

How to Make Work Healthier: Move It!

How sedentary is your work?

If you're like many office workers, you probably wish you could be more active, maybe spend less time sitting.

But, work keeps most of us at our desks. We may have a cell phone, maybe a tablet or laptop, so you'd think we could be fairly mobile. But most workers aren't.

The [Steelcase Global Report](#), a major new study of office workers in 17 countries, shows that office workers use fixed technology (desktop computers, landline phones, etc.) *twice* as much as mobile devices (smartphones, laptops and tablets). In fact, we found 86% of offices have landline phones, and just 39% are equipped with cell phones. A full 80% of offices have desktop computers vs. 39% with laptops.

As a result, many workers are desk-bound. On average we spend 5.7 hours a day sitting, according to a 2013 study. But very few people sit for long stretches at a time. Most get up frequently to attend meetings, collaborate with colleagues, grab a coffee, etc. Studies show we get up from our chairs every 8 to 10 minutes.

Another recently published study, this one of workers in Britain over 16 years, found no link between sitting and mortality. The researchers recommend being cautious in emphasizing sitting as a risk factor for mortality separate from the effect of physical activity.

This is good news: Sedentary work is less worrisome than we may have previously imagined.

But, this does not mean we should not look for ways to introduce more activity into our lives at work - in fact many workers are demanding it.

HOW TO CREATE A MORE ACTIVE WORKPLACE

Since the work itself is a sedentary pursuit, and will probably always require a lot of sitting, can we rethink how the workplace can help us be more active?

The answer is yes. According to ongoing Steelcase research, there are three strategies to make it happen.

1) PROVIDE AN ECOSYSTEM OF SPACES.

To create a workplace that promotes activity and movement, it's critical that you provide employees with a variety of spaces each designed to support different types of work. People at work need to focus, collaborate, rejuvenate, socialize and learn throughout their day. No single space can support these diverse needs.

The workplace should be designed as an ecosystem of interconnected zones and settings that are destinations where people have choice and control over where and how they work. Not only does this allow movement throughout the day, according to findings in the Steelcase Global Report, workers are more highly engaged when they can choose from a range of spaces that best support the work they are doing,

Researchers recommend a range of 2 to 4 hours of varied movement —standing, walking and other activities— in a typical 8-hour day. For example, Allan Hedge, director of Cornell University’s Human Factors and Ergonomics programs, suggests this mix: in each half-hour sit for 20 minutes, stand for 8 minutes (longer and you may start to lean, which can lead to musculoskeletal problems), and move around and stretch for two minutes.

The British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2015 recommended a similar regimen: 2 to 4 hours of standing and light activity spread throughout the workday.

When the workplace provides a range of spaces workers are not restricted to working solely at their desk and they can easily add activity and movement into their day.

2) SUPPORT VARIED POSTURES.

Activity and movement can also be increased when the workplace provides a range of postures from which workers can choose. When the workplace supports postures ranging from sitting and standing to leaning and perching, workers can become more active, comfortable and will be better supported.

3) ADDRESS STANDING CONCERNS; MAKE SITTING TRULY ACTIVE.

It’s important to note that just as too much sitting can limit activity, static standing is also not good for you. Avoid *static* standing, for a couple reasons. First, it doesn’t necessarily use more energy than sitting. Research by Catrine Tudor-Locke, PhD, a kinesiologist at the University of Massachusetts, found that workers expended about the same amount of energy seated as standing.

Second, static standing can cause problems. Researchers from the Sensory-Motors Systems Lab in Zurich and the University of Michigan found that standing for five hours a day contributed to long-term back pain and musculoskeletal disorders.

Switch frequently between sitting and standing; that offers positive health outcomes according to the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society. One popular way to do it is with an adjustable-height desk. It allows the user move quickly and frequently between sitting and standing. Another healthy alternative is use of a treadmill desk. This incorporates active standing, walking and varied postures in a small footprint.

It’s okay to lounge at work.

Since work is more collaborative, lounge and casual meeting spaces are increasingly important and these spaces should be designed to support various postures. Collaborative seating should support postures such as reclining, standing-height and perching. People should have options – sometimes they will want to huddle at a table and other times they prefer to sit in a more relaxing and casual setting such as a “living room.” The key is to provide as much choice as possible that support various postures even within a single environment. For example, in large meeting room the space should support both standing and sitting that encourages movement during the meeting.

Seating adjustability.

Today’s workforce is diverse in age, gender, size and physical capabilities. Whether using a dedicated desk or moving from one space to another, workers need their space, furniture and tools to fit quickly and easily. People are more likely to be active, change posture and use different places when they know they can easily adapt the space to fit their needs.

No one has time to learn complicated chair adjustments, so they should be intuitive. Seating should fit the widest possible range of users and adjust easily. Adjustable height worksurfaces, moveable monitor arms, and easy access to power and worktools all help fit the workspace to the user.

Sometimes people need to spend a lot of time sitting at their desk. But this does not mean that people cannot be supported properly. They need an active sitting experience.

ACTIVE SITTING

Sometimes people need to spend a lot of time sitting at their desk. The nature of their work requires it. But this does not mean that people cannot be supported properly. They need an active sitting experience. Active sitting is supported when the chair the individual is sitting in allows or encourages them to move. The idea is that this movement is good for the human body and prevents some of the physical problems that occur from sitting by making the tasks they do while seated easier to perform.

DESIGN ISSUES WITH TODAY’S CHAIRS

Too often workers sit in chairs that do not support the normal activity that happens while seated: Many people like to recline in their chair (which should be healthy for you) but it pulls you away from the worksurface, distances you from your work, technology and information. Screens are no longer at eye level, hands come off the keys, and we strain our necks and shoulders to use our devices. That’s why we hunch, slump our shoulders and often return to a static, upright posture.

Also, when we recline, our lower spine naturally curves forward, yet most chair backs don’t move in the same way. A gap forms between our lower back and the chair, our back sags backward to find support and this puts the back in a hunched, unnatural posture.

GET A CHAIR THAT WORKS LIKE YOU

Supportive, ergonomic seating needs to encourage active sitting, and it should support the user in any posture, and encourage movement and varying postures. So as you recline, for example, the chair back changes shape, just like your spine.

The tools we use change, but the basics of ergonomics are constant. Using just one posture —static sitting— puts strain on the body and can drain energy because of the lack of movement. This can not only lead to physical health problems, but cognitive issues too, such as poorer cognition, disengagement and a negative impact on overall wellbeing.

Active sitting helps us engage with the worksurface, our technology and materials because it keeps everything, even in recline, within what Steelcase researchers call the vision and reach zone. We're encouraged to move, knowing we'll be supported. Movement helps us stay fresh and productive.

By introducing products that support people properly, you can create a more stimulating, healthier workplace where workers can move easily between different workspaces and engage in different ways of working.

Many people have sedentary jobs that require a lot of sitting, but the workplace can help us be more active, provide better support and more comfort, and that's a boost to everyone's wellbeing.

Ken Tameling

General Manager, Seating and Surface Materials

Ken Tameling is General Manager globally for Seating, Surface Materials at Steelcase. In his global role, Ken is responsible for product development, marketing and overall profitability of seating. He is also responsible for the management of Steelcase's surface materials offering.

Featured Products

Steelcase

Steelcase

© 1996 - 2021 Steelcase Inc. is the global leader in office furniture, interior architecture and space solutions for offices, hospitals and classrooms. Our furniture is inspired by innovative research in workspace design.