

Keeping fit to curb workplace deviance

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If you feel that work is wearing you down, you are not alone. The economic value that modern organizations strive to create comes at a human cost to employees in terms of reduced physical fitness.

Either directly, or indirectly, work can cause exhaustion and strain, sleep

deprivation, presenteeism and poor nutrition choices. Worldwide, the workforce is becoming more obese and vulnerable to diseases.

"I would say that work has become increasingly more stressful and is placing a toll on one's physical and [mental health](#)," says Kenneth Tai, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Professor Tai has co-authored research informing the cost-benefit analysis of the relationship between economic production and physical [fitness](#) by uncovering a significant but overlooked cost associated with low physical fitness—deviance.

Deviance describes deliberate behavior that violates organizational and societal norms and threatens the well-being of the organization and the broader community. It is prevalent, on the rise and introduces systemic efficiency losses to organizations.

Costs in the US associated with just one type of deviant workplace behavior—employee theft—have been estimated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to be as much as \$40 billion yearly, which is almost ten times the cost of all street crime combined, including burglaries and robberies.

"Deviant workplace behavior is so widespread due to several reasons, including reactions to experiences of injustice, reflections of one's personality and adaptations to the [social environment](#)," Professor Tai says.

Losing self-control

An additional explanation for deviance is ego depletion.

"In our paper, we focus on control capacity, which scholars have generally conceptualized as ego depletion," Professor Tai says.

"The idea is that ego depletion can be thought of as a pool of self-control resources exhibiting some degrees of temporal stability. Some people are, on average, more likely to be ego-depleted than others in general, as well as exhibiting significant variation over time, where people feel more depleted on some days than other days."

Ego depletion presents as burnout, with an inability to muster enough regulatory resources to meet a specific self-control demand, such as resisting an urge to steal something. If we are required to keep working when feeling overtired, drained, and stressed, which is not uncommon in modern settings, we can be prone to ego depletion.

Fortunately, Professor Tai and his co-authors see a solution in maintaining physical fitness.

"Physically fit individuals are less likely to engage in deviant behavior because they are more likely to build up their self-control capacity over time, such that they are better able to override desires or impulses to engage in deviant behavior," Professor Tai says.

"Physical activity involves a trade-off between short-term costs—such as time spent and physical discomfort—and long-term gains, such as physical health and self-control capacity. Overcoming the costs of [physical activity](#) and engaging in physical activity requires discipline and successful acts of self-control. Therefore, the more individuals engage in physical activity, the more likely they will build up their [self-control](#) capacity over time," Professor Tai continues.

The bottom line

So, why are most organizations not actively managing physical fitness issues?

"This is likely due to the focus on generating [economic value](#), such that managers and organizations alike may knowingly or unknowingly produce negative externalities in terms of human physical fitness in the pursuit of economic benefits," Professor Tai says. "Our research suggests that physical fitness matters even in knowledge-based work that may not necessarily involve physical work or labor by imposing [social costs](#) in the form of deviance."

Aside from workplace pressure, there are social issues that can undermine physical fitness.

"Past research has shown that social factors such as poverty, poor family dynamics, community violence, barriers to care and other environmental and developmental stressors can undermine people's [physical health](#) and fitness," Professor Tai says.

Individuals who receive less social support are less likely to follow up with their physical fitness goals. Professor Tai's research team suggests that not only can social issues undermine physical fitness, but lower physical fitness may, in turn, fuel further social issues, such as impaired relationships at work.

And the co-authors have debunked one of the ideas from early work in criminology that attempted to uncover biophysical underpinnings of deviance by specifying a prototypical body type most prone to such behavior. Athletic mesomorphs were the prime suspect due to their greater than average muscular development.

"Our research debunks this by showing that physically fit individuals are less likely (rather than more likely) to be deviant. Although

mesomorphic individuals possess the physical ability to engage in acts of direct physical aggression, it does not mean that they are motivated to do so simply due to their physical build," Professor Tai says.

Practical implications

The researchers conducted three studies, the second of which examined whether objectively measured fitness of 3925 military recruits was negatively related to peer-reported deviance. They found this to be the case.

In the military context, deviance can be highly costly as it not only compromises individual and collective safety but also military and national security. The US army loses an estimated \$7 billion annually due to deviance.

But the message applies to all workplaces.

"In terms of practical implications of our findings, our research suggests that managers and organizations should not neglect employees' physical fitness," Professor Tai says.

"In particular, we hope that our research motivates organizations and economic systems to boost physical fitness among the less physically fit, as opposed to discriminating against such individuals. For example, organizations may sponsor initiatives or interventions that include health seminars, and corporate health and fitness clubs to encourage physical activity and healthy behaviors.

"Extending this further, managers may also concurrently explore how financial incentives can motivate people to engage in physical activity, ultimately increasing physical fitness."

Professor Tai and his co-authors are continuing their research in further directions.

"We are exploring how [physical fitness](#) may influence other positive interpersonal behaviors at the workplace, such as prosocial and proactive behaviors, and the moderating factors that may affect these relationships," he says.

Provided by Singapore Management University

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