THE IMPORTANCE OF MOVEMENT
Why “Fidgety” Is Good for the Modern Office Workforce

By Stefanie J. Nobriga

We know from research that frequent movement can help prevent injuries, especially considering the static positions we often find ourselves in within modern work environments. Knowing this is only half the battle.

If OSH professionals are trying to reduce workplace injuries and do not actively encourage this movement, even if they provide the best adjustable ergonomic equipment and training, they will not help prevent injury.

Science shows that the human body is not designed to be static for long periods; we are meant to move. As Gummelt (2015) observes, physical activity lowers blood pressure, regulates blood sugar, lowers resting heart rate, controls body fat, improves immune function, increases muscular strength and endurance, improves cardiorespiratory functioning, increases flexibility, improves mental functioning and improves the quality of sleep.

Movement, as it turns out, is good. This is where the concept that “fidgety is good” stems from. So, why is this message not being heard?

Less Movement, More Injuries

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2014), office workers, including support staff, administrative and management, make up more than 16% of the workforce in the country. OSHA (n.d.) cites work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) as among the most frequently reported causes of lost or restricted work time. In fact, MSD cases account for 33% of all work-related injuries across the U.S. (OSHA, n.d.).

These numbers have been consistently high for some time, with the total cost of MSDs across the country reaching $45 to $54 billion annually. With years of experience and research, we have learned that technological advancements, modern conveniences and the age of the internet have, in part, contributed to the soft-tissue injuries that office workers consistently suffer, and that what should be an inherently safe work environment is rather hazardous and wreaking havoc on our bodies (CDC, 2020a).

As children and young adults, we are taught and encouraged throughout school to move around frequently. Once we enter the office workforce, we immediately become sedentary.

Historically, most office tasks required some movement and getting away from one’s desk from time to time. Today’s modern office workers can send emails, participate in meetings and order lunch without ever leaving their desks.

Anecdotally, we have heard of employees who are encouraged to stay in the office (and at their desks) with lunches (breakfasts and dinners) catered and delivered directly to each person. Some jobs such as call centers, dispatch and customer service centers require workers to stay at their workstations for hours at a time without movement.

All of this inactivity is not only causing an alarming rise in obesity rates nationwide, but it is also a contributing cause to consistently high soft-tissue injury rates in the U.S. According to a science advisory from American Heart Association, prolonged sedentary time can be bad for the heart and blood vessels regardless of the amount of physical activity an individual participates in (Young et al., 2016). The report also states evidence suggests that sedentary behavior could contribute to excess morbidity and mortality. In other words, inactivity is killing us (CDC, 2020b; Galka, 2016).

High-Tech Solutions Can Evolve Problems

Ironically, today’s ergonomically designed and adjustable equipment far surpasses what we had access to only 10 years ago. We understand how to correct the problems associated with poor workstation fit and design, and we have done an excellent job of educating and training on proper posture at the workstation.

Technology has provided the ergonomic community with more options, including input devices, keyboards and other equipment. This has been both a positive and a negative in the world of ergonomics. With so many input devices and keyboard options, it is difficult for the average human resources or operations manager to know what will work in various situations. The same can be said for sit-stand workstations. They are not all created equal and that, in itself, can cause more problems than it solves. For more information and assistance, consult an ergonomic consultant. However, in general, if a sit-stand workstation is available, the key is to balance the stand-to-sit ratio. Different opinions and studies exist on sit-stand ratios. According to Callaghan (as cited in Bezruki, 2016), the ideal sit-stand ratio lies somewhere between 1:1 and 1:3.

Hedge (n.d.) suggests “20 minutes sitting (in a good posture), 8 minutes standing (for sit-stand workstations) and 2 minutes of standing and moving (gentle stretching, walking, etc.) as a ballpark goal for organizing work.” Nearly all ex-
traditional workstation users tend to ig-

We have found that not enough atten-

Experts and professional ergonomists agree

Considering the importance of movement through-

Experts and professional ergonomists agree

The author has developed the “Fidgety Is Good” program over the course of 25 years of close observation of workforce behavior. The goal of the program is to mitigate individual injury rates that may result from poor ergonomics, increased sedentary time and static postures during the workday.

Key Points of the Program

- Consultation with an ergonomic specialist is the essential first step for

The “Fidgety Is Good” Program

The author has developed the “Fidgety Is Good” program over the course of 25 years of close observation of workforce behavior. The goal of the program is to mitigate individual injury rates that may result from poor ergonomics, increased sedentary time and static postures during the workday.

Key Points of the Program

- Consultation with an ergonomic specialist is the essential first step for

...
workstation design, providing employees one-on-one evaluations or, at the least, reactively in response to a complaint or injury.

- Conduct proactive ergonomic assessments to identify and address problems for the workforce and during new hire orientation and processing. These assessments can be in person, online or virtual. We have found all of these options to be effective.

- Implement a fidgety plan for staff:
  1. Encourage staff to engage in 2 to 3 minutes to recover from 30 minutes of sedentary time (e.g., repetitive work, static postures) or adopt the Hedge (n.d.) movement cycle for sit-stand workstation users.
  2. Encourage staff to shift and move throughout the day by changing tasks and positions frequently.
  3. Move from stand to sit and, if possible, move to collaborative spaces or alternative work areas.

- Encourage employees to use wearable devices that track stand and walk times; create competitions with nominal awards.

- Implement movement campaigns, consisting of rest, stretch and recovery that encourages therapeutic movement, to stretch tight hip flexors from prolonged sitting, and hand, wrist and finger mobility exercises to relieve fatigue from repetitive keying (Gudmestad, 2007).

Figure 1 shows several sample stretches, inspired by the author’s training as a yoga instructor and ergonomic consultant, from the program created for and provided to clients.

Formal stretch programs by department are an excellent way to recover from sedentary time (including long periods of repetition). Consider developing an in-house instructional video and stretch guides that can be effective. Weighing all of the research from academic assessments and field observations, we have found a practical approach for planning that is reasonable and sustainable for nearly any office situation:

1. Fight “sedentary time.” The minimum recommendation is 2 to 3 minutes of movement for every 30 minutes of sitting or standing. If you have a sit-stand workstation, consider adopting the Hedge (n.d.) sit-stand guideline of 20 minutes sitting, 8 minutes standing and 2 minutes moving or stretching in 30-minute cycles.

2. Encourage 16 position transitions in the 7.5-hour day, a goal that is easier to achieve when you adopt the Hedge (n.d.) guideline, along with walking and stretching.

3. Think “balance.” If you like or need to stand more, try not to stand for more than 20 to 40 minutes at a time without changing positions. An alternative to standing or sitting can be “perching.” Perch stools have become popular over the past 5 years and provide another option, but they are not for everyone.

4. Be adaptable and flexible. Remember, you are working with people, not machines. Not everyone will want to stand or perch. Allow individuals to change the plan to meet their own physical needs and work requirements.

Conclusion
Adopt some or all of the fidgety plan: find neutral postures (by adjusting the chair, keyboard, mouse and monitor); avoid contact stresses to the wrists, forearms and the back of the legs; obtain or provide adjustable equipment; move frequently; and above all else, listen to your body. Be an advocate for yourself and the workforce, and avoid becoming a soft-tissue injury statistic.

References


Stefanie Nobriga, CAE, RYT, is a safety and health manager for Bolton and Co. insurance agency. She is a safety and health consultant for more than 2 decades with experience in ergonomics and wellness, and has traveled the world to assist clients with their OSH needs. Nobriga holds a B.S. in Business Management and Human Resources from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. She is a board-certified CAE through Oxford Research Institute. She has been teaching yoga for more than 18 years as a certified YogaFit instructor and is a registered yoga teacher with Yoga Alliance. Nobriga is a professional member of ASSP’s Los Angeles Chapter, and is a member of the Society’s Risk Management Practice Specialty and Women in Safety Excellence Common Interest Group.

assp.org NOVEMBER 2020 PROFESSIONAL SAFETY PSJ 13