

September 2018

viewpoint

Is the standing desk proving to be the cure-all answer to a healthier, more productive workplace?

As businesses continue to look at improving the overall health of their employees and increasing productivity in their workplace, it has become reasonably common for multinationals to implement standing desks and other flexible office working patterns in an attempt to overcome the adverse health effects of the traditional sitting office environment. With sitting at a desk all day being compared to smoking, in terms of just how bad it is for your health, businesses want to find as many ways as possible to get their employees back on their feet.

“Sitting is the new smoking”

While comparing sitting at a desk for your entire workday to the ill effects of smoking may perhaps seem overstated, the health impacts of these hours of inactivity are actually hard to deny. The UK's National Health Service (NHS) cites studies that not only link excessive sitting to being overweight and obesity, but draw a correlation between type 2 diabetes, some types of cancer and other diseases that could cut life expectancy¹.

Sitting for long periods is believed to slow the metabolism and impact the body's ability to regulate blood sugar, blood pressure and break

down body fat¹. Couple this with strong links to lower back pain and other posture-related musculoskeletal injuries and it is little wonder that employers are desperate for ways to get their employees out of the office chair and moving around.

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Taking a stand

Given the vast volume of research done into the health impacts of sitting for an eight-hour work day, it is unsurprising that standing desks are one of the most popular office environment changes being made. The Society of Human Resources Management in the US found that 44% of employers they surveyed offered standing desks in 2017, compared to just 13% in 2013².

This trend towards standing desk adoption doesn't seem to be slowing down. In June 2018, Apple CEO Tim Cook announced that all staff at Apple's new \$5 billion Silicon Valley headquarters will have a standing desk³. And, Apple are just one example of hundreds of global corporations looking to tackle the impacts of prolonged sitting with a standing, treadmill or cycle desk.

Despite this growing popularity, studies show that, perhaps surprisingly, the time employees spend standing at their desks is not drastically increased. Cochrane researchers found through studies of over 2,000 people, that sit-stand desks reduced sitting time between 30 minutes and two hours per day⁴. With some experts recommending 30 minutes of standing per hour, even those using the standing desk the most were falling around two hours short of the recommendations. Plus, anecdotally, multinationals we have spoken to suggest the novelty of the standing desk wears off quite quickly and employee usage drops over time, meaning any long-term benefits of standing will not be realised.

So, just how much better for you is standing than sitting?

While we probably all assume that by standing we are countering the negative impacts of sitting, there is actually little to no evidence that currently shows the long-term improvements standing for large parts of the day has on your health.

In the short-term, studies have shown that standing does burn more calories. According to the European Journal of Preventive Cardiology, standing for six hours a day would burn 88 calories an hour, compared to the 80 burned whilst sitting – so a small improvement but one that is insignificant when compared to the 210 burned while walking⁵.

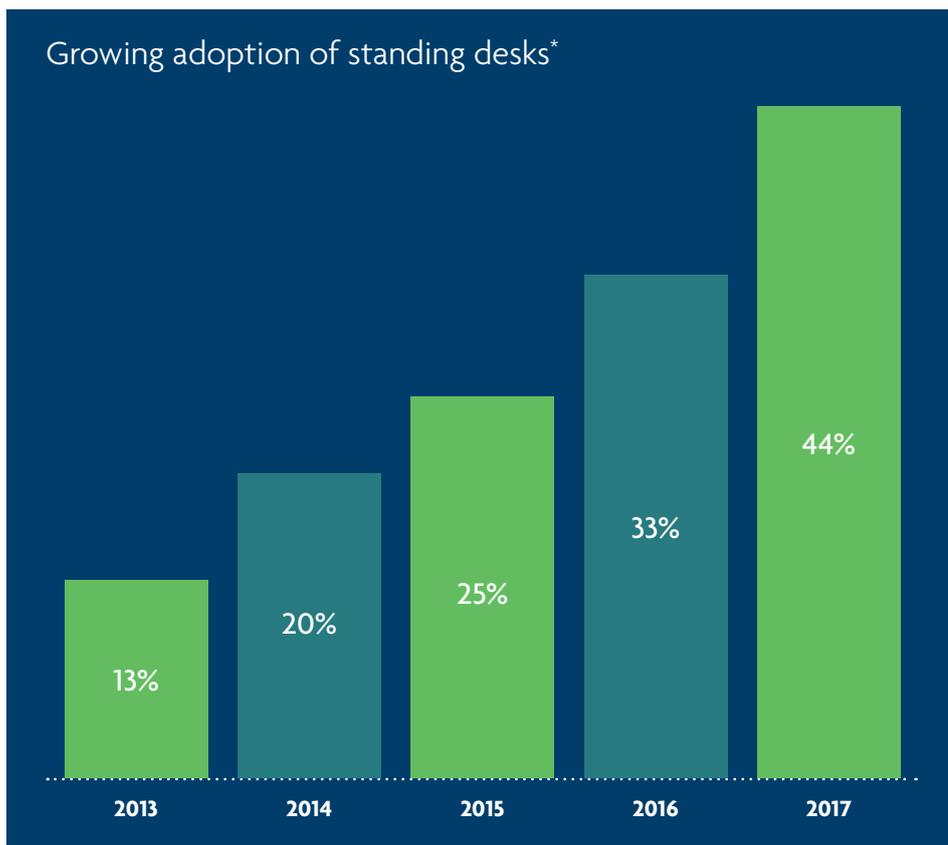
Calories aside, the common belief is that standing can help improve energy and focus, breaking the monotony of sitting for hours. While energy levels and focus are subjective and may differ on a person-to-person basis, the assumption is that standing for certain tasks can help keep the mind more active.

“There's also plenty of data to suggest that prolonged standing can have negative health side effects.”

However, and there is always a 'however', there's also plenty of data to suggest that prolonged standing can have negative health side effects.

A 2017 study from Curtin University, Australia, summarised their report with the statement “Prolonged standing should be undertaken with caution” after participants in the study experienced muscle fatigue, lower limb swelling and general discomfort after two hours of standing⁶.

While the sample size was small for Curtin University's study, the potential health impacts are backed up by a 12-year study into varicose veins in workers in Denmark. Those with jobs that required prolonged standing were proven to be more likely to develop varicose veins and experience leg pain⁷. Those with back pain and musculoskeletal problems are regularly prescribed standing desks to improve posture and ease dull pain, however, there are few studies that suggest prolonged standing does actually ease back pain.



*Employers providing or subsidising the cost of replacing a regular desk with a standing desk.
Source: 2017 Employee Benefits (SHRM)²

“When it comes to looking for the best way to keep your employees healthy and productive, there’s no clear cut, one-size-fits-all answer.”

8 ideas to get your employees on their feet

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| <p>1 Encourage standing meetings – including height adjustable meeting room tables</p> <p>2 Encourage meetings on-the-go – ie, walking or include a standing break during long meetings</p> <p>3 Provide height adjustable hot-desks</p> <p>4 Display posters encouraging standing breaks and stair usage</p> | <p>5 Encourage or provide computer software or wearable technology that prompts employees to stand or move regularly</p> <p>6 Offer corporate deals on gym memberships so that staff can include activity in their day</p> <p>7 Encourage staff to take a walk or standing breaks at lunchtime</p> <p>8 Place shared utilities (the printer, the water machine) away from desks to encourage regular movement</p> |
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Staying productive and healthy

As well as the health implications, the productivity pros and cons of standing desks are also worth consideration. In a study in Australia, the group using standing desks mentioned that emailing, reading and writing tasks were easily undertaken while standing, yet more complex writing tasks and phone calls were described as more difficult⁸. Participants regularly opted to stand in the morning, after lunch and later in the day, when energy levels were lower, suggesting standing provides an energy boost.

Similarly, standing desks gave participants a creative problem-solving advantage in the Curtin University study, although reaction times slowed and mental fatigue set in the longer the experiment ran⁶.

If everyday tasks did begin to take longer for staff who opt to stand, overall productivity could be brought into question. The potentially negative impacts to business productivity (and long-term profitability) aside, growing time pressures and mounting to-do lists could be a driver of stress-related illnesses in employees.

Striking the balance for a healthy workplace

Yes, you’ve guessed it, when it comes to looking for the best way to keep your employees healthy and productive, there’s no clear cut, one-size-fits-all answer. While the health impacts of sitting are evident and well-known, the potential health and productivity impacts of prolonged standing are not proven enough to make it the obvious way forward for the modern workplace.

Having said that, given the ill-effects sitting can have on employees’ health, it is important for corporates to consider taking a proactive approach to getting staff out of their seats in order to avoid low productivity, sickness and potentially costly insurance pay-outs.

In truth, the human body is simply not designed for eight hours a day of sitting or of standing, so striking a balance between sitting, standing, walking and simply moving about, is paramount.

If you have any questions or want to get in touch, please visit maxis-gbn.com

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/why-sitting-too-much-is-bad-for-us/> – accessed on 13 August 2018

² <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2017%20Employee%20Benefits%20Report.pdf> – accessed on 13 August 2018

³ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/apple-employees-standing-desks-tim-cook-sitting-cancer-2018-6> – accessed on 13 August 2018

⁴ https://www.cochrane.org/CD010912/OCCHEALTH_workplace-interventions-methods-reducing-time-spent-sitting-work – accessed on 13 August 2018

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26693809> – accessed on 13 August 2018

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00140139.2017.1420825?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=terg20> – accessed on 13 August 2018

⁷ <https://oem.bmj.com/content/62/12/847> – accessed on 13 August 2018

⁸ https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/images/uploads/main/Programs/nsw/HF-NSW_Stand@Work_CaseStudy.pdf – accessed on 13 August 2018

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