

Could offices change from sitting to standing?



A number of studies have suggested that constantly sitting at work is bad for you. So could workplaces be rejigged around standing up, asks would-be stander Chris Bowlby.

Medical research has been building up for a while now, suggesting constant sitting is harming our health - potentially causing cardiovascular problems or vulnerability to diabetes. We can't simply fix it by heading for the gym.

This has big implications not just for homes - usually blamed for "couch potato" lifestyles - but for sedentary workplaces too, especially the modern office. But when it comes to the average office, reducing sitting is a huge challenge. It means rethinking architecture, spending a lot of money, changing the office routine. Adjustable sit-stand desks can cost many hundreds of pounds.

The current common arrangement of rigid rows of desks, beloved of businesses wanting to cut down on renting floor space, does not suit employees who want more physical choice in how they work.

Advocates say more standing would benefit not only health, but also workers' energy and creativity. And some big organisations and companies are beginning to look seriously at change. US firm General Electric's British plant in Groby, Leicestershire, is considering giving staff a choice. "It's becoming more well known that long periods of sedentary behaviour has an adverse effect on health," says GE engineer Jonathan McGregor, "so we're looking at bringing in standing desks."

But the cost must be calculated. Senior management at the site are asking for data on illnesses and time off before making a final decision.

Prices vary according to design but they cost more than conventional desks. UK firm Elite Office Furniture manufactures sit/stand desks in the UK and charges £500 per desk for orders of 50 or more. One of its major clients is Google which has fitted a large number in its London office, although it will not divulge just how many the search giant has bought. Another UK firm, National Office Furniture Supplies, charges a similar amount and would bill £15-£50 to remove each old desk. It tends to sell only two or three desks to clients who have employees with specific needs. Yet another firm, Back Care Solutions, charges just under £400 but this compares with a standard desk which costs £172.

For anyone wanting, say, 1,000 desks changed, it's easy to see how cost would be an obstacle. And there's an issue. People have to choose to stand. Forcing offices to stand up might harm morale.

Ergonomics expert Alan Hedge is sceptical about how far workers can change. Some will simply want to stay sitting, he points out. And those with adjustable desks don't mix well with the sitters.

But he thinks employees should still be encouraged to move around much more. "We need to think of sitting like driving," he says. "Take a break regularly." Small adjustments - abolishing the tea trolley, for instance - can encourage people to move around more.

The whole concept of sitting as the norm in workplaces is a recent innovation, points out Jeremy Myerson, professor of design at the Royal College of Art. "If you look at the late 19th Century," he says, Victorian clerks could stand at their desks and "moved around a lot more".

"It's possible to look back at the industrial office of the past 100 years or so as some kind of weird aberration in a 1,000-year continuum of work where we've always moved around."

What changed things in the 20th Century was "Taylorism" - time and motion studies applied to office work. "It's much easier to supervise and control people when they're sitting down," says Myerson.

In the US and UK, "there's a tendency to treat workplace design as a cost, not an investment", he suggests. "Denmark has just made it mandatory for employers to offer their staff sit-stand desks."

What might finally change things is if the evidence becomes overwhelming, the health costs rise, and stopping employees from sitting too much becomes part of an employer's legal duty of care.

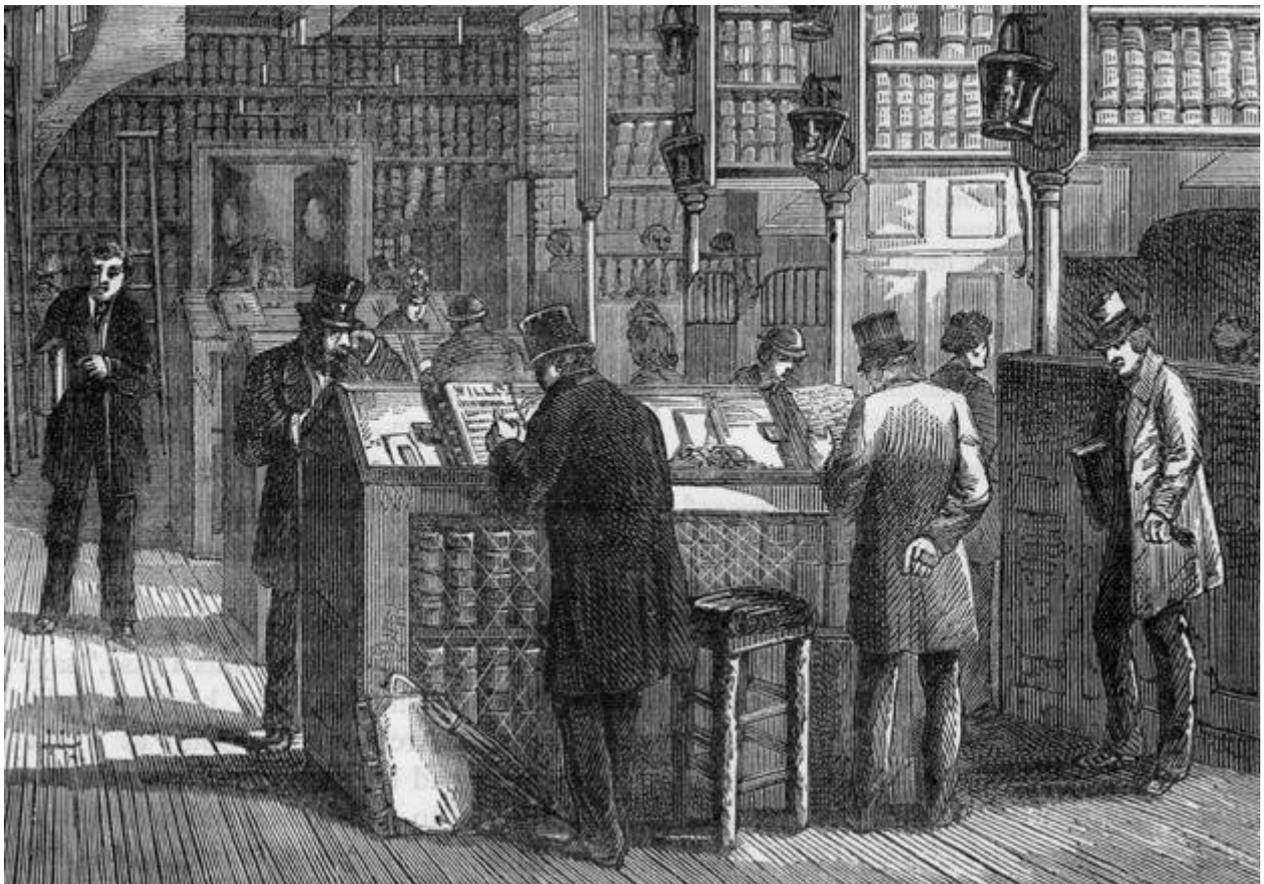
Fred Turok founded the LA Fitness chain of gyms and is now chair of the physical activity network for the Department of Health. "The best way to get the biggest returns," he says, "is to get those people who currently do no exercise to do some exercise. Even 10 minutes a day having elevated your heartbeat will see the biggest financial returns to the economy as well as the emotional and social returns for the individual."

But that message, he adds, "has not yet got through to the people who are designing our space". So what happened when I started to cut back on sitting? I found myself standing, but at the far side of my office, at a higher desk not meant for regular work. I had only been able to find one desk fixed at around my height, usually used for specialised technical jobs. The computer connection was bad, and there was no phone. Getting this changed, I was told, would be costly.

Design gurus talk a lot about mobile technology liberating workers. But for many, the need for computer and landline is still more like a leash.

"If what we are creating are environments where people are not going to be terribly healthy and are suffering from diseases like cardiovascular disease and diabetes," says Prof Alexi Marmot, a specialist on workplace design, "it's highly unlikely the organisation benefits in any way."

How did I feel after days of more standing? After some initial aches and pains standing for prolonged periods, I began to get used to it. Sitting back in a chair felt more cramped than before. But when standing, I was quite cut off from my colleagues, most of whom wondered what on earth I was doing.



Standing in the Doctors Commons in the mid-19th Century.