

By IMSA Global Search | January 20, 2026

Exercise and the Workplace, Insights from Stef de Haas



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Inactivity on the Rise Worldwide

According to the World Health Organization, almost 1/3 of the global population is physically inactive, which means they do less than the 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week. 43% of adults worldwide are overweight, up from 25% in 1990, so the trend is headed in the wrong direction. Importantly, this inactivity is a leading risk factor in noncommunicable disease mortality with inactive people having a 20% greater risk of death. And from a public perspective, obesity is estimated to cost public health care systems approximately \$300 billion between 2020 and 2030. In light of these grim facts, the need for increased exercise as one part of the solution is an imperative.

Raising up the importance of physical activity is one way companies can support a healthier workforce and a healthier world. Most working adults spend up to two thirds of their waking hours at work. And with more people spending more of that time in the office, employers have the opportunity to impact levels of physical activity and, thus, overall employee health. Leaning into these trends, forward-thinking companies will be able to harness this energy to create more active, healthier, and happier work environments.

More Companies Demand Return to Office, Governments Get Involved

In the US, in 2025, the new administration issued an Executive Order demanding that all federal employees return to the office full-time. Global companies including Amazon, AT&T, Boeing, CitiGroup, Dell, JPMorgan, UPS, and X followed suit. And a recent KPMG CEO Outlook survey confirmed 79% of CEOs expect the work environment to shift toward in-office.

Stef de Haas, Managing Partner of IMSA Search Global Partners Netherlands and Partner of EPC Search, comments, "Netherlands is a very flat country, ideal for commuting via bicycle. Since Covid and the rise of hybrid/work from home, bike commuting has declined. Now, as employers demand a return to the office, the government has stepped up with a program called "Company Bicycle." Instead of a company car, employers may provide workers with bicycles free of charge or for a significantly reduced price, without it being considered a taxable benefit. It provides good quality commuting as well as the motivation to exercise."

Companies Engage Employees with Incentives including Corporate Fitness

As back-to-office strategies and mandates accelerate and evolve, employers recognize that most employees will feel they are losing flexibility. To compensate, many companies will evaluate the value of their incentives – from investments in company culture to rewards and perks. 86% of CEOs say they will reward employees with favorable assignments, raises, and promotions (KPMG CEO Outlook).

Companies will continue to assess and likely expand their corporate fitness programs as they continue to prioritize employee mental health and wellness. Many companies are already experiencing the benefits of group workouts – encouraging physical activity and building community. We are expecting to see recreational sports programs and leagues on the rise – from team sports like soccer, basketball, and volleyball to corporate challenges and run clubs.

According to Stef de Haas, IMSA Netherlands, "Organizing teams and company clubs are a great way to boost employee communication and improve company spirit. Leaders who recognize that investing in employee well-being means helping employees remain active during the day and after hours, will benefit from the improved happiness of their teams."

Running Clubs and Wearable Tech

In a recent Trend Report by Strava, the leading digital app for active people with over 100 million community members in 190 countries, run clubs and group activities with some social components are motivating people to exercise. Strava's report found a 59% increase in running club participation globally, and a 40% average increase in group runs, rides, or hikes vs. those that were solo experiences. And the American College of Sports Medicine Health & Fitness Journal Report, based on their annual survey of 2,000 clinicians, researchers and practitioners in the fitness industry, named Wearable Technology the number one trend in 2025.

De Haas confirms more employers are prioritizing employee wellbeing by encouraging healthy activities that support overall employee health: "From walking meetings, active company outings, and planned exercise classes, to run-walk-hike clubs, gym memberships, and providing wearable fitness tech, companies can encourage employees to add physical activity to their schedules. When employees feel like their company cares about them, they care more about their work, which enhances productivity and builds the corporate brand."

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