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Stand And Deliver: Professionals and Companies Alike Applaud Benefits of Alternative Desks

By: [Laura Randall](#) | May 1, 2013

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Steelcase has also seen its height-adjustable desk business expand in the last few years. (Photo Credit: Steelcase)

Desk jobs don't have to be stagnant. Just ask Scott Brills, a Detroit-based IT professional and entrepreneur who spends 12 to 14 hours a day in front of his computer.

Last year, after one too many backaches, he ditched his chair for a desk system that looks more like a height-adjustable music stand than a modern work station.

Brills, 30, now spends about half his day standing, and the other half sitting at a separate work station. The discipline eventually pays off, he says.

"I saw that when I was sitting, I tended to slouch a lot and feel drowsy," explained Brills, who runs a blog about the standing/working lifestyle that includes independent reviews of nontraditional desks. "Just the action of standing in front of the computer seemed to allow me to focus and concentrate more."

More companies and individuals are joining Brills in using non-traditional desk systems that allow them to stand, walk, bounce, or do a combination of all three as they go about their typical workdays. For some, it's as simple as buying a tabletop add-on for their current desks. Others are investing thousands of dollars on dual-

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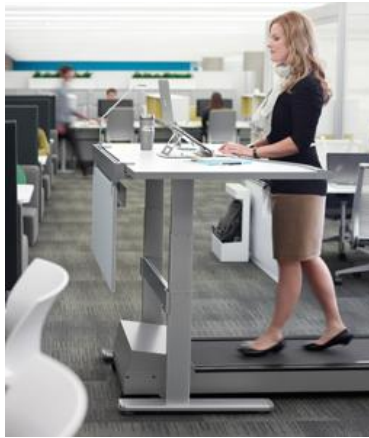
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surface electric lift tables with adjustable arms. At Mutual of Omaha, Glaxo SmithKline, and the healthcare company Humana, employees burn 100 to 130 calories an hour on treadmills that double as work stations.

The whole idea that sitting might be dangerous for health is actually quite new, notes Marc Hamilton, a professor at Pennington Biomedical Research Center and a leading researcher in the field of inactive physiology.



Sales of Steelcase's lines of adjustable desks and WalkStations (pictured here) have surged fivefold in recent years.

Steelcase

Not long ago, the perception was that people could make up for long hours of sitting at work by eating right and exercising while they are off the clock. But research in the last decade has found that the health risks of sitting for long stretches are significant even for those who lead active lifestyles away from their desks. In a 2008 research report for the National Center for Biotechnology Information, a division of the National Institutes of Health, Hamilton and his colleagues concluded that too much inactivity over the course of the normal day is perhaps the most common modifiable lifestyle factor for mortality, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and several cancers.

“Sitting is the most common reason people are inactive,” he explained. “We sit more than any other single behavior. Far more.”

Preventing Injury and Promoting Productivity

Research like this, along with web sites and news articles covering the topic, is driving the rising popularity of non-traditional desk systems, says Cathy Filgas, co-founder of Anthro Corporation, a furniture maker in Oregon. Anthro started selling height-adjustable desks geared toward technology challenges in 1984. Its main clients were people who worked from home and companies looking to help employees with injured backs or other disabilities, Filgas recalls.

Now the company’s client base has shifted. Corporate America, she notes, is “not waiting for an individual to be injured but being proactive in getting workstations so its people can avoid the injury.”

Steelcase, a Michigan-based office furniture maker, has also seen its height-adjustable desk business expand in the last few years. Seven years ago, the company’s only client in that sector was a firm in the energy sector looking to maximize real estate for thousands of workers about to fill its new offices, says Jeff Charon, manager of height-adjustable tables for Steelcase's Details line. Now its client base includes Chevron, Eli Lilly and Allstate, and sales of its lines of adjustable desks and WalkStations have surged fivefold, according to the New York Times.

Coca-Cola is considering several alternative desk options as part of its multi-year Workplace 2020 initiative to renovate and reimagine its global headquarters in Atlanta.

“We’re exploring a range of options for matching the use of space to the type of work required throughout the day,” says Julie Seitz, director of Workplace 2020. “Open

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workstations, private huddle rooms, standing and treadmill desks – all of these may have a place in meeting the needs a productive workplace that fosters collaboration, creativity and innovation.”

Pennsylvania-based office-furniture maker Knoll sees height-adjustable workspaces as an important option in meeting the ergonomic needs of changing work styles and environments. Knoll offers four different types of adjustable tables including simple hand-crank units and more sophisticated electric height controls.

On the Move

At ff Venture Capital, an early-stage venture capital firm, creating a healthy office culture that encourages exercise was top of mind when the company recently moved to new quarters in Manhattan, according to partner David Teten.

Exercise balls are a common sight, and all employees have the option of choosing a sit/stand height-adjustable desk with anti-fatigue mats. Walking meetings (if they don't require much note-taking) are encouraged, and a conference room with a standing table is under consideration.

"We've seen research that indicates standing meetings run much faster than sitting meetings," Teten said. "In our experience, the standing-only work set-up has increased active participation and sharing of ideas."

The company also explored the addition of treadmill desks, but the noise they generated was a concern, Teten said.

Challenges like this remain for the nontraditional desk industry despite its increasing popularity. Some ergonomic experts believe standing too much will cause more long-term back injuries and an increase in varicose veins among women. And some workers who have tried treadmill desks complain that more errors crop up in their emails and reports because typing while walking, even at a slow pace, is difficult.

Still, there is a growing belief that the workplace will never go back to the stagnant desk systems and cubicles that once ruled the typical office building.

"We're entering a phase where we're going to see this continued migration toward providing some level of adjustability," says Jeff Charon of Steelcase. "Whether it's panel, freestanding ... the word static will be taken out of the design of the workspace."

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