

Walking Meetings: The Research on Why We should “Walk and Talk”



Dr. Brandy Parker
Dr. Lodge McCammon
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Walking Meetings

Most organizations would agree that employees are their biggest asset. Having a strong workforce can make the difference between sinking or swimming in a changing economy. Unfortunately, the average American worker has been struggling with health and wellness.

One of the easiest tools that companies can start using tomorrow is walking meetings or the “Walk and Talk” strategy. Organizations like LinkedIn, professionals like Mark Zuckerberg, even President Barack Obama regularly use walking meetings (Peck, 2015). The concept is simple: rather than having a meeting in a conference room or office, with employees sitting around a table, employees go for a walk while discussing meeting topics. This simple strategy has the potential to make a powerful change.

The Physical Aspect

As of 2012, the CDC found nearly 70% of American adults are either overweight or obese (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). This same report found that in 2013, only 20% of adults met the 2008 federal physical activity guidelines for aerobic activity and muscle strengthening (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). Physical health problems can lead to negative outcomes such as employees being absent from work, increased stress, and increased healthcare costs for both the employee and the organization (Manning & Napier, 2014).

The average American spends approximately 60% of his/her waking hours sedentary (e.g., watching television, sitting at a desk, commuting; Matthews et al., 2008). In other words, we spend much of our time sitting. Researchers and health experts are finding that too much sitting is related to a host of negative physical health outcomes, such as weight gain and obesity, cardiovascular disease, and even some cancers (Matthews et al., 2012).

In order to reduce and prevent the negative effects of sitting, experts recommend that for occupations which are predominately desk-based, employees should aim for 2 hours of standing/walking during work hours, with the goal of progressing toward 4 hours of standing/walking during the work day (Buckley et al., 2015). Though standing is an improvement over sitting, walking is an even better choice, as it can help improve health. Walking has been found to lower blood pressure, reduce weight (Murphy, Nevill, Murtagh, & Holder, 2007), and even reduce the risk of coronary heart disease (Murtagh, Murphy, & Boone-Heinonen, 2010).

The Mental and Emotional Aspect

In addition to these physical health problems, employees are struggling to maintain mental and emotional health too. A survey of over 32,000 employees found only 53% agreed that their stress levels are manageable (Towers Watson, 2012). Sitting for long hours has been linked to negative mental and emotional health outcomes, such as increased risk of anxiety (Teychenne, Costigan, & Parker, 2015) and depression (Kilpatrick, Sanderson, Blizzard, Teale, & Venn, 2013).

Walking can decrease or even prevent depressive symptoms (Artal, 1998), reduce stress and anxiety (Carmack, de Moor, Boudreaux, Amaral-Melendez, & Brantley, 1999), and improve energy and mood (Thayer et al., 2005). When employees walk throughout the day, they may even perform better. Sitting limits blood flow to the brain, which limits optimal brain function (Anderson, Eckburg, & Relucio, 2002). Walking increases blood flow, meaning more oxygen is transported to the brain. This increased blood flow may be the reason why researchers have found cognitive benefits of walking, such as increased creativity (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014), and increased attention (Courchesne, & Allen, 1997).

Incorporating the Walk & Talk Strategy

With all this research about the benefits of walking, why are employees still sitting in their seats most of the day? It is largely a problem of time. Many employees are tied to their seats, with activities like working on a computer or spending time sitting in meetings. It may be impractical to walk while computing, but employees have the opportunity to change how they spend their meeting time.

Pairing the FLIP Meeting with the Walk and Talk strategy is an efficient way to minimize time spent in chairs and maximize time spent walking. This walking meeting format would look something like this:

The meeting facilitator creates a video presentation and sends it to meeting attendees prior to the scheduled meeting. The facilitator includes directions with the video, such as “please come prepared with ideas on how to improve this project.” At the scheduled meeting time, attendees gather at a specified location and then go for a walk. Attendees share their ideas, ask questions, and discuss the topic. The walking portion of the meeting concludes a few minutes before the scheduled meeting end time, at which point everyone takes down any notes or further instructions.

The key is in creating time to have collaboration and discussion. It is difficult for someone to present while walking, particularly if the presentation requires the use of visuals (e.g., showing charts in PowerPoint). The FLIP Meeting can reduce the time spent on presenting and can maximize the time spent collaborating. Questions, comments, and general discussion can take place during the Walk and Talk.

It is important for organizations to think of ways to get employees out of their seats and moving toward healthier habits. The Walk and Talk strategy is one tool that can help organizations promote a culture of health.

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