

What You Need to Know About the “Standing at Work” Conversation

Beck Johnson

The traditional model of assembly-line office work from decades ago, one in which employees sat in long rows of desks for long hours, is no longer useful. It's the epitome of sedentary work. Yet, sometimes people only equate “working” with “being at your desk.” This expectation—only desk work is productive work—persists as an underlying current in a work culture that doesn't quite recognize that knowledge work can and should be performed in a variety of manners and contexts. Add to this the concern about the adverse health effects of sedentary work with the hype to stand while working and knowledge workers are caught in the middle. They know they need to be less sedentary, but how do they address this without looking like they're not working? We need to debunk the myth that good work only happens while sitting at a desk.

The Broad Benefits of Standing While Working

Previous research on the effects of sedentary work focused primarily on reducing cardiovascular disease and obesity¹. While worthwhile, focusing solely on reducing adverse health effects has limited what we know about the benefits of standing at work. Fortunately, newer research is starting to reveal some of these additional benefits.

This newer research suggests that introducing standing postures at work can reduce spinal shrinkage², fatigue³, and discomfort⁴, *without* reducing productivity⁵.

That's right. Your productivity shouldn't suffer as a direct result of standing while you work. Not only that, standing can increase your perceived energy and mood⁶ throughout the work day. Furthermore, standing while working with others on creative tasks influences that process to improve the group's performance⁷. It makes sense that people should stand more while working, but it's still not happening.

1 Wilmot et al., 2012.

2 Paul and Helander, 2010.

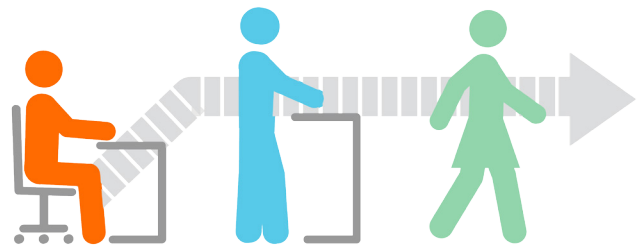
3 Dutta et al., 2014.

4 Dutta et al., 2014; Karakolis and Callaghan, 2014.

5 Bantoft et al., 2015; Dutta et al., 2014; Karakolis and Callaghan, 2014; Karol and Robertson, 2015; Russel et al., 2015.

6 Dutta et al., 2014.

7 Knight and Baer, 2014.



Introducing Standing Work Surfaces Isn't Enough

Standing interventions for sedentary work are beneficial—to a certain point. In a 2016 study, researchers reviewed several prior studies and found the results to be less than exciting. 20 studies with over 2000 total participants qualified for their review that evaluated physically changing the workplace (providing standing work options), policy changes (e.g., policy for how to conduct walking meetings), and providing employees with information (e.g., risks of being sedentary) and/or counseling (e.g., prompts to move). On a whole, the results were very modest for two primary reasons: 1) there haven't been enough studies conducted (yet) that look at these very specific features in the workplace, and 2) the time reduction for sitting didn't meet the 2 to 4-hour daily reduction recommended by experts; instead, reduced sitting times varied between approximately 1 to 2 hours⁸.

Even though the reduced sitting time in this review doesn't meet the recommendation, sitting time still was reduced. The practical conclusion to this research is that these specific interventions: access to standing work surfaces, policy changes, information and counseling get us *part of the way* to reducing the adverse effects of sedentary work. With this and other similar research, we can have confidence that these types of interventions are a step in the right direction. Well then, what *is* the next step?

Varying Postures Throughout the Work Day

If there are benefits to standing while working, everyone should be standing all the time, right? Wrong. There's plenty of evidence that too much sitting OR standing can have adverse health effects. Consider this: A European study of over 7000 adults published this year and conducted over a 10-year period indicates that cardiovascular disease increases from spending too much time sitting still AND

8 Shrestha et al., 2016.

standing still. However, participants that had a variety of occupational activities (sitting and standing) had lower rates of cardiovascular disease⁹. It's clear that being in one position for too long is problematic to our health. To continue to combat adverse health effects at work, employees need to vary their postures throughout the day, whether they are sitting or standing. And, research indicates we're not standing and moving enough. Yet.

What This Means for the Workplace

Recognizing the adverse health effects of sedentary work is prompting employers to provide a variety of standing workspaces for employees. But, to get workers out of their seats more, employers and employees need to recognize the additional benefits of standing while working beyond reducing cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In reality, we intuitively know that workplace behaviors are complex and what work looks like for one person may be different for another. New research is now demonstrating a variety of positive outcomes of standing and moving while working. And, future research will continue to investigate this¹⁰.

Thus, it's good advice to include a variety of standing postures and movement in a sedentary work day.

It's also time to shift expectations of what good work can look like: It looks like much more than just sitting at a desk.

Good things happen while standing at work. It can contribute to your physical health, your overall well-being, and even the quality of your work. So, yes, if you are able, we encourage you to routinely get out of your seat and onto your feet. Our bodies are designed for movement, so get moving while you work. You and your work will benefit.

Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit www.haworth.com.

© 2016 Haworth, Inc. All rights reserved. Published 2016.

⁹ Esquirol et al., 2016.
¹⁰ Smith, Ekelund, and Hamer, 2015.

References

- Bantoft, Christina, Mathew J. Summers, Peter J. Tranent, Matthew A. Palmer, P. Dean Cooley, and Scott J. Pedersen. 2016. "Effect of Standing or Walking at a Workstation on Cognitive Function: A Randomized Counterbalanced Trial." *Human Factors* 58 (1): 140–49.
- Dutta, Nirjhar, Gabriel Koepp, Steven Stovitz, James Levine, and Mark Pereira. 2014. "Using Sit-Stand Workstations to Decrease Sedentary Time in Office Workers: A Randomized Crossover Trial." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 11 (7): 6653–65.
- Esquirol, Yolande, John Yarnell, Jean Ferrieres, Jean-Bernard Ruidavets, and Frank Kee. 2016. "0089: Effect of Combined Occupational Tasks on Cardiovascular Events: PRIME Study." *Archives of Cardiovascular Diseases Supplements* 8 (1): 12–13.
- Karakolis, Thomas, and Jack P. Callaghan. 2014. "The Impact of Sit-Stand Office Workstations on Worker Discomfort and Productivity: A Review." *Applied Ergonomics* 45 (3): 799–806.
- Karol, Sohit, and Michelle M. Robertson. 2015. "Implications of Sit-Stand and Active Workstations to Counteract the Adverse Effects of Sedentary Work: A Comprehensive Review." Work (Reading, Mass.) IOS Press: 1–13.
- Knight, Andrew P., and Markus Baer. 2014. "Get Up, Stand Up: The Effects of a Non-Sedentary Workspace on Information Elaboration and Group Performance." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5 (8): 910–17.
- Lafond, Danik, Annick Champagne, Martin Descarreaux, Jean-Daniel Dubois, Janina M. Prado, and Marcos Duarte. 2009. "Postural Control during Prolonged Standing in Persons with Chronic Low Back Pain." *Gait & Posture* 29 (3): 421–27.
- Paul, Rajendra D., and Martin G. Helander. 2010. "Effects of Sit-Stand Schedule on Spinal Shrinkage in VDT Operators." Haworth White Paper.
- Russell, Bridget A., Mathew J. Summers, Peter J. Tranent, Matthew A. Palmer, P. Dean Cooley, and Scott J. Pedersen. 2015. "A Randomised Control Trial of the Cognitive Effects of Working in a Seated as Opposed to a Standing Position in Office Workers." *Ergonomics*, September. Taylor & Francis, 1–23.
- Shrestha, N., S. Ijaz, K.T. Kukkonen-Harjula, S. Kumar, and C.P. Nwankwo. 2016. "Workplace Interventions for Reducing Sitting at Work (Review)." *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, no. 1.
- Smith, Lee, Ulf Ekelund, and Mark Hamer. 2015. "The Potential Yield of Non-Exercise Physical Activity Energy Expenditure in Public Health." *Sports Medicine (Auckland, N.Z.)* 45 (4): 449–52.
- Wilmot, E. G., C. L. Edwardson, F. A. Achana, M. J. Davies, T. Gorely, L. J. Gray, K. Khunti, T. Yates, and S. J. H. Biddle. 2012. "Sedentary Time in Adults and the Association with Diabetes, Cardiovascular Disease and Death: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Diabetologia* 55, (11): 2895–2905.