

# @work

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## Emerging Technologies and Integration

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# Standing for Health: Solutions to Sedentary Work

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We have all seen the headlines — “sitting is the new smoking,” and “we are sitting ourselves to death,” and “death by chair.” Are they true or just the latest hype to help boost the fast-growing sales for sit-stand workstations?

Between time in the car, at the computer, and then more time on the sofa, people are sitting more and more. If all of this sitting is putting people at risk, what do employers need to do to help employees break the sitting cycle? If sit-stand workstations are the answer, how does an employer decide who gets them — and what kind to get? Does the employee’s doctor decide? What other strategies can make work less sedentary?

Let’s begin with what we know. At the 2016 DMEC Annual Conference in New Orleans, I had the pleasure of presenting with Dr. Steve Wiesner, National IDM Physician Advisor, Kaiser Permanente, and Peggy Sugarman, PhD, Director of Workers’ Compensation, City and County of San Francisco. During his presentation, Dr. Wiesner highlighted various studies of the health risks of sitting and the health benefits of activity throughout the day. Here are some of

the key points Dr. Wiesner covered:

- Sitting too much has a negative impact on our health, even for those who are active outside of the work day.<sup>1</sup>
- Reasonable efforts to increase physical activity have a big payoff.<sup>2</sup>
- Participants in most studies had a high rate of using the sit-stand desks and a moderate increase in physical activity.<sup>3</sup>
- Overweight/obese people had more significant benefit from sit-stand desks, but lower-weight people also experienced benefits.<sup>4</sup>
- Other health metrics such as blood glucose levels may be affected but in some studies did not reach the level of statistical significance.<sup>5</sup>

These facts support the business case that getting employees to move is good for them — at home, at work, and throughout their daily activities. So does that mean everyone needs a sit-stand workstation? And will everyone even use them if we give them one? Employers want the business case to evaluate what is needed. Remember, this is not just about buying desks; this is about building a workplace culture of health.

Peggy Sugarman brought her insights on the employer perspective and experience to our panel presentation, noting, “Sit-stand workstations are quickly becoming a standard in

many work places, and many Millennials have come to expect a modern workstation. Employers need to think about keeping a competitive edge as they try to attract and retain staff. Investing in employee health and wellness during the onboarding process — and having a mechanism in place to ensure ongoing check-ins — can help. It doesn’t have to be fancy or expensive. It just has to be embedded in the outreach and proactive messaging to employees. If it’s not, well, that’s also a message...”

In this proactive approach, employers can educate employees on the clear benefits to posture changes throughout the day, sending the message that employee health and well-being matters to the organization. When done in a way that does not single out or shame any of the employee population, it can be very effective at teaching employees a new way to work — in a safer and healthier manner.

The City and County of San Francisco, in addition to implementing sit-stand workstations, is one of the first employers in the area to incorporate treadmill workstations. Emergency 911 dispatchers were the first to get a treadmill station.

Dispatchers work in a 24/7 operation without personal work stations and use the treadmill station on a rotating basis. In this high-stress set-

ting where employees cannot necessarily leave their desk easily, the treadmill station was seen as a way to support movement and posture changes despite the challenges. The dispatchers were asking for a treadmill station.

Sugarman added, “Most employers would be happy to provide whatever they can to make employees more comfortable at work, especially if it reduces their injury rate and costs. Unfortunately, large investments in expensive equipment are often financially difficult in any given year and end up sidelined as more immediate financial needs emerge. That’s when you begin getting the one-off requests that can end up as a workers’ compensation claim with a far more expensive outcome. If the employer is insured, the cost can be obscured because the insurer pays for it so it doesn’t seem like a direct expenditure until those costs begin to affect the premium.”

She raised a good point. Getting everyone a sit-stand desk would be a large investment for most organizations. What can an employer do if this doesn’t fit in the budget? How do we decide who gets a sit-stand desk and what kind? And should we be letting the doctors decide?

At a loss for how to prioritize who actually needs a sit-stand station, employers often turn to the doctors and require employees to provide a doctor’s note stating the need for a sit-stand desk. The doctors are not the ones to decide this, and we should not be “medicalizing” the decision.

The physician’s role — whether for WC or disability issues — is to provide us with safe activity guidelines for their patient. For example, an employee with a back condition may have the following limitation: “can sit for up to 30 minutes at a time before needing a

10-minute break from sitting.”

The employer’s job from there is to seek to comply with any activity guidelines provided by a physician for an employee and, keeping the big-picture perspective, provide a safe and healthy workplace.<sup>6</sup> Given what we have learned about the benefits of posture changes throughout the workday, employers need to be working to provide and promote those opportunities for movement.

To decide where to offer sit-stand desks on a limited experimental basis, employers can use a matrix of employee needs (e.g., medical restrictions, higher-risk jobs, etc.) and opportunities to implement efficiently (e.g., employee interest, favorable work unit configuration, etc.). A pilot program like this can test the return on investment from sit-stand desks where they may meet the biggest need or offer the biggest benefit.

For most employers, providing sit-stand desks to the entire workforce is not feasible, and they are looking for alternatives. Knowing that the goals are to reduce overall time spent sitting and to increase changes in posture, there are a number of low-cost and no-cost things we can do.

- Help employees set up areas within their existing workspace that are suitable for standing work. This way they can alternate from their computer desk to these other areas for periods of standing when reading, sorting documentation, or making phone calls.
- Encourage standing breaks during meetings.
- Move printers and copiers farther from the seated desk to increase walking in work units that are willing to embrace this.
- Set up electronic reminders for employees to take short walking breaks.

- Set up one fully adjustable sit-stand workstation that employees can rotate to throughout the day.

A sit-stand desk may be priced from less than \$300 for a tabletop manual unit to more than \$2,000 for a full-featured motorized desk. When you are ready to make a purchase for devices to support standing work, it is important to remember that ergonomics is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach.<sup>7</sup> Ergonomics specialists can help employers understand the proper postures associated with both sitting and standing work as well as identify devices that will create ergonomically correct workstations for the full range of their employees. Not every device will work for all employees, so employers need to do their homework to understand the options and maximize the benefits gained from the investment in these alternatives.

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Health Services, can be retrieved from [https://uhs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/ucbtips\\_for\\_sitting\\_and\\_standing.pdf](https://uhs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/ucbtips_for_sitting_and_standing.pdf).