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Treadmill desks, wireless headsets make workers better, U study finds



The study, conducted by Avner Ben-Ner, a professor of Work and Organizations at the Carlson School of Management, found that treadmills increased productivity by nearly 10 percent.

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It may be just the kind of place anyone would want to work. In one area sits a foosball table, pingpong table and video golf game to help employees break through creative blocks. In another area, slices of birthday cake adorn plates on the kitchen's island counter.

But the most noticeable workplace feature? Treadmill desks.

At Salo, a finance, accounting and human resources staffing firm based in Minneapolis, the culture is one of movement intended to fuel creativity and productivity. Workers pace on treadmills while talking on the phone or sorting through e-mails. Others stand at their desks or sit on exercise balls.

A recent study by the University of Minnesota found that walking while working might improve not only an employee's health, but also boost output. The study, conducted by Avner Ben-Ner, a professor of Work and Organizations at the Carlson School of Management, followed about 40 employees of a local financial services company who regularly used treadmills instead of chairs. Workers had a computer, a phone and writing space on a desk in front of a treadmill set to go no faster than 2 miles per hour. Ben-Ner and his co-authors studied them for a year.

What they found was that treadmills increased productivity by nearly 10 percent. "That's a substantial increase," Ben-Ner said.

Workers were not forced, like rowers in a Roman war galley, to walk all day. Walking on the treadmill was voluntary — as was standing at their desk or sitting on an exercise ball. Still, even though workers could sit all day if they wished, most did not.

Moving, Ben-Ner said, is good for work. Especially for what he called “brain workers,” those who need to have increased cognitive skills to perform their duties. An employer’s investment of \$1,000 to \$2,000 in outfitting a workstation will pay off, he said.

“The employer benefits from the employee being active and healthy and more smart because more blood is flowing to the brain,” Ben-Ner said.

Officials at the company that participated in Ben-Ner’s study did not return a call seeking comment. But Salo’s participation in a similar study several years ago by the Mayo Clinic helped create a culture of movement and fitness at the company, said founders Amy Langer and John Folkestad.

They had seen an article by Dr. James Levine at Mayo and, as Langer said, “stalked him” in an effort to get treadmill desks like the ones he used. Instead, in 2008, they became part of his study. The treadmills and other equipment, like wireless headsets to encourage movement, have been a feature at Salo ever since.

While everyone in the office wears business attire, running shoes are at every desk. There is even a conference room with four treadmills for “walking meetings.”

Motion ‘not abnormal’

Whether the culture attracts employees who like to constantly move or whether the active environment created more energetic workers isn’t really clear, Langer said. “This for us is not abnormal,” she said, pointing to workers moving and pacing all over Salo’s sun-filled main area. Salo has about 55 employees in its office near Loring Park; in all, the company has about 330 consultants working all over the Twin Cities. Salo has another office in Chicago.

Folkestad said that as Salo looks to expand into new space, they are considering putting a treadmill at every workstation.

At one end of the Minneapolis office, Chief Financial Officer Denise Doll-Kiefer was trying to meet her goal of walking 2 to 4 miles every day, while going over work at her desk. At the other end, at a bank of treadmills, Maura Howard and Angie Complin in business development perused e-mails and spoke with clients by phone as their walking shoes kept up a steady beat.

“I try to do three miles every day,” said Howard, who also teaches fitness classes outside of work. Both she and Complin said the regular walking helps them avoid the drowsiness that used to hit them after lunch.

‘On the radar now’

Ben-Ner said Salo's experience is becoming less unique as more companies from Best Buy to Great Clips are setting up treadmills, standing desks and other equipment to encourage workers to get up and move.

"It's detectable on the radar now," he said of the desire to encourage more regular workplace activity, especially among desk-bound workers.

"You sit long, you start dozing off because you don't do anything other than thinking."

It makes sense for companies, and sedentary workers, to pay attention, he said.

"There is a very simple cost-benefit analysis here. We're not talking big fitness gains. We are talking a person who is sedentary who just gets up. "

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