanging out together as a group.” - Jonas

“Physically and mentally, I don’t really see a difference in working out alone or with colleagues, but I do feel happier after the sessions with my colleagues.” - Sara

On the contrary, others perceived the initiatives as *divergent* in perceived benefits. Group sessions offered opportunities for bonding and sharing enjoyment, providing social value, while individual workouts were described as more performance focused.

“When you work out together, there is a social energy...it feels nice that you have accomplished something together, while I think the more positive outcomes like endorphins is what I get when I do my own workouts.” - Alex

The differences in how workplace workouts are perceived underscore how variation in perceived challenge, fitness level and personal goals shape the motivational effects employees derive.

6. Analysis & Discussion

This section presents an analysis of employees' experiences of workplace physical activity initiatives in a high-performing consulting environment. By linking the findings to existing theories and prior research, this analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving WPAI's impact on employee motivation and group dynamics. It extends previous literature by showing how motivational and relational outcomes intersect in ways earlier studies have not fully addressed.

6.1 Pressure in Workplace Physical Activity Participation

The findings show that all participants maintained a high level of physical activity outside of work, contrasting public health statistics that document insufficient PA levels in the general population (The World Health Organisation, 2024). Combined with the project-based structure that requires constant collaboration with new colleagues, this forms an environment where personal discipline, high performance and continuous social adaption is normalised.

6.1.1 Pressure to Perform

In line with previous research, the consulting industry was described as a high pressure environment (Sturdy, Wylie and Wright, 2013; Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020). Importantly, the findings reveal how the pressure was not only connected to work but also extended to WPAI. Firstly, the performance climate appears to shape how employees evaluate their participation and suggests high-performing individuals often experience WPAI as another arena where they are assessed, either socially or physically. A *pressure to perform* emerged, acting as a motivator for some, and a thwarting factor for others. This mirrors research and theory showing that competitive cultures create implicit expectations for continuous performance, and a desire for competence (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Thissen *et al.*, 2023; Croft, Parks and Whillans, 2025). Moreover, the competitive nature of participants together with expectations of performance can in some cases create a *fear of not being able to perform*, resulting in a choice to not participate in WPAI.

6.1.2 Pressure to Join

Secondly, a *pressure to join* appears. Interviews made it evident that high engagement can be a source of pressure decreasing the motivational aspects. When many colleagues are involved, WPAI become a social norm rather than an optional practice. The pressure to engage could additionally be explained through a *fear of exclusion* when participants feel they miss out on

opportunities for bonding. This aligns with SDT and prior work noting that perceived pressure of forced participation risks undermining motivation (Stan *et al.*, 2012; Burnett *et al.*, 2015). From a theoretical perspective, such dynamics exemplify motivational thwarting, where excessive pressure undermines the autonomous choice and fosters disengagement (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2016; Howard, Slemp and Wang, 2025).

6.2 The Double-edged Nature of Organisational Support

Organisational support surrounding WPAI was described as reassuring, both from a social and financial perspective. Many interviewees emphasised how subsidised activities and visible encouragement made them feel valued. WPAI are therefore interpreted as a sign of organisational care that can make employees reciprocate with commitment and effort towards the organisation. In turn, this is important for motivation because genuine organisational support increases the sense of relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

However, workload and time constraints made it difficult to attend WPAI for some participants. Since it was hard to attend, WPAI felt like a symbolic gesture, rather than a genuine workplace practice. When the intended support is combined with a high workload and lack of time, the outcomes of the support risks shifting from motivational to burdensome, aligning with previous literature (Stan *et al.*, 2012; Gillet *et al.*, 2013; Burnett *et al.*, 2015). A tension appears in where support only motivates when employees have the practical autonomy to make use of WPAI. It is thereby important to note that initiatives not automatically strengthens motivation, but does so when the organisation understands the importance of sustained attention to structural conditions (Salvagioni *et al.*, 2017; Shanafelt and Noseworthy, 2017).

A similar tension appeared in how support was distributed. While financial support acted as an enabler, the findings reveal that in some cases, highly competitive initiatives received more resources and perks than others. The intended support could then unintentionally signal different levels of value to different employees. When employees perceive inequality, motivation risks becoming thwarted, not because support is lacking, but because fairness is compromised (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013; Thissen *et al.*, 2023). Financial support then not only enables participation for some, but implicitly signals to others that they do not qualify, reducing the sense of belonging (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Taken together, it is revealed that support is beneficial for increasing motivation when it is accessible, balanced and aligned with employees working conditions. When support instead

conflicts with workload or privileges certain groups, it no longer fosters motivation but quietly threatens it.

6.3 Belonging, Boundaries & Their Motivational Outcomes

The empirics align with previous research in that WPAI operate as important social structures through which employees nurture belonging, trust and cross-departmental relationships at work (Doh, Do and Kim, 2024). Significantly, the findings further reveal a two-sided reality of how the gained social effects of WPAI translate into everyday work.

6.3.1 Belonging as a Source of Energy & Engagement

Firstly, newfound and improved relations strengthen self-esteem and makes employees more comfortable in the workplace setting. Several participants described how interactions during the workouts created a *sense of relational depth* that carried over into other aspects of work. What mattered was not simply having someone to talk to but developing a personal connection that extends beyond work tasks. This emerging pattern suggests that WPAI support a heightened sense of relatedness, as employees experienced themselves as seen, valued and meaningfully connected to others (Ryan and Deci, 2020). Such relational grounding appeared to increase their willingness to engage, collaborate and participate more fully at work.

This mirrors Hogg's (2000) view of how being a part of the in-group creates an environment where you are more willing to invest energy and effort at work, making social belonging a powerful motivational driver. The participants even expressed how the increased relatedness could be a defining factor in staying at their current job, supporting previous research on how participation in WPAI result in enhanced job satisfaction and retention (Brinkley, McDermott and Munir, 2017; Doh, Do and Kim, 2024).

6.3.2 When Inclusion for Some Creates Distance for Others

Although relational benefits emerge, there is another side to the story. Applying the concept of In-and Out-groups, regular participation in WPAI create a shared identity that distinguishes those *in* the activity from those *outside* it (Stets and Burke, 2000). Even without explicit exclusion, these boundaries matter because feeling less connected or valued can thwart relatedness and thereby reduce motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). This mirrors previous findings that wellness initiatives may unintentionally heighten social divisions (Signorini *et al.*, 2022; Thissen *et al.*, 2023). The findings therefore nuance the

assumption that group exercise is uniformly positive by illustrating how inclusion for some can subtly signal exclusion to others.

Yet, some participants did not acknowledge any indications of in-group formations. These contrasting perceptions can have two explanations. Firstly, individuals who experience themselves as part of a cohesive social circle may be less likely to recognise exclusionary patterns. Research suggests that in-group members often interpret group boundaries as natural or harmless, and may protect the group when asked about exclusionary tendencies (Hornsey and Imani, 2004). This may help explain why some interviewees described the initiatives as entirely inclusive.

A second explanation relates to the broader consulting environment, as the fluid structure prevents social clusters from forming exclusionary groups. Since employees explained rotating between projects and collaborating with different colleagues, group boundaries remain fluid. Instead of forming fixed in-groups that interfere with teamwork, as suggested by for instance Sweet et al. (2023), WPAI can form groups that function as flexible social circles that enhance belonging without restricting collaboration. Thus, the organisational structure enables relatedness-based motivation to thrive by limiting the negative consequences of group formation.

6.3.3 Motivation from Performance & Structure

For several participants, completing a workout during working hours generated feelings of capability and accomplishment, reinforcing their perceived competence (Deci and Ryan, 2000). They described returning to tasks with more confidence and energy due to the perceived competence, which contributed to a sense of effectiveness that participants carried into their work as well. For these participants, the motivational effects of feeling competent was thus experienced not only in the physical activity itself but acted as a boost that supported their performance in work.

However, two distinct interpretations can explain why others did not experience the same benefits. Firstly, the *pressure to perform*, as outlined in 6.1.1, explains how some participants felt unable to live up to unspoken individual expectations. For them, WPAI became a reminder of underperformance rather than a source of achievement, which undermines their perceived competence. Secondly, a different mechanism concerns the *level of challenge*. This was emphasised by how participants described the workouts as insufficiently challenging. Thereby, they could not attribute any accomplishment to their own effort. Thus, without the opportunity

to improve or master a skill, competence remains unfulfilled (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Han and Ha, 2025). Given the generally active lifestyle of the participants, both interpretations remain plausible. Some may have felt pressured in comparison to their equally active colleagues, while others may simply have found the sessions too undemanding.

Moreover, the scheduled nature of WPAI encouraged participants to stay focused before sessions. Knowing that a session was coming up created a natural deadline which interviewees described helping them work efficiently. This suggests that WPAI acted as a self-imposed deadline. While SDT would interpret the resulting sense of effectiveness as competence satisfaction, the mechanism here stems less from the exercise itself and more from the anticipation and temporal boundary it creates. This supports Koole's *et al.* (2019) critique that SDT underplays contextual motivators shaped by working conditions, suggesting that the timing of WPAI can be equally important for motivation as the activity itself.

6.3.4 Summarising the Relational & Motivational Dynamics of WPAI

The relational benefits and the self-imposed deadlines reflect broader mechanisms that could emerge in many organisational initiatives, as they stem from social interaction and temporal structure rather than exercise itself. In contrast, the competence gains identified here appear unique to WPAI, arising from opportunities for physical effort and accomplishment. Together, these insights summarise the distinct ways WPAI shaped participants' motivation within this analysis.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Answer to Research Question

This study sets out to answer the research question:

“How do workplace physical activity initiatives shape employee motivation and group dynamics?”

Workplace physical activity initiatives shape employee motivation and group dynamics through mutually reinforcing relational and motivational processes. Motivationally, WPAI influence employees through autonomy, competence and relatedness. Pressure to perform or to join can undermine autonomy, while supportive conditions and meaningful social interactions enhance motivation. Competence is strengthened when workouts offer an attainable challenge but weakened when sessions feel either too demanding or insufficiently engaging.

Relationally, WPAI create opportunities for belonging, trust and cross-departmental interaction, strengthening relatedness and fostering more open collaboration. At the same time, boundaries also emerge, as participation can form informal in-groups that may leave non-participants feeling less connected.

The dynamics are interconnected. WPAI foster belonging and meaningful interaction, strengthening motivation, whereas experiences of exclusion or unequal support can weaken it. Overall, the findings demonstrate that WPAI affect employees less through the workouts alone and more through the social and motivational processes that unfold around them, shaping both how individuals relate to colleagues and how motivated they feel in their daily work.

7.2 Contributions to the Research Gap

This study advances current knowledge on workplace physical activity initiatives by clarifying how these initiatives shape work motivation and by identifying the mechanisms underlying employees' experiences. Through a qualitative design, it offers insight into how employees interpret the motivational drivers connected to WPAI, addressing the lack of research that explores these dynamics from the perspective of lived experience. By linking reported outcomes to concrete motivational processes, the study contributes a deeper understanding of how WPAI influence both individual motivation and the broader social context of work.

Furthermore, the study clarifies how motivational and relational outcomes within WPAI are intertwined. The findings show that experiences of belonging and group boundaries directly shape how employees interpret autonomy, competence and participation, revealing that social dynamics and motivational processes are mutually reinforcing rather than separate. This connection has not been articulated in previous WPAI research, which has tended to treat social and motivational outcomes independently. By demonstrating how these processes interact in practice, the study adds a more integrated understanding of why WPAI affect employees differently across contexts.

7.3 Limitations of the Study

Although the study has provided several insights, limitations need to be recognised. First, the sample included only employees who participate in workplace physical activity, reflecting a possible positive participation bias towards the initiatives and potentially excluding critical views from non-participants. Furthermore, participants operated within varying organisational contexts and initiatives, making it challenging to discern which aspects of their experiences relate specifically to WPAI and which may stem from broader organisational influences. As a result, the interpretive clarity of the findings may be somewhat reduced. Finally, the focus on employees' self-reported experiences may obscure discrepancies between organisational intentions and employees' interpretations.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research would benefit from including employees who choose not to participate in workplace physical activity, as their experiences may shed further light on In- and Out-group dynamics, feelings of exclusion, or differing motivational needs. Additionally, examining different types of WPAI would be valuable to understand how various initiatives foster distinct motivational and social outcomes. Moreover, while employer branding concerns were mentioned by some participants in the study, they did not emerge as a dominant theme. Further research could therefore explore how organisations balance genuine support with strategic interests in employer branding, and how employees interpret this.

A mixed methods design that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches could be beneficial for future research. This would make it possible to capture not only measurable outcomes but also the underlying contextual factors in a more controlled and comprehensive

way. In addition, longitudinal studies could provide insight into how experiences and motivational processes develop over time, something that has not yet been explored.

7.5 Final Conclusion

This study demonstrates that workplace physical activity initiatives play a significant role in enhancing work motivation, fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening social cohesion. Yet, these effects occur within a high-performing consulting culture that both enables and constrains participation. The motivational benefits are not derived solely from physical activity, but from the balance between competence, organisational support and evolving group dynamics. While WPAI can facilitate genuine motivation and relational bonds, their impact is shaped by underlying organisational pressures and social boundaries. Thus, WPAI's influence reflects a complex interplay between authentic motivation and structural constraints, rather than a simple pathway to inclusion or well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Background

- Hi, and thank you for taking the time to talk to us today!
- We're both in our final year of the bachelor's program at SSE and are writing our thesis in management.
- We're researching how physical activity at work affects motivation, and we'll also look a bit at how it might create a sense of togetherness and group dynamics among colleagues.

Ethical considerations

- As we mentioned earlier, this interview will be recorded, but only for academic purposes, and only the two of us will have access to the recording. We just want to double check to see if it is okay for you.
- Everything will be anonymised, meaning that neither you nor your company's name will be mentioned in the final study.
- You have the right to withdraw from the interview, and then all data will be deleted.
- We ask you to answer truthfully to all questions and there are no right or wrong answers.
- Before we start, do you have any questions?

Warm-up questions

- 1) Can you tell us a bit about your role at XXX and what a normal workday looks like for you?
- 2) Do you work project-based?
 - a) How are the teams selected?
 - b) How much variation is there in the teams across different projects?

Personal Exercise Habits (Before)

- 1) How would you describe your exercise or physical activity habits?
 - a) Are any of the workouts you do during work hours or organised by the company?
 - b) Do you prefer to work out alone or together with others?

- c) What type of exercise do you usually do?
 - d) How do you plan your exercise?
 - i) Do you follow a program, use a personal trainer, or plan it entirely on your own?
- 2) What role does exercise or physical activity have for you in your everyday life?

Participation in Workplace Initiatives (During)

- 1) What kinds of workout or health initiatives exist at XXX?
 - a) How long have these initiatives been around, and how have they changed over time?
- 2) Do you participate in any of these?
 - a) Which ones, and how often?
 - b) What made you start participating?
- 3) How would you describe the atmosphere during these sessions?
 - a) How is the interaction between colleagues?
 - b) Do you feel that these activities strengthen your relationship with XXX as a company?
- 4) Do you think these activities influence the sense of togetherness with your colleagues or within the organisation? How?
- 5) What is the level or intensity of the initiatives you take part in?
 - a) Where would you place yourself in relation to your colleagues when it comes to fitness or performance level (Low / Average / High)
 - b) What kind of feeling do these activities create in you?
 - c) How does that feeling influence your work?

Experience and Motivation (During)

- 1) How do these initiatives affect your engagement or energy in your work?
- 2) Do you notice any difference in your motivation in your work tasks when you take part in the training? Can you explain how?
- 3) What role do you think the company has in supporting employees through initiatives like these?
- 4) How do you think colleagues who don't participate view these activities?

Effects and Reflection (After)

- 1) Looking back, how has your participation in these initiatives affected your overall experience of working at XXX?

- 2) Do you think these activities have influenced your productivity, focus, or how long/hard you work? Can you describe in what way?
- 3) How have your relationships with colleagues changed? (For example: stronger bonds, more informal atmosphere, or more group divisions?)
- 4) If you compare a workout you do privately with one organised by the company, what differences do you notice?
- 5) Do you feel more appreciated by the company thanks to these initiatives? Why or why not?
- 6) If you could change or improve something about the initiatives, what would it be?
 - a) Would you have the possibility to influence or make decisions about those changes?

Closing

- 1) Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with physical activity at work?
- 2) Is there anything you feel we've missed or should have asked about? (Feedback for improvement)

Appendix 2: Interview Specifications

NUMBER	CODE	GENDER	NATIONALITY	DATE	PLACE
1	Alex	Male	Swedish	2025-10-06	Online
2	Leo	Male	International	2025-10-08	Online
3	Simon	Male	International	2025-10-09	Online
4	Elin	Female	Swedish	2025-10-09	In person
5	Sofia	Female	Swedish	2025-10-09	In person
6	Emil	Male	International	2025-10-09	Online
7	Oliver	Male	International	2025-10-14	Online
8	Markus	Male	Swedish	2025-10-15	Online
9	Daniel	Male	International	2025-10-15	Online
10	Nora	Female	Swedish	2025-10-15	Online
11	Julia	Female	Swedish	2025-10-16	Online
12	Jonas	Male	Swedish	2025-10-16	Online
13	Mia	Female	Swedish	2025-10-17	Online
14	Sara	Female	Swedish	2025-10-17	Online

Appendix 3: Email Outreach

Hi XXX,

We are two students at the Stockholm School of Economics currently writing our thesis in management. As part of our study, we are conducting interviews with consultants and professionals in the industry to better understand how physical activity may influence motivation.

We are now looking for interview participants and would be very grateful if you would like to take part yourself, or if you could share this with colleagues who might be interested. The interviews take approximately 30 minutes and can be conducted digitally or in person, depending on what suits you best. All participation is, of course, voluntary, anonymous, and will be used solely for academic purposes.

Your help - either as a participant or by reaching out to others - would be highly appreciated and valuable for our study.

Thank you very much in advance for considering our request!

Best regards,

Meja Ruthér and Theo Kandell, Stockholm School of Economics

Appendix 4: LinkedIn Outreach

Hi XXX,

We are two students at the Stockholm School of Economics writing our thesis in management. As part of our research, we are interviewing consultants to explore how physical activity at work may influence motivation.

It would be fun to connect, so we can tell you more!

Appendix 5: Implications for Practice

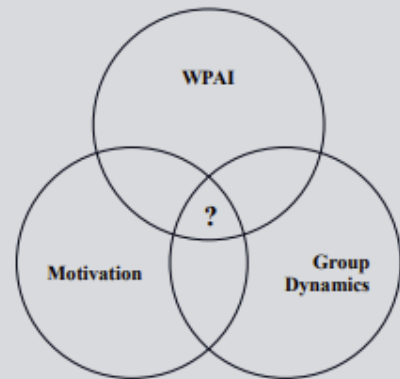


Research Question

In literature, workplace physical activity initiatives (WPAI) are typically evaluated through health or productivity outcomes, while little is known about how employees experience these initiatives in everyday work. A gap in literature was found where the connections between motivation, WPAI and group dynamics was not researched in qualitative measures. Thereby, our research question became:

“How do workplace physical activity initiatives shape employee motivation and group dynamics?”

By examining these mechanisms qualitatively, we explore why WPAI matters, how it affects motivation, and what relational processes it triggers inside high-performing organizations.



4

Methodology

Research Approach

- The study followed an interpretivist paradigm to capture employees' subjective and socially embedded experiences of WPAI.
- An abductive approach allowed us to move between theory and empirical insights throughout the process, ensuring theoretical depth while remaining open to new emerging themes.

Qualitative Research Design

- A qualitative design was chosen to understand how motivation and group dynamics unfold in practice which are phenomena that cannot be meaningfully captured through numeric measures alone.

Data Collection

- This study used purposive sampling to identify consulting firms that fit the research scope, followed by voluntary, self-selected, participation from employees within those firms.
- We used an interview guide with primarily open-ended questions, designed to understand employees lived experiences while still covering main topics that allowed us to answer the research question.

Data analysis

- We used a thematic analysis, following an iterative and reflexive process where we read the interview transcripts multiple times and focused on identifying what was regarded most significant for the respondents.
- Codes were clustered into higher-order themes, resulting in four central themes: Workplace Culture, Organizational Support, Relational Outcomes, and Motivational Effects. These were later refined into eleven lower-order themes to capture internal variation.

5

Quality Assurance



Credibility:

- We independently coded transcripts before comparing interpretations, reducing individual bias and ensuring that multiple perspectives shaped the analysis.
- Reflexive discussions were held after each interview to question assumptions, identify emerging themes, and detect any influence of prior expectations.



Dependability

- All methodological decision, from sampling to coding, were carefully documented, creating a trail of how interpretations evolved.
- The interview guide was refined after two interviews to ensure clarity and alignment with the research aim.



Transferability

- We provided contextual descriptions of the consulting environment and workplace culture so that readers can judge whether findings apply in similar settings.
- Sampling included variation in seniority, gender, and nationality to reflect a broader range of lived experiences.



Confirmability

- We share a personal interest in physical activity, which required conscious reflexivity.
- We consistently questioned whether interpretations were grounded in data rather than personal beliefs, ensuring that findings reflected participants' voices rather than researcher expectations.

6

Main Findings

1

Culture Shapes Participation

The consulting environment is performance-driven, socially dense, and physically active.

WPAI becomes embedded in this culture, shaping how employees evaluate whether participation is expected or desirable.

2

Mixed Signals of Org. Support

Support such as subsidies and encouragement signalled care, but time pressure made WPAI feel symbolic for some employees.

Motivation increased when support aligned with workload and decreased when working conditions contradicted organizational messaging.

3

Bonding and Boundaries

Relations are strengthened but also bounded.

WPAI builds trust, cross-departmental ties, and meaningful social bonds. However, informal in-groups also emerge, creating subtle boundaries for those who do not or cannot participate.

4

WPAI Generate Motivation

Motivation emerges through multiple mechanisms.

Competence: *strengthened* when workouts provided an attainable challenge; *undermined* when sessions felt too demanding or too easy.

Autonomy: *supported* when participation felt voluntary; *undermined* by pressure to perform or join.

Relatedness: *enhanced* through shared effort and interaction; *weakened* when employees felt excluded or unsupported.

7

Implications for Management

WPAI as a Culture-building Tool

Physical activity itself is not the main driver of increased motivation. Instead, it is the social belonging, trust, and cross-team relationships that shape how energized and committed employees feel.

- Support loses impact when employees lack time; therefore, management must align staffing, deadlines, and meeting norms so WPAI are realistically accessible rather than symbolic benefits.

Management takeaway:

WPAI is a strategic culture-building tool. It strengthens cross-functional cohesion, supporting better collaboration, and client delivery quality.

Workload Constrains Matters

Time pressure and workload limit actual participation. Support is motivating only when employees have autonomy to use it.

- Normalize participation by integrating WPAI into workflow planning.
- Support should be equally implemented among employees.

Management takeaway:

Ensure there is alignment between culture, capacity, and policies, not only financial support.

WPAI as a Strategy for Retention

Social bonds formed through WPAI made employees feel more attached to the organisation and less likely to leave.

- Position WPAI as part of the firm's retention strategy.
- Strengthen cross-project relationships by designing voluntary WPAI:s that deliberately mix teams and seniority levels.

Management takeaway:

WPAI can reduce turnover risk by increasing belonging: support continuity, reduce onboarding costs, and maintain tacit knowledge flow.

8

Implications for Employees

WPAI Strengthens Social Bonds

Employees consistently described WPAI as a major source of belonging, friendship and cross departmental connection.

- Not just wellness perks but also function as informal social infrastructure.
- Employees with stronger internal networks are more motivated more engaged and significantly less likely to leave.

Employee takeaway:

Engaging in WPAI increases job satisfaction and makes work more enjoyable.

Messaging of WPAI Matters

High performing cultures create pressure to join and pressure to perform.

- Employees who fear being "the worst one in the room" or who feel sessions are implicitly mandatory may experience reduced freedom negatively affecting motivation and wellbeing.

Employee takeaway:

Reflect on your participation and make sure you engage for your own enjoyment and satisfaction. WPAI should never feel mandatory.

WPAI Enhances Motivation

Employees describe feeling more energized, sharper and more motivated after WPAI.

- WPAI break the day and improve energy control and facilitate informal knowledge sharing.
- Improves real time productivity and collaboration across project teams.

Employee takeaway:

WPAI serve as a lightweight but powerful productivity enhancer but need to be balanced with autonomy and workload.

9

Implications for Regulators

WPAI Matters for Social and Mental Benefits

WPAI increased employees' sense of belonging, trust and cross-team collaboration more than they improved physical health alone.

- WPAI should be recognized by regulators not only as health interventions but as social capital building mechanisms within organizations.
- Policies that incentivise WPAI could also support objectives related to employee integration, mental well-being and social cohesion.

Regulator takeaway:

National well-being strategies should treat workplace physical activity as part of social sustainability and workplace community development, not merely physical wellness.

Ensure Practical Support

Employees appreciated WPAI but often lacked time or capacity to participate due to workload intensity. In these cases, initiatives became symbolic rather than practical forms of support.

- Regulators should ensure that organizational support for health is accompanied by realistic workload standards.
- Without enforceable structures for rest movement and recovery, wellness initiatives risk masking systematic issues rather than solving them which aligns with emerging EU discussions around rights to disconnect and work flexibility.

Regulator takeaway:

Health policies must address work conditions, not just promote extracurricular wellness initiatives.

10

Ethical Implications

This study highlights important ethical considerations around workplace physical activity initiatives. There is a potential risk that our findings could be misinterpreted as portraying WPAI negatively due to the challenges and risks we identify. However, the majority of participants emphasized the positive impact of these initiatives when designed and implemented with genuine care and respect.

It is important to note that while WPAI generally fosters motivation, belonging, and well-being, they can also challenge autonomy by unintentionally creating pressure to participate and reinforcing subtle social boundaries. Organizations must therefore ethically balance promoting engagement with respecting individual differences to ensure WPAI genuinely support employee well-being and inclusivity.

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Recommendations for Decision-makers

Protected Time for WPAL

- Implement recurring, meeting-free time blocks reserved for voluntary participation in physical activity initiatives.
- Communicate organizational endorsement clearly, reassuring employees that stepping away from work to participate is accepted and encouraged.

This supports employees' autonomy and signals ethical respect for their well-being, reducing conflicts between work demands and participation.

Diversify Activity Options

- Offer a variety of activities catering to different fitness levels and preferences, such as alternating low- and high-intensity sessions or mixing team sports with individual workouts.

This fosters inclusivity by acknowledging individual differences and promotes broader engagement across diverse employee groups.

Fair Resource Distribution

- Establish transparent guidelines to allocate funding and resources equitably across all WPAL, avoiding favoritism toward highly competitive or popular activities.

By doing so, organizations ethically promote equal access and prevent exclusionary dynamics that could undermine group cohesion.

Clear Communication

- Explicitly state that participation is voluntary, framing WPAL as opportunities for well-being and social connection rather than performance evaluation.

This ethical communication minimizes unintended pressure, supports psychological safety, and encourages authentic engagement.

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Thank You.

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