

ERGONOMICS

Sit-to-stand workstations no panacea

Despite growing popularity, standing desks can be unhealthy

By Jane Sleeth

By now, most of us have read the headlines “Sitting is the new smoking” or “Sitting will kill you.” But what if there’s a downside to all the recommendations that people stand at their desk?

A look at the research suggests the health benefits are questionable, especially if sit-to-stand workstations are not properly integrated into the workplace.

Rising popularity

Sit-to-stand workstations are very popular right now. An increasing number of employees are asking their physicians to write notes stating they must be provided with these workstations. Many employees are demanding changes to their ergonomic reports to state they need a sit-to-stand workstation.

Why are they so popular? People want to decrease the impact of prolonged time spent sitting behind their computers, which often leads to lower back pain, swollen ankles and decreased energy levels.

Millions of people in North America sit at a desk all day (either an assigned desk or, more recently, at a temporary desk they check into at the start of each day). And health experts have warned that long periods of sitting can increase the risk of heart disease, obesity and blood clots.

Potential problems

While there are other approaches to reducing the amount of time spent sitting at work, the one option that prevails is the sit-stand desk or desktop unit.

But standing statically at a desk increases cardiovascular loads on the heart; loads the lower body joints such as the hips and knees; and can cause varicose veins and neck/shoulder musculoskeletal injuries, as well as several other health impacts, according to 2016 research from the ergonomics group at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

Ongoing research from the Centre of Research Expertise for the Prevention of Musculoskeletal Disorders (CRE-MSD) at the University of Waterloo in Ontario also has found there is no solid evidence that the use of sit-to-stand workstations impacts health outcomes.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies conducted by this group have found less than 10 per cent of employees use the sit-to-stand capabilities of these workstations after three to six months of use.

And a team from medical researchers Cochrane in London, U.K., updated a systematic review that looked at the effects of different strategies to encourage people to reduce the amount of time they spend sitting at work. The potential health benefits were found to be uncertain.

“It is important that workers who

sit at a desk all day take an interest in maintaining and improving their well-being, both at work and at home. However, at present, there is not enough high-quality evidence available to determine whether spending more time standing at work can repair the harms of a sedentary lifestyle... it’s important that workers and employers are aware of this, so that they can make more informed decisions,” said co-author Jos Verbeek, from a Cochrane work review group.

There are other problems too:

- Dynamic movement is required to offset the impact of sitting, non-static standing.
 - Most people either don’t use the standing option on these desks or they stand all day.
 - The use of sit-to-stand workstations is not being combined with HR policies and programs including those devoted to well-being, health and productivity initiatives.
- What is worse, the desks are ordered and put into place by corporate real estate and facility managers — without the input and knowledge of human resources professionals, IT and, most importantly, ergonomic experts who have expertise in human-centred design, physiology and biomechanics.

This is not to say the use of sit-to-stand workstations is not helpful. It’s just they’re not a good investment as a single solution.

A better approach

So, what is the best solution? When HR professionals work together with facilities management, real estate, architects and interior design, IT, ergonomic experts and health and safety, then a more strategic approach is taken to decrease the health impacts associated with prolonged, static sitting and sedentary work styles in the workplace.

Some of the key programs, policies and standards that bring about measurable and long-term improvements require a multi-pronged approach where all key departments come together to ensure programs are developed and co-ordinated across these departments. This in turn creates a workplace that leads to measurable improvements in employee well-being.

HR can create policies, such as ensuring managers have training on the use of stretch breaks and encouraging employees to take lunch away from their desks.

Architects and interior design (A&D), corporate real estate and ergonomic experts should ensure all designs and furniture standards consider the human factor — providing areas where people can work in a standing posture, equipping some meeting rooms with standing tables, and using seating standards that meet the new BIFMA/ANSI 2013 ergonomic standards from the Business + Institutional Furni-

ture Manufacturers Association so employees are well-supported when sitting at their workstations.

IT should communicate with A&D and facility managers about upcoming changes to hardware and software that will impact: how employees interact with the technology; how often they can take breaks from the technology; and how they can use laptops to move to standing work areas or alternate areas in the office for a change of posture.

Health and OH&S can undertake initiatives to start lunch walking

programs or other fitness programs, and training for all employees on the use of stretch breaks every 30 minutes.

Ergonomic real estate and facility managers with the best standards for sit-to-stand workstation design that meets the BIFMA 2013 standards. They can also provide education programs as to how to use the workstations on a 30 minute-30 minute basis, along with explaining proper standing and sitting postures.

There is a tendency for organi-

zations to try to find quick solutions for issues related to employee health and productivity in the workplace. This is the case with HR professionals who are tasked with preventing both insurance claims and employee complaints about having to sit all day in office environments.

But an HR professional looking for a more strategic and effective approach to this challenge should team up with professionals across many departments to bring about long-term, cost-effective solutions.

Sit-to-stand workstations can be and should be one part of a multi-pronged approach to successfully help employees become healthier and more productive in the workplace.

Jane Sleeth is owner and senior consultant at Optimal Performance Consultants in Toronto, a national ergonomic and accessibility company. She can be reached at j.sleeth@optimalperformance.ca or for more information, visit www.optimalperformance.ca.