



The Case for Changing Postures

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EVEN A FRESHLY MINTED CONTRACT FURNITURE INDUSTRY PROFESSIONAL or interior designer would likely quickly identify the current focus on sit-to-stand office furniture as a rising and prominent trend.

Others know that it emerged as a dominant trend some years ago in Europe and has emphatically migrated to North America. Still others are very familiar with specialized sit-to-stand furniture products that have been around for decades.

This focus on standing furniture options for office work is often promoted by emphasizing the dangers of prolonged sitting, sometimes with hair-raising alarm. Who among us has not seen or heard the warning, “sitting is the new smoking.” Surely, even fervent proponents of sit-to-stand working can hardly allege that sitting is really the equivalent of ingesting carcinogens into

the lungs. Yet the expression does draw attention to the ill-effects of prolonged sitting, and the science that supports any concerns about those ill-effects is both serious and steadily mounting.

It seems fair to conclude that attention to the negative impacts of prolonged sitting is not merely a passing fad. Like other ergonomic focal points that have arisen and been addressed — for example, appropriate back and lumbar support, proper wrist positions to avoid carpal tunnel trauma, display viewing angles and neck and spine issues — the dangers of prolonged sitting seem to have settled into a permanent position within the ergonomic lexicon of the office workplace.

It seems important to frame the issue of sit-to-stand office work within the overall context of what the best science calls postural rotation. Understanding the value of postural rotation means knowing that it's not about just too much sitting in today's workplace. Too much standing could also bring negative physical effects. It's about moving around, changing postures throughout the work day.

It is equally important to understand the full context of a great deal of the scientific studies on the negative physical effects of prolonged sitting. These studies frequently include measurements of a range of daily postures that includes both prolonged sitting in the office workplace as well as prolonged sitting in casual settings at home, often in front of flat screen TVs and computer displays. When documenting the increased incidences of heart disease, blood pressure problems, obesity, diabetes, and the other side effects of prolonged sitting, many of the studies use metrics that include a full day of postural choices. In other words, the office workplace is not the only culprit in this scenario.

All that said, it is nevertheless becoming clearer by the moment that prolonged sitting in the office workplace can be the cause of a growing list of health concerns. The science on this is sound and merits careful attention. And, in addition, that science is bolstered by the personal preferences of an emerging generation of younger workers who are not inclined to favor being planted in one place and in one posture for long periods of time.

So what's an interior designer or a health & safety leader or an ergonomist or a facility manager to do? It's clearly not enough to promote postural rotation by simply suggesting that office workers just move around during their day — get up and stretch, get a coffee, visit the copy center, etc. Sound ergonomic solutions can certainly be behavioral, but the workplace of today needs to also address productivity and on-task focus.

One solution is to add standing height worksurfaces to the overall floor plan of the office, alternative places for workers to use when they need a break from sitting. Of course, these may consume additional square feet in the shrinking floor plate, as well as not provide the privacy necessary for some tasks.

Another solution is to insert height-adjustable tables into existing workstations. There are certainly a wide array of tables currently marketed for this purpose. This solution requires the user to move any technology or tools they are using off their primary surface and onto the adjustable worksurface as they rotate their posture. An additional alternative is to retro-fit portions of an existing worksurface with a sit-to-stand adjustable base/leg system. Finally, and more recently, comprehensive solutions that integrate sit-to-stand height adjustability throughout a floor plan are being designed and marketed. Not long ago, this approach would have seemed excessive and unjustifiably expensive. However, value engineering, efforts to enhance the health and wellness of employees, and the desire to successfully recruit the next generation of talent now makes this a very attractive solution for designers and corporate customers. The challenge in this solution is to provide other workplace furniture — storage elements, seating options, privacy components, cable management devices, adjacent collaborative settings — that can accommodate sit-to-stand adjustability in a variety of floor plans and configurations.

This trend toward a totally height-adjustable workplace has embraced even private office and executive casegoods configurations. A host of manufacturers at this year's Orgatec event in Cologne, Germany showcased a variety of sit-to-stand casegoods designed for company leadership spaces.

It would seem that we are only in the early phases of this effort to bring more healthful postural rotation to the office workplace. Providing sit-to-stand worksettings does not seem to be an unreasonable ergonomic objective, nor merely a passing fad. Designers and manufacturers and end-users will continue — in a best case scenario — to explore new solutions toward enabling the work force of the future to move more and sit less. It should be an exciting evolution. 

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