

Is Sitting the New Smoking?

It is becoming painfully clear that sitting with limited movement throughout a 9 hour working day is terrible for one's health and is a lethal activity. Companies abroad are taking a stand by adopting new work methods and office furniture to promote different postures. And now, according to Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, South Africa is beginning to follow the same approach.

Health studies conclude that people should sit less, and be more active and mobile. After one hour of sitting, the production of enzymes that burn fat declines by as much as 90 percent. Extended sitting slows the body's metabolism affecting vitals such as HDL levels (good cholesterol) in our bodies. The death rate associated with obesity in the US is now 35 million. The New York Times reported last year that for each additional hour of television a person sat and watched per day, the risk of dying rose by 11 percent. The alarming obesity rate coupled with prolonged hours of sitting and little movement, especially in the workplace, is a global health concern.

Andrews says that movement throughout our working day is critical to maintaining employee wellness - from sitting, to walking or standing, it is key to alleviating the concerns caused from sitting. "By simply providing our workforce with a variety of postures and different places, it lets workers change positions, keeping them engaged, productive and well".

Interestingly, Andrews says that when one looks at the need for movement and different postures in the office, the first place to identify this is with cigarette smokers, "If you speak to staff, it's the change of posture and

inspiration at work

scenery, coupled with movement they are really after, often as a direct result of physical discomfort, even more so than just a nicotine fix”.

In response to the sitting dilemma, many companies, including a number of local South African organisations, are turning to active desks — from trendy standing workspaces to, in the most progressive environments, even treadmill desks. By offering workers a flexible work environment the benefits are significantly obvious and include:

- High-quality, task-specific, seating options reduce employee fatigue and repetitive motion injuries;
- Reduced fatigue means more time on the job, improved job performance and lower healthcare costs;
- Allowing employees to walk or stand while working reduces the need to leave the office, keeping them on task boosting productivity.

“When one turns to international examples, ‘sit, stand, walk’ is a specific philosophy that global office furniture brand, Steelcase, uses to keep workers moving”, says Andrews. While in the United Kingdom, the people behind ‘Get Britain Standing’ have partnered with the British Heart Foundation for the ‘On Your Feet’ campaign. He says the initiative aims to raise awareness by encouraging people to stand for as much of the working day as possible.

In closing, Andrews says that employers need to be aware that once workspace solutions are provided to avoid prolonged hours of sitting, staff then need to be educated on the available choices, and how to make the right ones. “Technology and new-age furniture designs might have freed us from the cubicle, but one can still sit poorly at an improperly adjusted work surface. Workers also need to be more aware of the options available to them and, as they move, they must learn how to choose their postures and work places wisely in order to avoid sitting for lengthy hours and encountering the long term negative health effects. As employers, we have a duty of care to our staff and should provide a palette of places, postures and presence to make the work environment healthier and that much more productive”.