



Office of the Future: Walk While Working

Mayo Clinic Researchers Design Cubicles That Allow You to Work Out While Working

By **SIBILE MORENCY**

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On the heels of research finding that fat-burning enzymes shut down while sitting, Mayo Clinic researchers believe they may have the cure for inactive 9-to-5ers chained to their desks: walking workstations.

According to experts, the walkstations, which resemble treadmills with computers attached, represent a bold new step by the medical community in an effort to fight the rising obesity epidemic.

James Levine, an endocrinologist at the Mayo Clinic, came up with the walkstation idea about three years ago while talking to an ABC producer about new obesity research; it indicated that people with obesity fidget less and are more likely to sit than people who aren't obese.

During the conversation, Levine gave her four ideas to revolutionize offices. Six weeks later, he began putting them into action as part of his NEAT (non-exercise activity thermogenesis) initiative to transform offices into gyms.

"Support from the Mayo Clinic was unbelievable. People at Mayo said this is very important," Levine said. "They literally assigned 50 to 60 builders to do this, night and day. I would show up at 3 in the morning, people would be there painting walls, designing desks."

Fifteen years of research at the Mayo Clinic has shown that sitting all day long at the office is actually quite harmful to human health and that people who are obese tend to be seated two hours more than leaner people, according to Levine.

"We're chair-based. People being seated all day is crucial to why obesity occurred," he said.

Levine first tested the newly designed office with his own research staff for six to 10 weeks. Then he approached Steelcase to collaborate and develop walkstations that can now be integrated into any office.

"They call it a walkstation, I call it a dream for my patients," he said. "One can write manuscripts, talk on the telephone while walking one mile per hour. Patients with weight problems are burning 100 to 150 calories more per hour, potentially 1,000 more per day. That number is profoundly important."

In offices with walkstations, employees can also hold conferences on the move. Levine's research team even developed "Meeting in Progress" stickers that indicate that a person is not to be interrupted as they're walking.

A month ago, Deb Bailey, director of corporate communications at Steelcase, began to use one of the walkstation units available at her office.

"I walked by a couple of times [and] saw other people using them," she said. "I was shocked at the way they were sending e-mails, checking e-mails while on the treadmill. Then I thought, why not be multitasking in a healthy way?"

Bailey now uses the walkstation daily.

"I jump on it for an hour. In the morning, I check e-mails; it's a nice period of time," she said. "I think I'm more productive [throughout the day as a result]. It gets the adrenaline pumping."

She is quick to dismiss criticism of the new units.

"People will say it's a treadmill. It's not like I'm trying to talk and run. I keep it at a 1.3 miles per hour gait," she said. "It's very much regular activity. The only thing I do differently is bring a pair of walking shoes. It's not designed to be strenuous. It's the same thing you would be doing if you were on campus walking from building to building."

She also adds that the walkstation is an excellent remedy for the midafternoon post lunch sugar slump.

"We only look at a change in posture as a good way of adding energy. Why not stand up and do this? Or a 30-minute conference call, do it from a walkstation," Bailey said.

Growing Trend?

Four walkstations are currently in use at Wal-Mart's corporate offices in Bentonville, Ark., and at Salo, a financial outsourcing firm in Minneapolis, according to Bud Klipa, president of Details, a Steelcase company. Hundreds of walkstations have already been reserved for customers, including some Fortune 500 companies.

The walkstations are also extending into some schools. Traditional school desks are removed from classrooms; kids are then free to sit on the floor with their laptops, stand or move around as they're listening to their teachers.

Student behaviors in those schools improved substantially, according to Levine.

The response from the scientific community the walkstations has been largely positive.

"Often in science when you come up with ideas that are offbeat, the standard response of many scientists is very skeptical. Sometimes it's unhelpful because it makes people think scientists argue all the time," said George Brooks, a professor in the Department of Integrative Biology at the University of California at Berkeley. "When I sent an e-mail to NIH[National Institutes of Health] [about the whole project], no scientist was opposed to it. They said, 'How can we be involved?' It's fantastic. It's been incredible, quite amazing."

Brooks believes that the walkstations are an important step in the fight against obesity.

"Physical activity is gone from our jobs, as a consequence people are overweight, diabetic, and it's even leading to some forms of cancer. We need to be active at least one hour a day," he said. "[The walkstations are] a revolutionary step in terms of putting physical activity in the workplace in a way people are still effective at their jobs."

Brooks insists that investing in workplace fitness has great benefits for employers, despite financial costs.

"If organizations try to implement it, we'll see if people will do it. I think people will resist it mightily," he said. "But people who will do it will be healthier, more effective, and happier."

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