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**Physical activity
and sport in the
working environment.**



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1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The "Work, Move and Perf" (WMP) project aims to contribute towards challenging sedentary lifestyles among European workers by promoting physical activity (PA) and sport within workplaces through health enhancing physical activity (HEPA). It does so by exploring the links between physical activity, workplace productivity and wellbeing. The project is particularly relevant in the present context following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated the decline in physical activity levels across the European Union, with nearly half of Europeans reportedly never exercising or playing sport. Partners in the WMP project also collected qualitative and quantitative data on the links between physical activity and productivity, thereby making this information accessible to both employers and employees. These data will be instrumental in establishing a clear link between physical activity and workplace performance.

Indeed, the WMP project design recognized the need for multi-disciplinary, mixed methods research, including the need for further qualitative research. This report focuses upon the establishment of focus groups to gather insights from employees and employers regarding their experiences and perceptions of HEPA programmes at work. These focus groups were intended to help identify barriers to

participation and inform the development of tailored interventions that can effectively promote physical activity in diverse workplace settings

2. REPORT RATIONALE

Previously, and as part of the WMP project, a systematic review of quantitative studies and a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies were conducted which focused upon physical activity in the workplace, HEPA programmes, and evidence of its links to productivity. These reports illustrated how both consistencies and contradictions in how workplace productivity is conceptualized and measured. Workplace productivity was described as a multifaceted outcome variable that is often assessed with subjective evaluations of performance, such as self-ratings and questionnaires, as well as objective measures, though the latter are less common. The reports also highlighted how productivity is influenced by various other intersecting factors, including workplace interventions, environmental conditions, and organizational structures. Recognising this complexity underlined the challenges in measuring productivity, particularly among sedentary office workers.

What's more, our previous work identified two principal schools of thought regarding productivity. The first adopts a realist or post-positivist approach, viewing workplace productivity as an objective variable, a state of play or reality that can be studied empirically. Many studies in this category utilized qualitative methods only to complement quantitative data, and instead had a primary focus upon evaluation of the effectiveness of physical activity interventions. Such studies rarely interrogated the underpinning assumptions and rationale for delivering HEPA programmes in the workplace, and instead tended to focus upon delivery mechanisms and positive impacts of programmes. Conversely, a smaller group of studies employed an interpretivist approach, acknowledging that productivity can be subjectively understood and influenced by individual experiences and contextual factors. This duality in conceptualization suggests a need for further qualitative research to explore the subjective experiences of employees regarding physical activity programs and their perceived impact on productivity.

Such work is important because, that while some studies suggest a positive relationship between physical activity and productivity, evidence remains inconclusive. In part, this is due to the wide range of study methods and approaches that have been taken, making comparison of impacts challenging. For instance, some research has shown improvements in psychosocial function and reduced absenteeism linked to HEPA, which may indirectly enhance productivity. Other studies, however, found no significant associations between physical activity interventions and productivity outcomes.

This inconsistency highlights the necessity for more rigorous qualitative studies that delve into the lived experiences of employees participating in workplace physical activity programmes.

3. STUDY METHODS

This section of the present report describes the research methodology that informed this report's data and conclusions. To align with the project's overarching lexicon, the term "company" is used to encompass all participating organizations, regardless of their structure (e.g., private firms, non-profit federations, or ministry departments).

3.1. Study participants

A total of 14 focus group interviews were completed online in 2025 by partners in the WMP project. Interviews were conducted in native languages of participants in France (5 interviews), Malta (4 interviews) and Bulgaria (5 interviews), and ranged between 30 minutes and 90 minutes. Data was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2023).

Company size	Country	Sector	Participant characteristics
Large	Bulgaria	State	2 Male, 7 female
SME	Bulgaria	Private	5 male, 1 female
SME	Bulgaria	NGO	2 male, 3 female
SME	Bulgaria	Private	2 male, 2 female
Large	France	Private	2, male, 3 female
SME	France	Private	4 male, 1 female
SME	France	Private	2 male, 2 female
SME	France	Private	2 male, 2 female
SME	France	Private	1 male, 3 female
Large	Malta	Public	1 male, 2 female
SME	Malta	Public	3 male, 2 female
SME	Malta	Public	3 male, 1 female
SME	Malta	Public	1 male, 3 female

Participants were from a range of large companies and small-medium companies (small-medium defined as less than 250 employees, large with 250 or more employees). Representatives of * different

companies of various sizes from five different countries took part in this study. Given the time-frame and geographical scope of the project, group interviews were considered more practicable than solo interviews. What's more, discussion in the interviews generated new, more collaborative or comparative findings. The group setting also facilitated networking between the companies. We aimed for 3-5 participants per interview, and all interviews fit this criterion.

The interviews are designed to allow both employers and employees to discuss their practices and the rationale behind promoting physical activity in their workplaces. The key areas of interest included current policies and programmes for physical activity, the perceived impact of physical activity on productivity, and processes and goals associated with creating active workplaces. Interviews were conversational and informal in manner, where coordinators encouraged open-ended discussions. There was no rigid time schedule; questions can be addressed in any order, although all topics were covered. Interviewers did not take notes during the conversation but instead focus on engaging with the participant, and interviews were recorded for later transcription, which will facilitate accurate reporting of findings. Post-interview, recordings were shared with the research team via a file-sharing platform, and a shorter, loose template for reporting key findings in English was provided. Interviewers were encouraged to listen to the recordings to capture additional insights beyond the questionnaire data prior to completing this short report.

Interviews utilised a semi-structured schedule centered around three thematic frames to direct our questions to different areas of physical activities in workplaces, and which was aligned results of our previous reviews and quantitative studies. The interview schedule included several key topics and prompts to facilitate discussion, beginning with Background Information, in which the significance of physical activity promotion in the workplace was discussed along with existing physical activity programs and their goals. Second, the interview focused upon Definitions and Measures of Productivity, including how productivity is defined within the workplace, perceived characteristics of a productive workplace and culture, perceptions of the relationship between productivity and subjective outcomes such as wellbeing and satisfaction, and reflections on any methods used to measured productivity. Finally, the perceived impact of Physical Activity on Productivity was discussed, including exploration of tools and methods that could enhance the connection between physical activity promotion and productivity. The interview schedule served as a foundational framework to ensure the research question was addressed while supporting comparative analysis. Employing a semi-structured approach permitted questions to evolve from participant responses, encouraging deeper exploration through probes. This methodological flexibility was instrumental in capturing detailed, context-specific insights into the practices, challenges, and needs unique to each company.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis adhered to the thematic analysis framework established by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2023). The process began with a thorough familiarization phase, which included transcribing and repeatedly reviewing both the transcripts and audio recordings of the interviews. Following Braun & Clarke's framework (2006), transcription was treated as an integral, interpretive step in the analysis. Initial coding commenced during the second review, with notes on specific topics being generated to identify patterns in the data. Foucauldian theoretical concepts were utilized as a lense through which to analyse these data. Following data familiarization phase, initial codes were systematically and axially generated. Once all interviews were coded, the codes were compiled for cross-case analysis and codes were then categorized to identify consistent themes. Concurrently, the researcher began synthesizing coherent text excerpts and constructing an analytical narrative for each interview, incorporating illustrative quotations. This narrative is presented in the results section of this report.

Following the completion of transcription, coding, categorization, and thematic generation, the themes were reviewed with project stakeholders. Through this iterative review process, three themes were identified as particularly salient and were selected as key focal points. In the presentation below, each theme is organized according to its constituent sub-themes, which collectively form the broader thematic structure. Illustrative quotes were carefully chosen based on the criteria established by Tracy (2010) to emphasize critical insights and substantiate the recommendations presented in the subsequent section. Before data is presented, however, a brief overview of our theoretical frame will be outlined.

4. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This report utilized concepts and principle from Foucault's social theoretical framework. In brief, Foucault's focus upon the workplace aligns with his arguments that modern capitalism relies on the disciplining of individuals' time, transforming their existence into labour time that is functionally useful for production. This shift marks a departure from classical notions of work, emphasizing control of individuals' time rather than their spatial ties. Foucault suggests that the emergence of industrial society necessitated two key developments: i) Individuals' time must be offered to the market in exchange for wages, and ii) that their time must be converted into labour time, leading to the establishment of institutions aimed at maximizing the extraction of time from workers. He also notes that social policies are used to control workers' time, including to control leisure time, and to control

their capital via the banking system. Such measures are ostensibly concerned with welfare, yet also serve to align workers' time with capitalist interests. What's more, Foucault's analysis describes how new forms of power bind individuals to labour as a political operation, and he argues that capitalism requires a complex web of power to transform individuals into productive, docile workers. In more recent times, the shift to remote work has raised questions about managerial control and surveillance. For example, while telework offers workers more freedom, it also presents challenges for employers in terms of oversight and performance assessment.

Furthermore, Foucault's concept of the panopticon can illustrate how modern surveillance techniques have evolved in workplaces. Technology increasingly enables new forms of surveillance that penetrate personal spaces, creating a tension between worker autonomy and managerial control, and suggesting that the internalization of surveillance may persist even in less monitored environments. At the same time, resistance is also a fundamental aspect of power dynamics, and without it, power relations would not exist. For Foucault, the person -or subject in Foucauldian terms- is a site of resistance and truth-seeking, and therefore it is important to seek the worker's perspective in understanding work as an active, rational choice made by individuals. To this end, the Foucauldian approach is useful in inviting a reevaluation of the significance of work, suggesting that meaning and self-actualization can stem from the intrinsic value workers find in their labour, workplace cultures and wellbeing.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following section, data are presented alongside analytical insights that highlight the main discourses and conceptualization of productivity in relation to physical activity amongst focus group participants. The report moves through 5 higher order themes of discussion. Beginning with outlining consistencies and contradictions in how productivity is conceptualized, the report then describes how productivity is linked to physical activity from the perspective of participants. The report then outlines how first the regulation of time and space, and then workplace culture were described as key influencing factors upon the implementation of, and adherence to, physical activity in the workplace. The analysis concludes with reflections on some of the main contradictory factors concerning physical activity promotion in the workplace, focusing upon power dynamics and how participants simultaneously described physical activity as both a regulatory and emancipatory activity in relation to their experiences.

5.1. Discursive constructions of productivity in relation to physical activity

As in the scientific literature, definitions of productivity amongst focus group participants varied, suggesting an ephemeral and abstract definition of the term. Productivity in the workplace was defined through multiple ideas, including work output, work quality, and employee well-being. Participants highlighted that productivity is not solely about the quantity of work produced but also encompassed employees' mental and emotional state. For instance, one participant noted, *"I think being productive means that the time for work has arrived and you are motivated to go,"* emphasizing the importance they placed in motivation and mental health in defining productivity.

Additionally, several consistent themes recurred. First amongst these was the link drawn between productivity, worker output and efficiency. In this respect, interview participants frequently emphasized the need for quick turnover and high-quality work, with one participant noting how *"the quicker the turnover of patients... the more successful the [workplace] is,"* highlighting a management-driven perspective on productivity. Second, there was also a recognition that productivity encompasses quality of life, workplace culture, and employee well-being. For example, one participant stated how *"productivity is not only quantity, it's also quality,"* suggesting a shift towards a more holistic understanding of productivity that included employee satisfaction, as well highlighting perhaps the temporal and output-related considerations associated with productivity.

Moreover, cultural norms also shape perceptions of productivity. In some contexts, there was a prevailing belief that personal well-being is secondary to work output. One participant remarked, for example, how *"in France, corporate culture places little value on time dedicated to personal well-being,"* indicating a cultural barrier that may hinder the integration of physical activity into the workday. A second participant stated that, in such a cultural context, *"You feel like you have to be constantly productive, even during breaks,"* suggesting an all-pervading notion of productivity related to a culture of compliance where employees felt compelled to adhere to productivity norms.

Conversely, such perspectives were not universal, and some participants emphasized the need for a cultural shift that valued personal well-being alongside productivity. For example, one participant remarked how, as managers, *"we need to lead by example"* by integrating physical activity into workplace practices and cultures. Indeed, several participants suggested that organizational leaders should model healthy behaviors to encourage employee engagement in HEPA, suggesting a desire for discursive formation. It is to description of these perceptions that the analysis now turns.

5.2. Perceived links between HEPA and Productivity

Having discussed existing ways of conceptualizing productivity, the perceived impact of HEPA upon productivity and wellbeing was discussed. Indeed, HEPA (often interchangeably conceptualized as physical activity, exercise or sport) was frequently linked to enhanced productivity. For example, one participants expressed how *"physically active employees are more productive, have clearer thinking and better focus,"* suggesting that, for them, mental wellbeing was concomitant with both physical wellbeing, and both of which would contribute significantly to workplace efficiency. Another participant outlined how *"If we do [physical activity], people will be more productive, and there will be higher output, or better quality output."* Indeed, discursive constructions of productivity often tied HEPA to measurable outcomes, such as reduced sick leave or increased output, despite the difficulty in ascribing causation between such factors.

The perceived mental health benefits of physical activity were also frequently highlighted by participants. Engaging in physical activity was associated with *"releasing happy chemicals"* and improving mental stability, which in turn, as assumed to enhance focus and productivity. To this end, one participant remarked, *"physical activity really helps with this, especially team sports,"* indicating that the benefits extend beyond individual health to impact overall workplace morale. Moreover, the introduction of challenges, such as *"interdepartmental contests,"* served to create a competitive atmosphere that, for some participants, encouraged HEPA. However, such programmes were also considered to reflect a form of surveillance wherein employees were monitored for their participation and performance, reinforcing productivity norms. Indeed, the implementation of wellness policies was considered a key regulatory mechanism. As one participant mentioned, *"the promotion of physical and sports activities is not just an employee benefit — it is a strategic initiative."* Such views are suggestive of how organizational policies are designed to align employee health with productivity goals. Indeed, the concept of biopolitics is often evident in workplace wellness programmes that aim to shape employee behaviors and attitudes towards health. Without due care, participants felt that such a biopolitical approach could lead to the normalization of certain behaviors, where physical activity becomes a mandated aspect of workplace culture. One participant articulated this notion, outlining how *"health initiatives are presented as a way to improve productivity, but they often feel like another way to control us."*

On an organizational level, therefore, physical activity in the workplace was conceptualized as a potential tool for workplace optimization, and as a contested terrain. It was seen as a source of compliance and moral obligation, with participants discussing the need for workplace policies that encourage physical activity as a moral imperative. One participant described how *"we [the company]"*

need to push for sports at the workplace," suggesting that physical activity was viewed as a tool to ensure compliance with organizational norms to promote health, and in constructing and maintaining healthy workplaces.

On the other hand, there was also some doubt that the direct links between physical activity and productivity were well-established, as noted by one participant when they suggested that, for them, *"there are no established direct links between productivity and physical activity at the workplace."* Another participant supported this, stating, *"It's hard to quantify how much physical activity contributes to productivity; it's more about the overall environment."* This sentiment underscored the challenges organizations face in establishing direct causal relationships, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of how physical activity interacts with other factors influencing productivity. Indeed, such ambiguity reflected the complexities of how productivity was measured and understood within different organizational contexts and cultures. It is to reflections upon working practices and their influence upon physical activity, that this report now turns.

5.3. Productivity in time and space; The organization and implementation of HEPA in the workplace

The interdependence between HEPA, time management and working spaces was also noted as being crucial in terms of physical activity participation. Participants described the importance of having accessible spaces for physical activity, such as gyms or areas for group classes. For example, one participant mentioned, *"the [Sports Center...] offers a wide range of facilities for both individual and team sports,"* indicating how spatial design can facilitate or hinder engagement in HEPA. Moreover, the layout of the workplace can influence movement and physical activity. One participant highlighted how *"we have our sports rooms literally 3 minutes from the cafeteria,"* suggesting that proximity encourages participation in physical activities during breaks. Similarly, the creation of spaces designed to support physical activity was also considered crucial. One participant mentioned the need for *"showers or changing rooms"* to facilitate HEPA, whilst others highlighted the importance of partnerships with external agencies with facilities such as leisure centres. What's more, participants suggested various tools and strategies to enhance physical activity in the workplace. Ideas included conducting surveys to gather employee preferences for sports, organizing sports afternoons, and designating fitness areas within the company. One participant noted, *"we should give a possibility for our workers to go into the gym or something like that because it really helps,"* highlighting the importance of accessible facilities.

As with space, the regulation of working schedules and integration of HEPA into workplace rhythms was considered a central consideration. For example, management time through fixed working hours created a dual pressure on employees, and one participant noted, *"the main constraint mentioned is fixed working hours,"* which could limit opportunities for physical activity. Similarly, one participant outlined how *"there is social pressure to be present at the same time as others,"* which created a culture of compliance where employees feel compelled to adhere to productivity norms. Conversely, the desire for flexibility in work hours was emphasized, with one participant suggesting, *"maybe a little bit more flexibility with regards to working hours,"* indicating a desire to negotiate personal health needs against organizational demands. Another participant articulated how *"I want to be healthy, but I also want to have control over my time."*

Such control over one's time reflected a broader struggle for autonomy in the face of regulatory pressures, aligning with Foucault's notion of counter-conduct, where individuals seek to resist and negotiate the norms imposed upon them. Indeed, participants discussed the need for balance in work-rest rhythms, with one stating, "sport can force setting limits within the workday." Such observations highlight how temporal structures can be manipulated to encourage physical activity, yet can also serve as a means of control over employees' time. Indeed, employees reportedly negotiated their time and space to incorporate physical activity into their routines. For instance, one participant mentioned, "I take my lunch break to go for a walk," indicating a conscious effort to reclaim time for personal health amidst workplace demands and cultural norms. Therefore, we now discuss the influence of workplace culture on HEPA and productivity.

5.4. HEPA, Productivity and Workplace culture

More broadly, workplace culture was also considered a key defining factor concerning whether physical activity was seen as a tool of control or of self-management. Workplace culture was considered to either support or hinder self-discipline regarding HEPA, and whilst some employees highlighted the need for policy changes, such as flexible working hours or relaxed dress codes, to facilitate physical activity. For example, one participant outlined how *"A relaxed dress code, [a] policy, so that we can wear more sportswear to be able to do something with our body [helps us participate]."*

When an organizational culture was perceived to promote HEPA, employees could feel more empowered to engage in it. Indeed, companies and organisations were described as having an important role to play in supporting such techniques of the self. For example, policies that promote or restrict physical activity directly can impact employees' ability to engage in such activities. When policies were aligned with promoting health and well-being, it was felt that employees were more likely

to feel more empowered to engage in HEPA, thereby indirectly enhancing their productivity. Moreover, HEPA was seen as a way to foster social connections among employees, enhancing team cohesion. One participant outlined, when describing a sports event, how *"It [the programme] helps us also maintain a strong relationship with local stakeholders... a very fun atmosphere during that time when we're organizing such an event."*

On the other hand, excessive managerial surveillance was described as potentially inhibitive to informal interactions and social bonding, as employees might feel their behaviours and actions are constantly being monitored. Moreover, suggestions of surveillance inherent in workplace productivity metrics created a culture of both organizational and self-regulation, where employees felt compelled to monitor their physical activity to meet both personal and managerial standards. In particular, 'organizational' or formal surveillance was considered problematic. Such an observation exemplifies Foucault's notion of biopower in which individuals health, wellbeing and potentialities are governed through the regulation of their bodies and behaviours. Such tendencies could, according to participants, lead to feelings of more isolation and reducing the benefits of physical activity on team dynamics and overall morale. The impact of cultural norms on productivity perceptions was further illustrated by a participant who stated, *"In our company, taking time for physical activity is seen as a lack of commitment."* This perspective reflects the internalization of cultural values that prioritize productivity over well-being, highlighting the need for organizations to challenge and reshape these narratives to foster a healthier workplace culture.

Hence, there were some contradictions concerning how physical activity could be utilized to enhance productivity in all workplace cultures. Whilst some participants advocated for physical activity as a means to enhance productivity, others expressed skepticism about its feasibility within the constraints of their work environment. One participant, for example, lamented how, *"nobody would take it [physical activity] up... they don't even have time to have a quick coffee,"* highlighting the challenges of integrating physical activity into demanding work cultures. A second participant also outlined how: *"I think it's a lack of time and it's going to be very difficult to introduce a concept of actual time of work during a typical working day."* This tension between self and organizational monitoring was a considerable point of discussion in the interviews. Therefore, in the final section of this discussion, we outline the contradictions and complexities inherent in focus group participants' accounts of how physical activity influences productivity.

5.5. HEPA as a technology of power; Tensions between physical activity as a technique of the self and technology of surveillance

The discussion above has begun to highlight several contradictions and complexities in how HEPA programmes were perceived by focus group participants. The potential for both surveillance and regulation, as well as self-governance, were highlighted, as were complexities in power relationships between employees and employers. Indeed, tensions existed between the conceptualization of physical activity as both a technique of the self and a technology of power enacted upon employees by managers. For example, participants outlined how workplace norms and surveillance could produce tension between management's expectations and employees' experiences of both productivity and being active in the workplace. Focus group participants also felt that employees often felt the pressure of having their productivity monitored by management, which in turn was considered to influence their engagement in physical activities. For instance, some participants noted that the lack of time due to constant administrative demands limited their ability to engage in physical activity during work hours. Hence, data suggested that, to some extent, surveillance created workplace cultures where employees prioritized work tasks over personal well-being, including HEPA. Participants also noted that fixed working hours and the need to clock in and out create significant limitations on their ability to take breaks for physical activity.

Similarly, whilst participants highlighted that physical activity was crucial for mental health, providing stress relief and enhancing focus, they also outlined how, when employees felt surveilled or pressured to perform, they may neglect physical activity, in turn leading to increased stress and decreased overall well-being. For example, one participant mentioned that the lack of time for breaks due to surveillance and workload could result in feelings of burnout and reduced productivity. Whilst some participants expressed resistance to such perceived pressures linked to workplace surveillance, with one stating, *"I have to prioritize my health over work demands,"* others noted that the pressure to keep up with administrative tasks often led to skipping breaks that could be used for physical activity. Furthermore, the pressures of managerial surveillance could reportedly lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, with employees feeling that their well-being was not prioritized, and which in turn could lead to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with their work environment. This sentiment was echoed by participants who expressed a desire for more flexibility and support for HEPA initiatives.

When considering the implementation of physical activity initiatives, focus group participants felt that employees could feel compelled to conform to productivity performance metrics, leading them to express concern that employees would engage in physical activity not for personal health but to meet organizational expectations. Such experiences created a sense of surveillance, where participants expressed worries that physical activity levels could be indirectly monitored through performance outcomes. Indeed, participants noted how the presence of wellness initiatives, such as organized sports and fitness programmes, could also be perceived as an attempt to regulate employee health,

and that such initiatives can also serve as mechanisms of surveillance. For example, one participant stated, *"monitoring presenteeism and absenteeism as indirect indicators,"* highlighting how employees were often aware that their physical activity levels may be scrutinized.

Furthermore, participants highlighted a perceived disconnection between employee performance and managerial perceptions of productivity. For example, one participant noted how *"management has absolutely no idea what is happening,"* suggesting a contradiction between personal experience and external perceptions of productivity and performance. Indeed, results suggested the existence of complex power dynamics, where metrics of productivity were often controlled by management at arms length, yet where there was often a simultaneous push for self-imposed standards of employee productivity through physical activity. For example, one participant stated, *"if we can prove... how to measure productivity,"* he could potentially establish metrics of productivity that align with both his personal and organizational goals. Hence, participants felt that many employees recognized the benefits of physical activity for their mental health and productivity whilst also feeling constrained by the expectations of their roles.

Thus, whilst some participants viewed HEPA programmes as a form of resistance against sedentary working cultures, they were also perceived to be a means to promote self-management amongst employees, thereby responsabilising them for their own wellbeing. This wasn't an unwelcome trend. For example, one participant reflected upon the importance of taking breaks for physical activity, stating, *"using your break to go for a short walk is a good kind of reset."* Such perceptions of physical activity as a self-management strategy to combat workplace pressures and the potential for sedentary behaviours were moderately common, and in this respect, participants also discussed the use of personal fitness trackers and wellness programs as technologies of the self that encourage self-discipline. One participant mentioned how *"there are many devices through which a person can track their physical activity,"* suggesting that these tools are frequently used to monitor and optimize personal productivity. Such personal regulation was perceived differently to surveillance and regulation 'from above,' and several participants outlined how, in their experience, employees expressed a desire to engage in physical activity as a means of enhancing their productivity. For example, participants mentioned that physical activity helped them feel mentally refreshed and more focused at work. Such self-discipline was often framed as a personal responsibility, where employees should find ways to incorporate physical activity into their routines despite workplace pressures.

In sum, inconsistencies observed in how productivity was framed illustrated how workplace norms and cultures shaped understandings of what it means to be productive, often privileging output and efficiency over employee well-being. The positioning of physical activity as both a mechanism to enforce compliance, whilst simultaneously acting as a form of resistance, illustrated the complex

interplay between self-discipline and organizational expectations. Engaging in HEPA, therefore, could be seen both as a way to reclaim agency in a highly monitored work environment, whilst others could comply with the expectations of productivity by sacrificing their HEPA participation for productivity goals, leading to a cycle of burnout and decreased overall well-being. Indeed, one participant mentioned that the lack of time for physical activity led to feelings of exhaustion and decreased energy levels.

Such tensions and contradictions in discourses concerning productivity and physical activity highlighted the challenges of aligning personal health initiatives with organizational productivity goals. While physical activity was framed as beneficial for productivity, the realities of workplace demands often undermined these efforts, revealing the limitations of a purely output-driven approach to productivity. HEPA therefore functioned within broader workplace discourses of productivity as both a tool for optimization and a site of resistance. According to our participants, it is often framed as a moral obligation by management, while simultaneously serving as a means for employees to assert agency over their well-being. The interplay of power relations, surveillance, and self-discipline outlined here underscored the complexities of integrating physical activity into workplace culture, ultimately reflecting the need for a more nuanced understanding of productivity that values employee health alongside organizational goals.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The "Work, Move and Perf" (WMP) project aims to address sedentary lifestyles among European workers by promoting health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) in workplaces, particularly in the context of declining physical activity levels exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The present report outlines key findings obtained during a study which utilised qualitative focus group interviews with participants from various organizations across France, Malta, and Bulgaria. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key discourses surrounding productivity and physical activity.

Participants defined productivity in multifaceted terms, emphasizing not only work output but also quality, employee well-being, and mental health. This holistic view challenges traditional metrics that prioritize quantitative measures as measures of productivity and instead suggests complexity and the importance of subjective understandings of the concept. What's more, workplace culture significantly shapes perceptions of productivity and physical activity. In some contexts, personal well-being is undervalued, creating barriers to integrating HEPA into daily routines. Conversely, a cultural shift towards valuing well-being alongside productivity was advocated by some participants. To this end,

the organization of work schedules and the availability of physical activity spaces were identified as critical factors influencing participation in HEPA. Flexible working hours and accessible facilities can encourage employee engagement in physical activity.

Indeed, many participants associated HEPA with enhanced productivity, citing benefits such as improved focus and mental clarity. Skepticism remained, however, regarding the direct causal links between HEPA and productivity outcomes. What's more, the report highlights complex power dynamics where managerial surveillance can inhibit employee engagement in physical activity. Participants expressed concerns about being monitored, which can lead to stress and decreased job satisfaction. HEPA programs were perceived as both a means of self-management and a tool for organizational control. While some participants viewed physical activity as a way to reclaim agency, others felt pressured to conform to productivity metrics.

The findings in this report remain at the exploratory level, particularly given the recognized importance of factors such as context, local environment and workplace cultures. Hence, there is a need for further qualitative studies to explore the subjective experiences of employees regarding HEPA programs and their impact on productivity in other contexts, workplace types, and with a focus upon specific types of employment. What's more, understandings of the relationship between productivity in the workplace and HEPA would benefit from additional focus upon HEPA practices throughout the 24 hours of a day, coupled with investigating the influence of rest, in order to assess how workplace HEPA programmes might fit within the general tempo of employees life with and beyond the workplace. Moreover, our findings underline the importance of promoting workplace cultures that value employee health and wellbeing *alongside* productivity, rather than assuming the former precludes the latter in all cases.