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## Cycling revolution in the workplace

By Sam Phipps

**The benefits of cycling to work are becoming more widely acknowledged. And although the picture is patchy, the money is starting to follow the tyre marks**

From Europe to the United States, in many of the world's car-dominated cultures, more people are choosing to travel to work by bike. They are spurred by a combination of infrastructure improvements, financial incentives and bike share schemes.

Many employers in both the private and public sectors are also doing more to encourage staff into the saddle. Organisations can not only reap major cash savings on car parking provision – an average of £400 a year for a single space, according to the UK Department for Transport – but also take credit for carbon cuts and reduced congestion.

Typically the cycling commute is for shortish journeys, up to about five or six miles – often less than three – or in combination with public transport, particularly train, for longer ones.

Whatever the journey length, there are health and wellbeing benefits for the individual and employers. "We know that people who cycle to work tend to feel happier, fitter and more productive," says Sam Robinson of Challenge for Change.

The numbers back this up. Employees who cycle to work take 1.3 fewer days sick leave per year than non-cyclists, according to two independent studies, one by the London School of Economics and the other by Dutch researchers TNO.

### Measurable benefits

In the UK, Challenge for Change is at the forefront of moves to get more employees cycling. It also operates in New Zealand, where it was founded in 2007, and Australia.

Like other campaign groups, it takes a gradualist approach, recognising that to entice non-cyclists

onto bikes even occasionally is just as worthwhile as converting occasional cyclists into regular ones.

This is mirrored in the US, where Bikes Belong, a national lobbying group, goes under the slogan: Putting More People on Bikes More Often.

Challenge for Change offers a mixture of incentivising prize schemes, mechanical support and information, with participants logging mileage and frequency of rides over the three weeks of a challenge in any given geographical area. It aims to nurture a spirit of light-hearted, friendly competition in the workplace, with social media and smart phone technology featuring prominently.

The case for getting more people cycling to work rests on these "real and measurable business benefits", says Robinson, the group's partnerships manager. "Our programmes are all about finding new cyclists. We do engage with existing ones but we're trying to get people who aren't cycling."

Funding comes from local authorities and grants, including the UK Department for Transport's local sustainable transport fund, enabling Challenge for Change to reach private as well as public employees.

The organisation is hoping to team up directly with a major UK company, with multiple branches nationwide, so that it can maximise exposure.

Caroline Muldowney is human resources adviser at Zen Internet, which took part in the Greater Manchester Cycle Challenge in 2012 – a programme run by Challenge for Change. Ninety-seven out of 412 staff took part, including 36 new cyclists, and almost 4,000 miles were logged.

"It was very successful and made a lot of us aware

*Employees who cycle to work take 1.3 fewer sick days per year*



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Boris bikes, Paris style

## Cycling infrastructure requires long-term spending and strategy by national and local governments

that it's not as hard as it looks taking part in something that's good for fitness and wellbeing," says Muldowney. "Since the challenge, 22 employees have signed up for the new bike scheme we operate with Evans Cycles, making 37 for 2012 in total.

"Following the challenge we would like to look at the possibility of how we can improve our shower facilities at Zen."

The UK Cycle to Work scheme to which Muldowney refers enables staff in effect to buy a new bike, plus accessories, from their employer, paying in monthly instalments from their salary, which are deducted from tax. It means average savings of 37%.

Since it started in 2005, more than 500,000 employees have bought new bikes via the scheme. About 28,000 employers offer it via a network of 2,220 bike retailers.

Simon Darby of the Cycle to Work Alliance says numbers in 2012 were 10% up on 2011. "Our research found that 61% of people did not cycle to work before they signed up to the scheme and 70% classed themselves as either novice or occasional cyclists."

The success of Bradley Wiggins, the first Briton to win the Tour de France and a gold medallist at the London Olympics, has had a beneficial impact too but should not be overstated, Darby says.

### Safety first

Julian Ferguson of the European Cyclists' Federation, based in Brussels, says perceptions of safety are crucial. "Ultimately for people to cycle to work they need to feel safe. If they don't, whatever the real

### Bike basics

- One person cycling **6.5km** to work each way, five days a week, instead of driving, saves **550kg** of CO<sub>2</sub> a year, or the equivalent of **55 square metres** of forest, according to the UK Department for Transport. This is a conservative calculation based on people cycling 188 days a year (allowing for holidays and reduced cycling during the winter), and a CO<sub>2</sub> saving of 0.36kg per mile cycled.
- Staff who are physically active have a **40%** lower absenteeism than those who are sedentary, according to Transport for London.
- **Challenge for Change** has run 50 challenges in the past four years, engaging **78,400** people (26,000 of them previously non-cyclists) and **3,616** organisations. That amounts to **13m kilometres** with carbon savings of **1,400 tonnes** of CO<sub>2</sub>.
- Bike sharing schemes in Europe have grown from only a few in 2001 to about **400** in 2012. **Bicing** in Barcelona, **Sevici** in Seville and **Vélib** in Paris were all launched in 2007.
- In Paris a 24hr ticket costs **€1.70**, the same as a single metro or bus ticket. Annual tariffs start at **€29**, while public transport annual subscriptions start at **€643**. The Paris scheme has more than **20,000** bicycles and **1,800** bike stations. Trips total **40,000 to 120,000** a day and each bike travels 10,000km per year, 40 times more than a privately owned bike.
- A **fifth** of motorists in the **UK** own a bike and ride it regularly; a **quarter** own one but ride it very occasionally; **7%** own one but never ride it; and **48%** don't own one, according to the Institute of Advanced Motorists.
- In the **US** only **14%** of the 4.5bn bike rides taken each year are for commuting. The rest are for sport or recreation.
- Public investment in US cycling totals about **\$13bn** over the past 10 years.

risk, then it can be very hard getting them to do so.

"In countries where lots of people cycle for transportation, a high percentage are women, who are typically harder to reassure on safety. So if you can get more women cycling you've done something right."

Hence the vital question of infrastructure, which requires long-term spending and strategy by national and local governments.

The obvious models here are the Netherlands and Denmark, with Germany close behind. These all have large networks of segregated cycle lanes and pathways.

But in recent years cycling has flourished in some more surprising locations, among them the Spanish city of Seville.

Spain is traditionally car-centric, but in 2006 Seville's mayor launched a 150km network of cycle lanes. Though less refined than its counterparts in Amsterdam or the Netherlands, it is immensely popular. Bike trips have risen from 6,000 a day to more than 70,000 a day, helped by the Sevici bike share scheme, which has more than 3,000 cycles available for rent.

London and Paris are other big European cities with similar bike shares.

## Case study: Taking on London's traffic

One minute you're on a traffic-free pathway, the next you're praying that the driver of an articulated lorry has seen you in his wing mirror.

Welcome to cycling in **London**. It helps keeps you **fit** and saves a **fortune** in fares or fuel, but you use up a lot of adrenaline.

London's "Boris bike" scheme – named after the current mayor **Boris Johnson** – has certainly boosted the number of cyclists dramatically, but in terms of other infrastructure not much has changed. True, there are plenty of new signs but too often they don't point to a particularly quiet (or safe-feeling) route.

**Cycle lanes** tend to be **narrow** and very short, blocked by (legally) parked cars early and late in the day and at weekends. Even paths through big green spaces such as Hyde Park are stingy, divided from pedestrians by mere white paint. It creates unnecessary **tension**.

Cycling casualties rose by **50%** between 2006 and 2011, according to a report by London Assembly's transport committee. In 2011 there were **555** serious injuries and **16** cyclist deaths in London.

The committee has recommended Transport for London double funding for cycling. Less than **1%** of TfL's 2012-13 budget went towards cycling, compared with **5%** set aside by Edinburgh council over the next four years.

About **540,000** London journeys a day are now made by bicycle, a **170%** rise in the past 10 years.

Some say that should translate into much better provision.



Not for the faint hearted

"When you start having them, it really normalises cycling as another form of transport," Ferguson says. "But the whole nexus with public transport is key too, including bike parking at stations."

Government-backed promotions in many European countries are reinforcing the message. Participants who use a bike a certain number of days over three months enter a lottery with prizes ranging from a Mediterranean cruise to upmarket bicycles and accessories.

As with Zen Internet, the schemes, which are free for employers and employees to enter, often lead to improved workplace facilities such as showers, lockers and cycle parking.

### Wheels of change in US

In the US, the cities of New York and Chicago are due to introduce bike sharing schemes – like London's "Boris bikes", named after the city's mayor, Boris Johnson – during 2013. Washington is among the cities that already have them.

"From all the available data we would say the number of US citizens who commute by bike has doubled in the last 10 years," says Tim Blumenthal, president of Bikes Belong, based in Portland, Oregon, where the cycle commuting level is now around 5%, against a US average of 1%.

"Federal, state and city investment has increased dramatically in the last 10 years and in many cases, such as New York, Chicago, Portland and

Minneapolis, mayors have understood the benefits of spending that money," Blumenthal says.

"One big factor is that cities want to attract highly educated, highly skilled workers and it seems like those workers want to live in cities where good, safe, convenient cycling is available. So it is now a business goal as well as a government one."

About 15 years ago Portland was one of the first US cities to embark on a major cycling infrastructure project, which includes segregated lanes and clear signage. These extend to nearly all the bridges that cross the river Willamette into the city.

"In some ways, Minneapolis is even more impressive," Blumenthal says. "It's a northern city, cold, in what used to be called the Rust Belt, so it's not the most likely candidate to become a bike-friendly city. Yet they've put together a great network. They are also very quick to plough the cycle lanes after every snow storm."

However, for all the recent gains across the US, they are still only tangible in pockets – largely excluding the southern states, for example. So Blumenthal admits it would be an exaggeration to say cycling is yet a mainstream means of transportation in the US.

"The good news is that we are moving in the right direction, and quickly in certain places," he says.

That could also sum up the picture in the UK and Europe. Commuting by bike is a work in progress. ■

*"The number of US citizens who commute by bike has doubled in the last 10 years"*

*Tim Blumenthal, Bikes Belong*