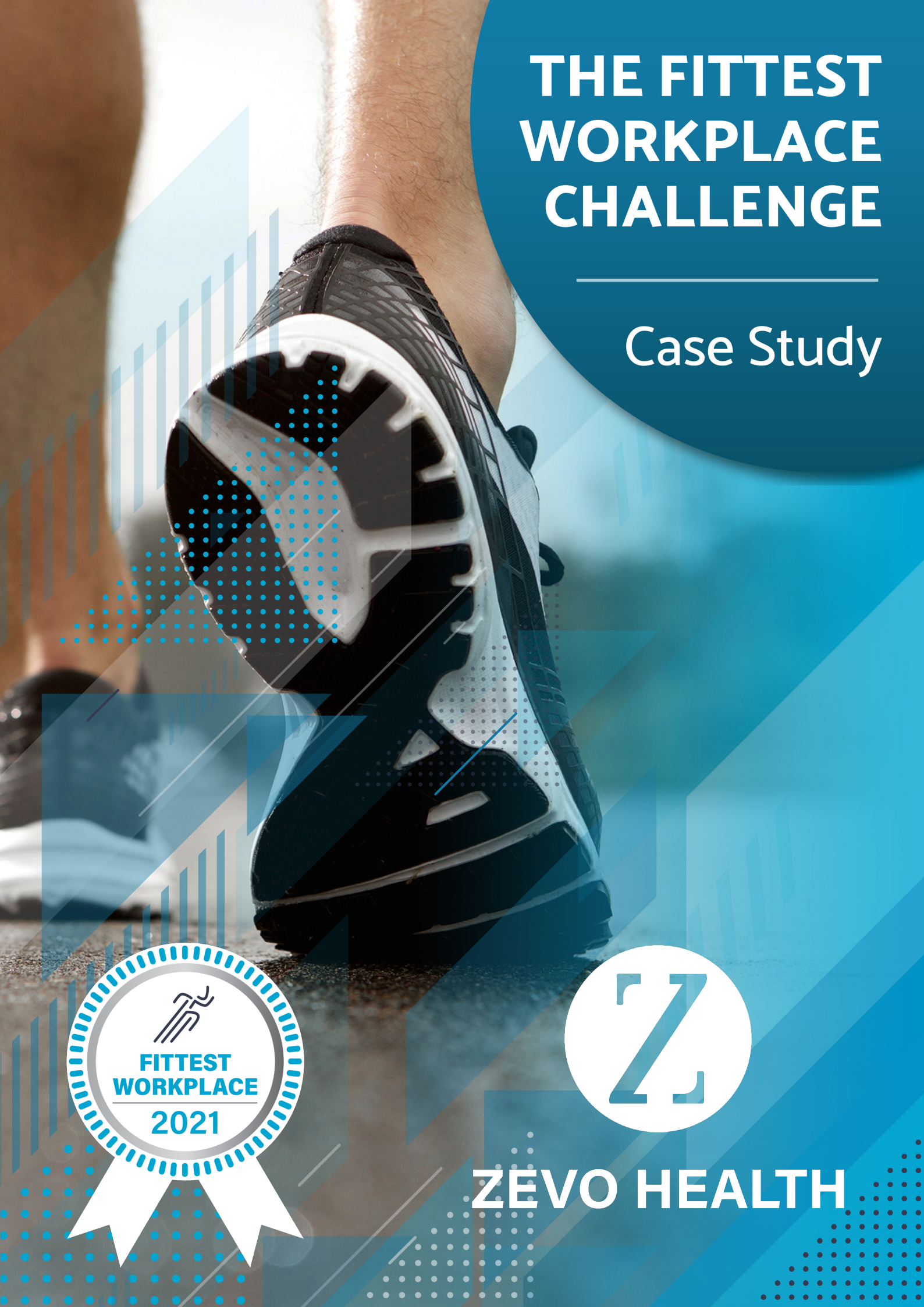
THE FITTEST WORKPLACE CHALLENGE

Case Study



ZEVO HEALTH

Contents

What is the Fittest Workplace Challenge? 3

Why is the FWC important? 5

Why sign up for the challenge? 6

Findings from the Fittest Workplace Challenge 2021 13

- Value of Investment 13
- Demographics 15
- Employee health 18
- Employee Morale, Participation Trends and Team Cohesion 18

Who is it the FWC for? 20

Conclusion 20

References : 21

WHAT IS THE FITTEST WORKPLACE CHALLENGE?

The Fittest Workplace Challenge (FWC) is a uniquely different activity challenge initiative purposefully designed for employees in any business environment, across diverse industries.

Competing companies contest for the prized title of “Fittest Workplace” over fourteen days - with the ultimate goal to be the team that reaches the highest average score, based primarily on step count.

This inter-company approach is curated to inspire employees within an organisation to band together and motivate one another to increase their daily physical activity levels - rising to the challenge as a unit. This company-wide, team approach, is one of the unique defining factors that differentiates this step activity challenge from many others.

In the FWC, the central focus is placed upon optimising employee engagement and strengthening intracompany relationships for the full duration of the competition.

Often physical activity challenge frameworks can pit colleagues against one another - which, by its very nature inevitably encourages internal competition and rivalry - as opposed to promoting an ethos of community effort and collaboration.

While this of course can add an element of fun to the challenge, the team effort that is required for a company to be successful in the FWC fosters organisational cohesion and gives employees an opportunity to flex their cooperative muscles, to build not only stronger bodies - but stronger relationships.

The FWC fosters organisational cohesion and gives employees an opportunity to flex their cooperative muscles, to build not only stronger bodies - but stronger relationships too.

Feedback from our most recent FWC 2021, demonstrates the efficacy of this approach. Our findings clearly indicate that this cohesive component yields additional benefits to the organisation that extend far beyond simply inspiring their employees to move more - and these are discussed in further detail below.

While there can only be one winner of the 'Fittest Workplace' title - cliche as it may sound, our evidence strongly indicates that all participating companies inevitably win, as they reap many rewards across various dimensions of wellbeing, from a micro to macro level.

WHY IS THE FWC IMPORTANT?

It is clear that employee wellbeing is fast assuming centre stage in any sustainable and socially responsible business model.

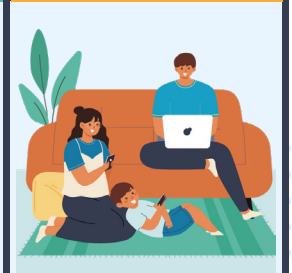
The W.H.O. has identified the workplace as a priority setting for health promotion and emphasises the central role employers play in optimising the wellbeing of their workforce. At the most recent World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, 2021 - over sixty global companies committed to reporting on new stakeholder metrics, which include a special emphasis on employee health in the 'People' category. Employers are rightfully taking more responsibility for the wellbeing of their workforce - which of course is especially relevant considering recent world events.

Changes in our work environment since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic have indeed helped to reduce viral transmission, but research indicates that these measures have also increased many lifestyle behaviours that contribute to the development of serious health conditions - including increases in sedentary behaviour and increased consumption of processed foods and alcohol (cso, 2020).

Subsequently, these trends in health-related behaviour indicate that employees working from home may be at higher risk of developing metabolic syndrome and work-related musculoskeletal disorders, as well as deterioration of mental health and emotional wellbeing than they were pre-pandemic.

Fortunately, many of these lifestyle behaviours can be effectively addressed with relatively simple interventions - mitigating the associated health risks. the FWC is a prime example of a relatively low cost, large scale, impactful solution that can benefit both employees and employers in many ways.

CSO Survey: SOCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-10 [April 2020]

Alcohol	Tobacco	Junk Food & Sweets	Time Watching TV	Time Online
				
Up 22.2% Down 17.2%	Up 30.55% Down 8.6%	Up 45.4% Down 12.3%	Up 44.3% Down 9.2%	Up 59.1% Down 2.8%

% of respondents whose consumption has increased/decreased since restrictions

WHY SIGN UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?

#1 Physical activity promotes general health and reduces the risk of developing metabolic syndrome and chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDS).

The extensive health benefits of physical activity have been widely documented in recent decades.

In November 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a comprehensive list of the many aspects of overall health and wellbeing that are enhanced by regular physical activity throughout the day:

- Improves muscular and cardiorespiratory fitness.
- Improves bone and functional health.
- Reduces the risk of hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes.
- Reduces the risk of developing certain site-specific cancer (breast/ colon/ bladder).
- Reduces the risk of falls as well as hip or vertebral fractures.
- Helps maintain a healthy body weight and reduce adiposity.
- Reduces the risk of all-cause mortality.
- Improves mental health (reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression).
- Improves cognitive function (memory, attention).
- Improves quality of sleep.

Extensive evidence from large studies unequivocally supports an inverse, independent, and graded association between volume of physical activity, general health, cardiovascular and metabolic improvements, and reduced overall mortality (Kokkinos, 2012).

The powerful therapeutic effects of physical activity are more relevant than ever to employers, especially given that metabolic syndrome has been significantly associated with both an increased severity and prolonged recovery from COVID-19 (Costa, 2020).

Equally, the prevalence of NCDs has been a significant global health issue for decades. NCDs encompass cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory illness, neurological disorders and cancer. According to statistics issued by the NCD Alliance, these illnesses account for 70% of all deaths worldwide. Every year, over fifteen million people between the age of 30-69 die prematurely from an NCD - most of which are largely preventable.

Despite this fact - the global burden of NCDs is expected to increase by 17% by 2025.

The current WHO guidelines for aerobic exercise stand at 150-300mins moderate intensity a week - however, this is only a minimum guideline to maintain health, and individuals who engage in higher amounts of sedentary behaviour (e.g., desk-based work), are advised to aim for the higher guideline of 300mins, or more.

Increases in physical activity can yield both acute and chronic improvements in health, reduce the risk (and improve management) of NCDs, and mitigate risks associated with the worrying trends in health behaviours during lockdown.

According to the Healthy Ireland survey 2019, over 50% of Irish adults do not meet these current guidelines.

To further compound this issue, research indicates there have been dramatic shifts in physical activity levels as a result of lockdown measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 (Arora & Grey, 2020). While some surveys indicate there have been increases in bouts of structured

exercise among some populations, the general trend indicates a significant increase in sedentary behaviour across the board, as well as a marked latency in people returning to pre-lockdown physical activity levels when restrictions are lifted (McCarthy et al, 2021).

These findings suggest that it shouldn't be taken for granted that individuals will bounce back to prior physical activity levels post lockdown - and that external support to not only regain but supersede pre-lockdown activity levels could certainly be beneficial.

#2 Reducing sedentary behaviour can mitigate the risk of developing work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMSDs)

In a recent report on the prevalence of WRMSDs published by the European Agency for Health and Safety at Work (2019) - MSDs were earmarked as the most prevalent work-related health problem across Europe, with three out of every five workers in the EU-28 reporting MSD complaints.

Of all work-related health issues that were reported, 60% of these identified MSDs as their most serious issue - backache and upper limb pain are among the most common complaints. Prolonged sitting was cited as one of the four most frequently identified risk factors.

WRMSD data features as an important dimension of the aforementioned stakeholder metrics advocated by the International Business Council at the World Economic Forum. This indicates that businesses across all industries and sectors will be paying more attention to the structural health of their employees.

Strategies to reduce sedentary behaviour and increase physical activity, such as the FWC, can help to improve aspects of structural health and mitigate risks associated with the development of WRMSDs (Parry et al, 2017).

Reducing sedentary behaviour mitigates a major risk implicated in the development of WRMSDs - particularly among desk-based workers.

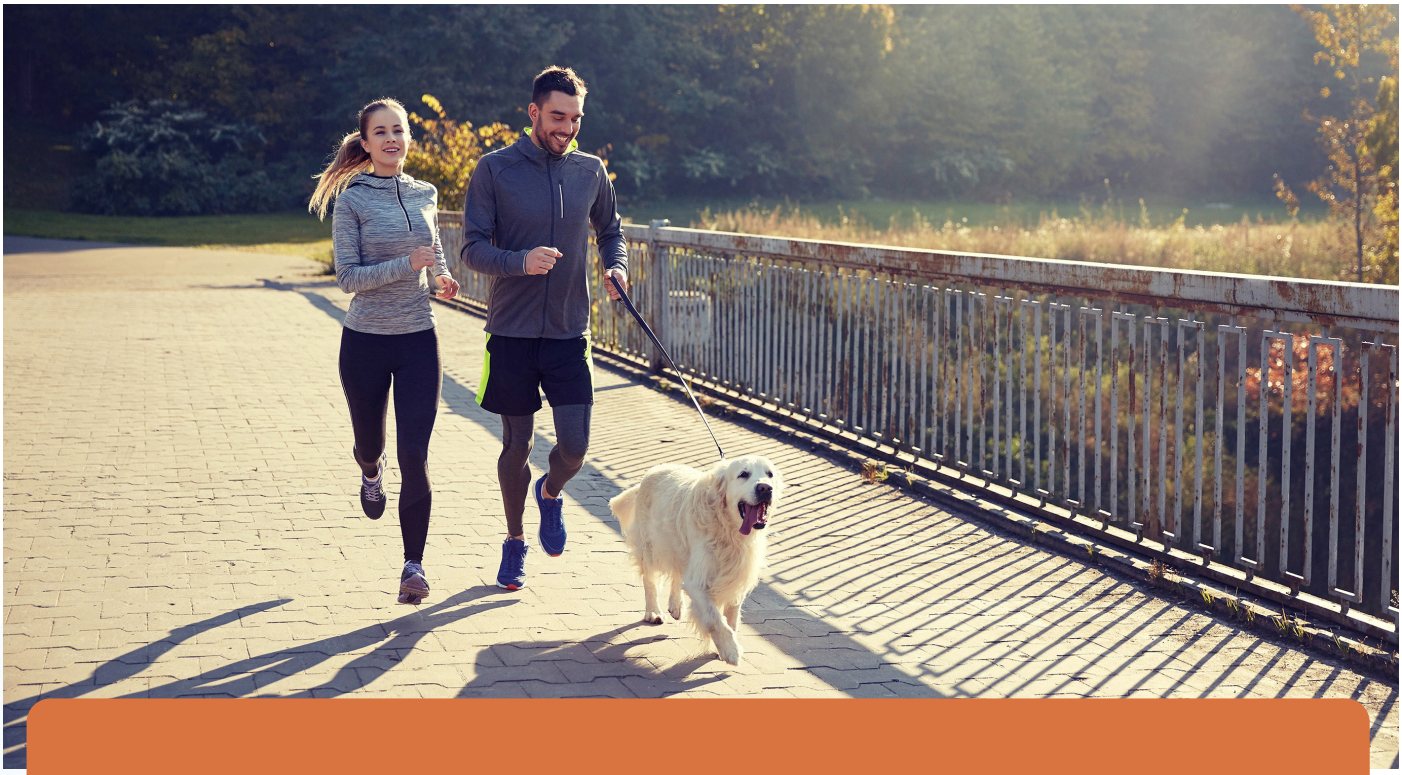
#3 Social engagement can improve overall health and wellbeing, and a supportive community can enhance adherence to exercise.

As many employees have adjusted to working remotely or in blended home/office environments - the amount of social connection people encounter during their typical working day is likely to have decreased substantially for many - especially for those living alone.
In a recent health survey of Irish adults, 74.4% of 18-34 years old reported that there mental health/wellbeing has been negatively affected by COVID-19. There is a steady upward trend in the number of respondents reporting they feel downhearted or depressed 'all/ most of the time', and a staggering 16.9% of women and 9.2% of men feeling lonely 'all/most of the time' (CSO, 2021)

In the field of health psychology - social connections have long been recognised as having a significant impact on both mental and physical health, and feature as a central component in determining health behaviour. This is illustrated in many contemporary theories such as self-determination theory, the theory of planned behaviour and the tripartite model of subjective wellbeing, to name but a few.

These models highlight the pivotal role of community, the quality of supportive connections, social and cultural norms in profoundly shaping our health behaviours. Social support can both initiate and improve adherence to new positive health behaviours, especially in the domain of physical activity.

Further to this, evidence suggests that health-related motivators to exercise are not as effective as social motivators among younger populations (Box et al, 2019).



Social engagement can improve overall health and wellbeing of employees, and a supportive community can enhance adherence to exercise.

#4 Improvements in subjective wellbeing can increase engagement in positive health behaviours.improvements in mental and physical health.

Evidence from a growing number of studies strongly suggests that subjective wellbeing is both a causal factor of improved physical health, and an independent predictor of health behaviour (Kushlev et al. 2020).

According to the findings issued in the recent CSO report cited above, subjective wellbeing for many individuals has been disrupted by social isolation and modification of normal lifestyle behaviours over the past twelve months. Initiatives that increase subjective wellbeing are likely to re-engage people in health promoting behaviours. There is a strong inter-relationship between physical activity and other lifestyle patterns such as sleep, diet, and alcohol consumption - improvements in daily activity levels often result in collateral changes in these other areas (Marks, 2018).

Improvements in subjective wellbeing and increased physical activity can influence engagement in other health promoting behaviours.

#5 Improvements in subjective wellbeing and increased physical activity can influence engagement in other health promoting behaviours.

Collaborative work within organisations has increased dramatically over the last 20 years - as business becomes increasingly global and cross-functional, connectivity is increasing, and teamwork is seen as a key to organisational success (Cross, 2016).

Initiatives to support the development of optimal team effectiveness has become a hot topic for many organisations - and the importance of relationship building is recognised as a prominent dimension of successful team collaboration (Gratton, 2007).

Teams are characterised by members working interdependently towards collective goals and by a period of stable membership - as interdependence increases, so does the need for team interaction and coordination (Hu, 2011). The FWC platform offers a unique opportunity for employee engagement and social interaction across the whole company - working towards a shared goal.

Novel team activities, even in playful contexts - have been shown to contribute towards developing psychological safety and team collaboration that have a lasting impact on group norms after the event ended (Wheeler, 2020).

Compared to other health behaviour interventions, an activity challenge shows high levels of engagement - and the use of an app alone can enhance program participation and reduce the risk of attrition (Guertler, 2015).

Instituting a physical activity challenge in the workplace has additional benefits in terms of cultivating team cohesion and giving employees a positive focus during difficult times.

FITTEST WORKPLACE CHALLENGE 2021: OUR FINDINGS

The inaugural year of the FWC - 2021 was a resounding success, with almost 2000 employees across 31 companies participating in the competition.

Participants hailed from diverse business sectors - from financial, consumer, and environmental services (20%), as well as healthcare and many other industries.

On completion of the challenge, we cross-referenced our step count raw data with HR and employee feedback to yield the following key insights from the intervention launch.

VALUE OF INVESTMENT

Hard figures on the return on investment for specific wellbeing interventions remains somewhat illusive to quantify accurately, especially for short term initiatives - as metrics relating to healthcare costs, productivity and employee safety require time to reflect meaningful changes, and only indicate a portion of the positive impact of the wellness initiative (Berry et al, 2010).

A truer reflection of the value of investing (VOI) in a health promoting initiative is often far more nuanced and multi-dimensional than these parameters are capable of quantifying.

Thereby a more thorough measure of VOI extends to factor in changes across the entire company culture, such as;

- Quality of internal relationships.
- Increases in employee job satisfaction and subsequent staff retention.
- Improvements in emotional state regulation and stress management of employees.
- Enhanced cognitive performance leading to greater innovation and creativity.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but serves to highlight just some of the more qualitative improvements that can arise from a successful programme that assists in the cultivation of a vibrant and excelling workforce.

A preliminary impression of the value of investment can be gauged by softer metrics, such as degree and depth of employee engagement in a wellness intervention, and can be supplemented by observed improvements in morale and health benefits.

Based on these grounds - we asked the HR representatives in the FWC 2021 to quantify their initial impression of the impact of the challenge and its value to the company - and the feedback was astoundingly positive:

94% of respondents reported the challenge had significant value for the company

50%	great / excellent value
44%	some / moderate

91% of respondents reported improvement in employee morale during the challenge

69%	significant improvements
32%	small improvements

87.5% reported widespread employee interest in participating in the challenge.

62.5%	very interested

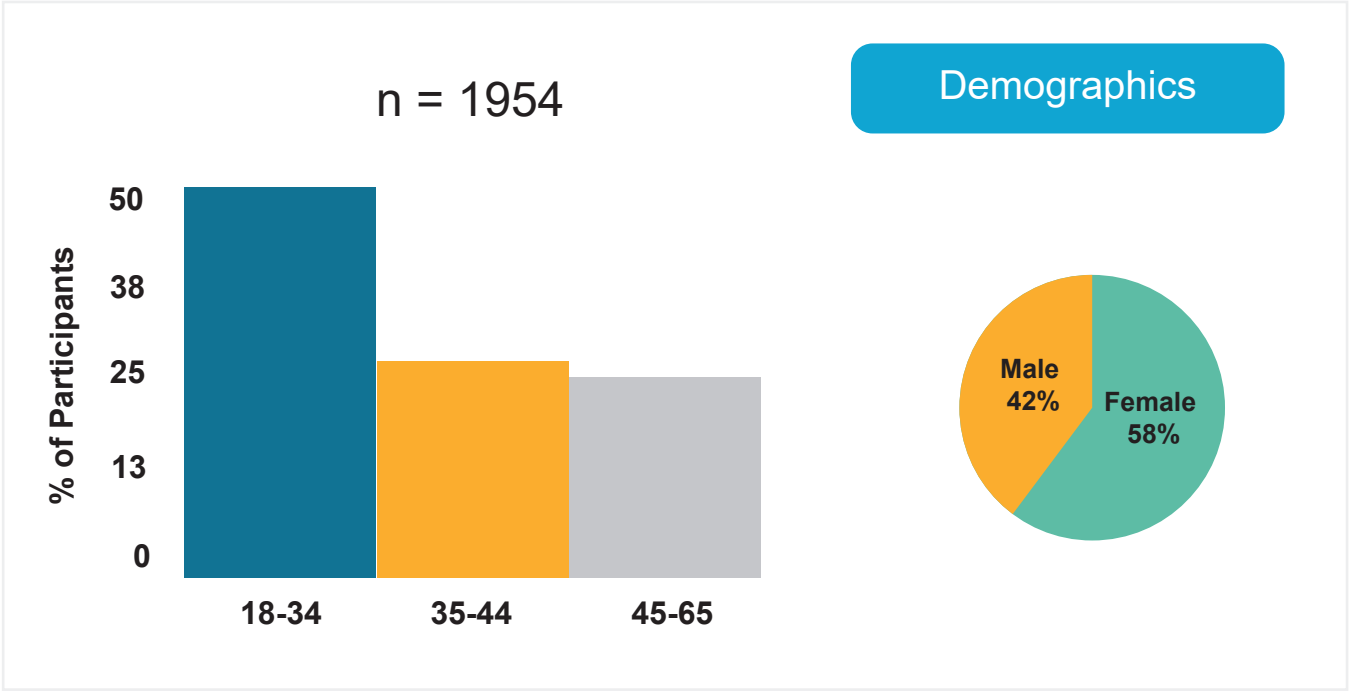
93% of HR respondents perceived improvements in employee physical health

80%	significant/ great
13%	some/small

The top three reasons the FWC was attributed to being of high value to the company included;

1. Providing employees with a non-work-related focus and it boosted employee morale and team cohesion (63%).
2. Perceived improvements in employee health and physical activity levels (25%).
3. Improvements in the overall wellbeing culture and image of the organisation (12.5%).

DEMOGRAPHICS



Age

Approximately half of the participants in the FWC were over 35-years-old - this is immediately a positive finding, indicating interest among older employees who can benefit greatly from increased aerobic physical activity.

Brain structural integrity starts declining during midlife, which increases the risk of age-related cognitive decline and neurodegenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's disease in later life (Park, 2017).

Research suggests that midlife aerobic exercise is associated with healthier brain structure and function, including higher white matter integrity (Takashi, 2021).

Gender

The challenge demographics reflected disproportionate engagement across genders, with more women signing-up (58%) compared with men (42%).

A recent study reports that many step activity challenge initiatives fail to engage men (Seaton et al, 2021) - and so, reframed by this standard, 42% can be viewed as a relatively successful uptake. This flags the importance of considering ways to equally engage men in physical activity programmes in future.

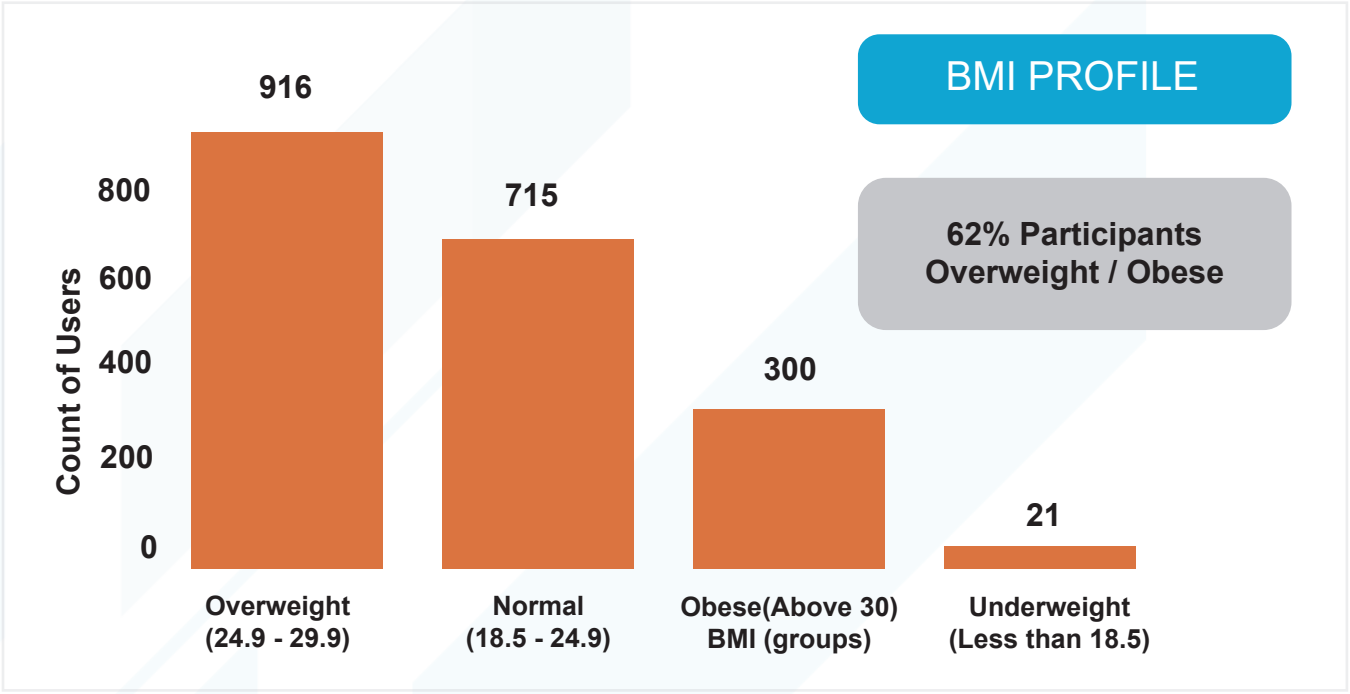
There is higher incidence of cardiovascular disease and diabetes seen among male cohorts compared to female (Wakabayashi, 2017), and the risk of contracting and/or dying from COVID-19 also appears to be higher among men in most countries (Jin, 2020). This has in part been attributed to genetic and hormonal differences between the sexes, but also higher engagement in higher health-risk behaviours such as smoking and drinking among some male populations (Bwire, 2020).

As previously illustrated above - improvements in physical activity can often have a knock-on effect on other behaviours (Marks 2018). Research suggests that a gender-sensitive physical activity workplace intervention and health promotion strategy shows promise for improving physical activity and sleep among men (Seaton et al, 2021) - and so this is perhaps most relevant for businesses with a high proportion of male employees, or those that see relatively low uptake in wellness programmes among male staff.

BMI

Further to the gender difference among participants, the demographic data also illustrates that over 62% of participants in the FWC were overweight/obese according to body mass index scores.

This figure correlates to a recent Healthy



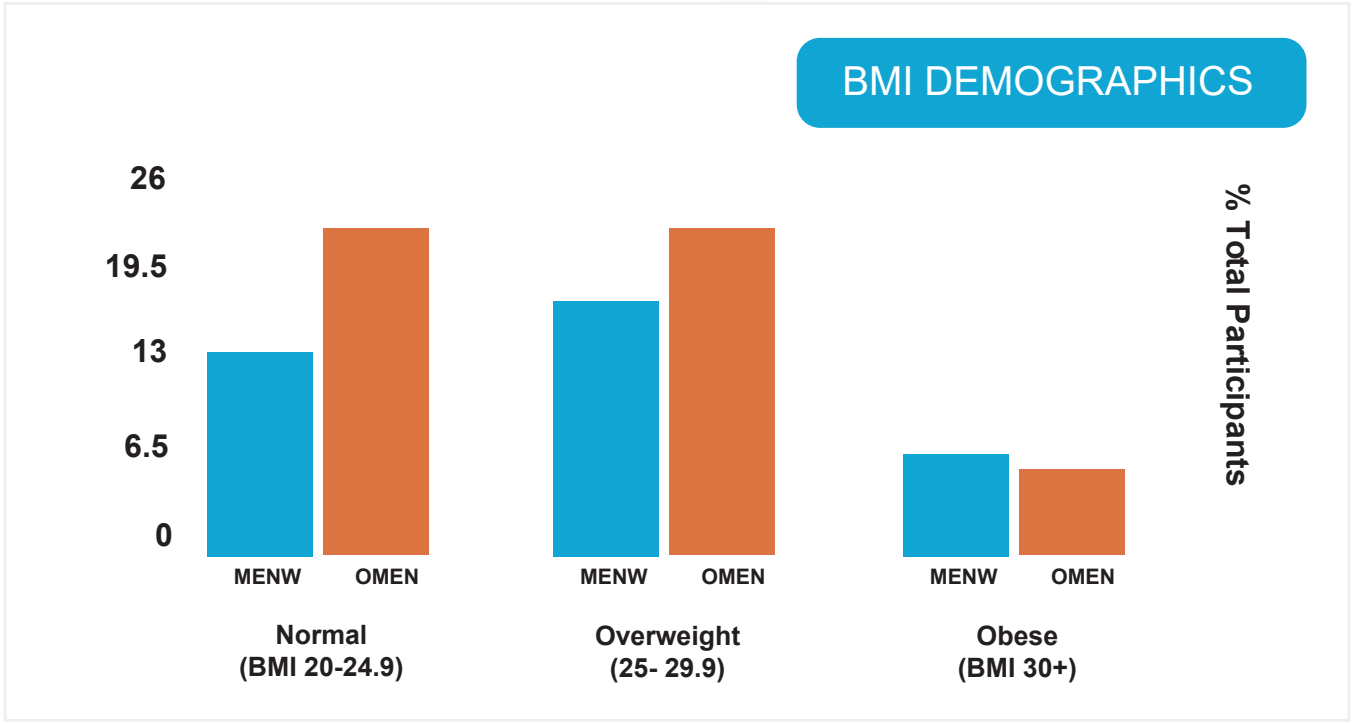
Ireland survey of Irish adults which reported that almost 60% of respondents were overweight.

Again, this is a highly promising finding - as the many health benefits of increasing physical activity outlined above can significantly improve the metabolic status of overweight/ obese participants, and reduce associated health-risks. A recent study suggests that an increase in daily steps among older women correlated to a lower risk of developing metabolic syndrome (Gawlak et al, 2021).

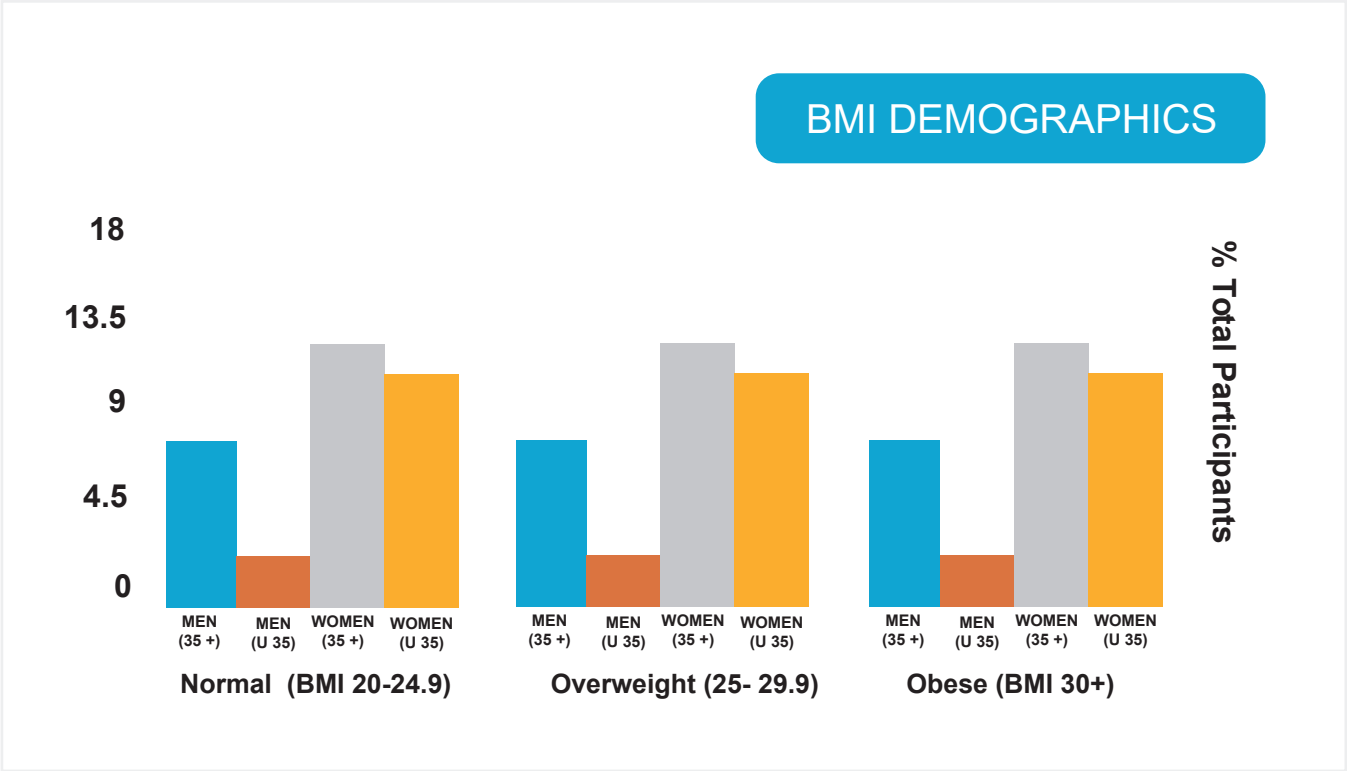
The greatest difference in gender can be seen between women and men in the 'normal weight category - with almost twice as many women participating. In the overweight category the gender gap closes, and in the obese weight category - slightly more men than women. This can also help to inform the health promotion strategy for future FWC within a company.

BMI / Gender / Age

Interestingly when we cross-reference age groups with BMI and gender categories - a clear distinction can be seen - with the greatest percentage of participants being overweight women under 35 years old.



The high percentage of obese and overweight men and women over the age of 35 is also highly promising, as this is a population who are potentially at higher risk of chronic health issues, and increased physical activity can yield significant health benefits.



EMPLOYEE HEALTH

The key findings from respondents of the employee survey, indicate the challenge had a highly positive influence on both their subjective wellbeing and physical activity levels.

Over 78% reported that the challenge had a positive effect on their health.

89% reported that the challenge motivated them to move more.

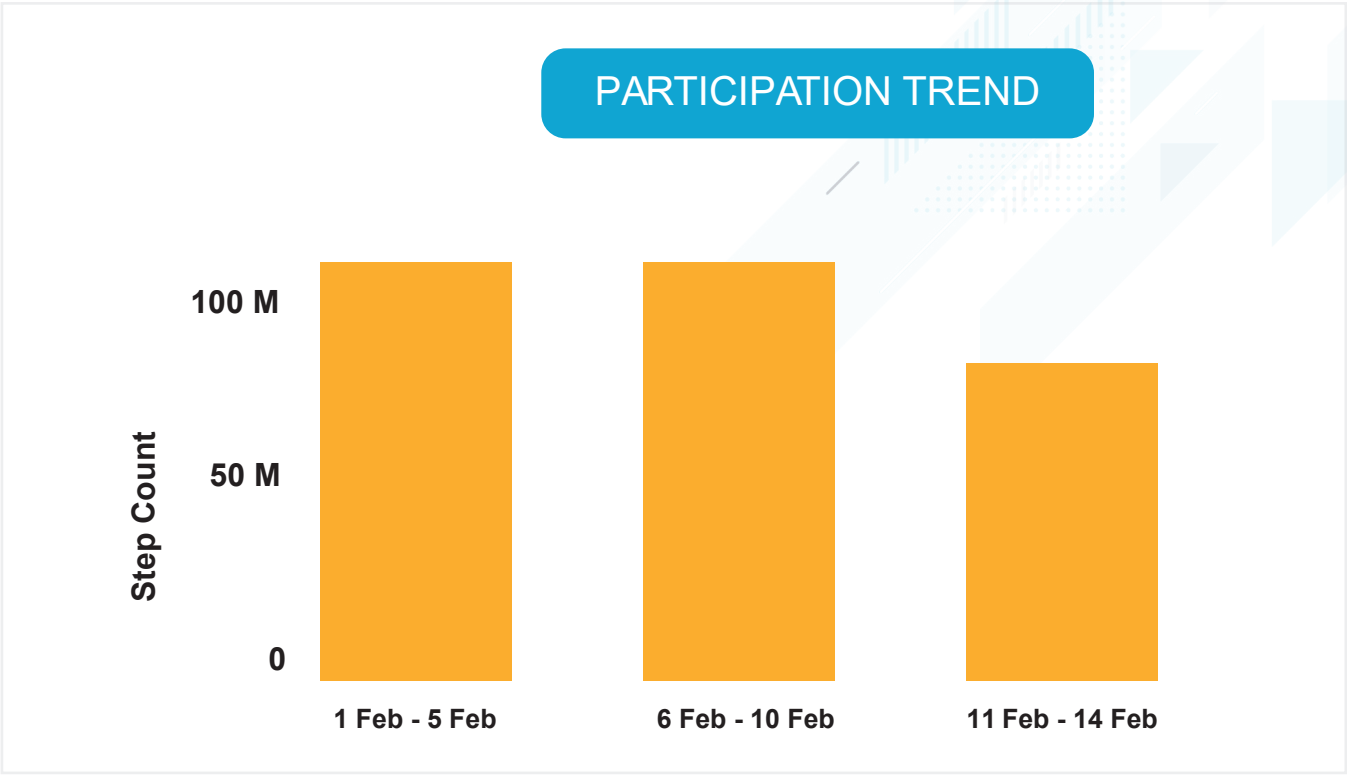
As cited above in the FWC rationale, increases in subjective wellbeing is not to be underestimated - as it has been identified as both a causal factor of improved physical health, and an independent predictor of health behaviour (Kushlev et al. 2020).

This in essence means that increases in employees perceived sense of wellbeing can have profound knock-on effects on their future behaviour.

EMPLOYEE MORALE, PARTICIPATION TRENDS AND TEAM COHESION

The top-rated reasons employees cited for participating in the challenge included;

1. getting more active
2. camaraderie
3. fun/excitement of the challenge



Employee feedback indicated strong desire to further increase intracompany channels of communication during the challenge - reflecting a strong desire for increased co-worker interaction and engagement, illustrating the cohesive impact of the challenge.

Another extremely positive finding was that 88% would likely sign-up next year. (78% definitely yes, 10% maybe)

When it came to participating trends during the challenge - both the step count data and HR feedback illustrated a high level of participation maintained throughout the challenge.

Participation remained almost constant in the first ten days - with a slight lag appearing in the final five day block for some participants. This is most likely due to motivation wavering among some competitors when clear leaders begin to appear and the winning margin feels too big to close.

Taking this onboard, revisions in the competition structure for 2022 are already underway - and strategies to optimise participation among teams that may not be contenders for the title are being considered.

WHO IS THE FWC FOR?

Company

The FWC is suitable for employees across multiple industries and many tiers within the business sector - however, it is especially beneficial for employees with a highly sedentary workforce, such as desk-based office workers.

Team

Employees form teams of up to seven participants - and the team average step count is tallied every evening and contributes to the company score.

This framework fosters team collaboration and company cohesion every step of the way!
Teams can be inter-departmental, or at the discretion of the company to assign - and this flexible structure enables employers to also run an internal challenge to parallel the inter-company competition if they so wish.

Individual

This challenge is quite literally for everyone - from beginners to regular exercisers.

The step-count focus means that everyone is measured against the same bar - it's not about how fast you can go, how hard you can push - but more about consistency, accumulation of movement throughout the day, and of course - the team effort.

Individuals with chronic health conditions or who are at higher risk of adverse reaction to exercise (PAR-Q guidelines) - are encouraged to check-in with a GP prior to commencing and get medical clearance.

CONCLUSION

The FWC is built upon the foundation of strong behaviour change strategies which include; a simple clear target/goal, self-monitoring through use of the app, social support through the team framework and company leaderboard, and gamification through the friendly competition element.

The challenge itself is delivered by a strong IT platform, a team of dedicated support. staff and the entire process undergoes a rigorous evaluation each year to continually refine and optimise participant experience.

A competition of this nature is a short-term intervention, but despite this, it can certainly yield long-term benefits and initiate improvements in employee health (Chew et al, 2021), and the efficacy of activity challenges in improving physical activity levels and health-promoting behaviours are well proven (Guertler et al, 2015).

There are countless benefits of participating in the FWC - however, before signing-up, it is imperative that employers are clear on what this is, and more so - what this is not.

A short-term intervention is not guaranteed to initiate sustained behaviour change among employees - it is optimal to deliver short duration interventions within the context of a broader long-term wellness strategy.

You are welcome to speak to us about your current strategy, so that we can see how the FWC may most effectively supplement your current initiatives, and thereby yield the greatest possible outcome for your organisation. If you do not currently have a specific physical activity strategy then we can also offer some advice on further follow-up support.

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