

An HR Plan to Employee Wellness:

How to Design Workspaces that Improve
Employee Health and Productivity



In modern office environments, employees are accustomed to flexible workstyles. From collaborating in a common area or co-working location to working from a home office, today's workers embrace—and expect—the ability to choose how, when and where they complete their tasks.

Even with employees open to working outside their assigned workstations, many organizations struggle to support their employees' physical and mental health in traditional, sedentary office environments. At Fujikura, a global manufacturer of electrical equipment, leaders began to see that long periods of sitting were adversely affecting employees' health. They were experiencing muscle loss and vision degradation, as well as hampered productivity, fatigue and loss of mental acuity and focus.¹

This organization is an example of a larger trend in workplaces nationwide. As many as 1.9 million Americans every year are affected by musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), and more than one-quarter of these injuries occur in the workplace. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2017, there was a 29% incident rate of musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace, with employees missing work for a median of 13 days.²

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HR can help alleviate these issues and improve employee well-being and productivity by developing a workplace program that incorporates ergonomic best practices.



Employee well-being depends on having comfortable, ergonomically correct workstations, taking appropriate breaks, and moving throughout the day by balancing sitting and standing. Yet, like at Fujikura, many employees spend large portions of their day sitting at poorly designed workstations that force employees into awkward positions while doing repetitive tasks, such as typing or looking at a monitor.

HR can help alleviate these issues and improve employee well-being and productivity by developing a workplace program that incorporates ergonomic best practices. In this playbook, we'll discuss not only the types of solutions you can implement, but also how these ergonomic practices can support increased productivity and better employee health.

The Workplace Sitting Situation

- 68% must sit all day for their job.³
- 61% dislike sitting all day.³
- 84% prefer to sit and stand at will.³
- 60% of employees say they'd be more productive if they had the option to work on their feet.⁴

The Effect of Poor Ergonomics on Employee Well-Being and Productivity

Office wellness is about designing workplaces, products and policies that fit employees' needs in ways that increase efficiency and productivity while reducing discomfort. Proper ergonomic adjustments and tools can minimize or eliminate physical stressors and environmental factors that can lead to musculoskeletal disorders from repetition, vibration, contact stress, awkward body position and force.

While computer work isn't physically strenuous, it can affect smaller, localized or postural muscles. Sitting also slows blood flow and the reoxygenation of tissue, which can cause fatigue.

If there's an ergonomic fit between the person, the job task or workstation, you can reduce musculoskeletal stressors, promote blood flow and increase worker comfort, allowing for more efficiency and fewer mistakes.

Despite the evidence that ergonomics can reduce discomfort and musculoskeletal stressors that can lead to chronic injuries and pain, many companies remain reactive rather than proactive about ergonomic best practices.

“Typically, when an employee gets onboarded, they are put at their desk and shown their phone and computer,” said Mark Beshears, sales director at Ergotron. “But there’s no proactive work that happens on the front end to make sure that the ergonomics of that person’s cubicle or work environment is optimized.”

Waiting until employees notify their managers or HR about discomfort can be costly to the bottom line and to your employees’ productivity. In a study published in the Journal for Safety Research, assessing ergonomics and making the necessary adjustments can provide a 12% boost in productivity—the equivalent of 12 new employees for every 100.⁵

A comprehensive office wellness program should not only assess and address workstation issues but also focus on changing employee behavior to use the products and tools, increase their mobility throughout the day, and change how they perform certain tasks. Achieving all these goals requires implementing multiple ergonomic controls.⁶

Workplaces that promote holistic well-being beyond offering healthy food choices or maintaining an on-site gym facility can help their employees improve inactivity and accuracy, while positively impacting cognitive support, psychological comfort and physical wellness.⁷ Many organizations that build a culture founded on health and well-being also see increases in engagement.

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Engineering Controls

Engineering controls are ergonomic products and tools that help improve workers' physical well-being and productivity. Engineering controls are the most preferred method for controlling ergonomic risk factors because they are more permanent and effective.

Controls can include modifying, redesigning or replacing:

- Workstations and work areas
- Equipment, such as chairs, keyboards or monitors
- Materials, objects or containers

Dr. Mark Vettrano is a physician who specializes in spinal biomechanics and executive director of the ergonomic consulting group TaskGroup International. He notes that while the most common discomforts employees report are posture related, such as lower back, midback and neck pain, immobility can be a bigger issue.

Standing desks can increase employee productivity 45%.⁶



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— Dr. Mark Vettrainso, executive director, TaskGroup International



“Office wellness issues go far beyond cumulative trauma disorders. The bigger issue is immobility and poor posture,” said Vettrainso, adding that lack of movement can interfere with cognitive functions, such as emotions, expressions, problem solving, memory and more.

At Fujikura, they found that addressing immobility and poor posture had a positive impact. The company piloted sit-stand desks to encourage movement, as well as notebook lift stands in conjunction with underdesk keyboard arms to make it easier to position monitors to eye level and the keyboard to optimal height. After these changes were made, employees had less physical and visual discomfort and less physical and mental fatigue.¹

When selecting ergonomic products, such as sit-stand desks, organizations should note the product’s adjustability to ensure it will fit a variety of body sizes.

“The right height is dependent on the physical size of the person,” Beshears said. “That’s why adjustability is so key and why you want to make sure that any products you purchase have a large adjustment range in terms of elbow and eye height or sit-to-stand heights.”

Ergonomic Tip: How to Select the Right Engineering Controls

When considering which engineering controls deliver the biggest return on investment, here are our top five recommendations:

1. Sit-stand desks

A sit-stand solution that is highly adjustable and comfortable allows employees to move between sitting and standing throughout the day, increasing overall movement. Ideally, workers should follow the Sit-Stand Switch™ and switch positions every 30 minutes.

2. Adjustable monitors or monitor arms

Monitors should sit at least 20 inches from your eyes, with minimal glare on the screen, and eyes should align with the top of the screen. If you have dual monitors, the primary monitor should be centered in front of you. If the monitors are used the same amount, bookend the monitors and position them side by side and centered in your focal point.

3. Adjustable, supportive chairs

Chairs should be adjustable for height and proper back support. The right stimulation of the lower area of the spine helps excite the nervous system, ultimately improving cognition.

4. Footrests

Almost 15% of the U.S. population is born with congenital abnormalities in their lower back. A simple footrest can mitigate most of the discomfort caused by these issues just by changing the angle of the spine.⁸

5. Keyboard trays

Employees should maintain a keyboard height that is even with the height of their elbows. If the elbows are too high when resting on the desk, a keyboard tray that extends below the worksurface can make typing more comfortable.

Administrative Controls

Administrative controls include workplace policies and procedures that further improve employee comfort and well-being. Examples of administrative controls include:

- Alternating heavy and light tasks
- Rotating workers through jobs that use different muscle groups or postures
- Providing variety in jobs to rest the different muscle groups and reduce repetition, prolonged static postures or highly physical demands
- Providing sufficient breaks to reduce fatigue
- Adjusting work schedules or work pace to avoid extended workdays



Full-time employees at large U.S. companies sit for two-thirds of their working hours, and this can lead to restlessness and lower productivity.⁹ Studies have shown that while 61% of workers feeling restless at their desk get up and move around, it can take up to 20 minutes to get back on task when they return. In fact, restlessness from sitting is more disruptive than social media.³

A better solution is to have employees move around before they become restless. HR, with the support of managers, can help facilitate this by finding ways to structure employees' jobs to encourage movement and variation throughout the day. This may include coordinating standing or walking meetings and encouraging employees to alternate every 30 minutes between

standing and sitting. Employers can support movement through height-adjustable sit-stand or mobile workstations, along with flexible monitor arms, that quickly adjust for team collaboration.

Rethinking the office and furniture layout through an ergonomic lens can also be beneficial. Vettraino suggests that HR walk around the office and look at postures.

“Don’t just do it once,” he said, “Make a habit of observing employees periodically. Most ergonomic issues are obvious, and taking a look once in a while helps you to understand the environment.”

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Workplace Practices

The final component of an office wellness program is workplace practices. This focuses on the way work is performed to ensure employees use neutral working postures and safe technique. This includes modifying how employees perform work within their power zone, which is above their knees, below the shoulders and close to the body.

HR can help facilitate better workplace practices by supporting appropriate training that teaches employees to:

- Bend and lift without straining backs or arms
- Improve their posture whether they sit or stand all day
- Engage in exercise that reduces pain and fatigue
- Take breaks

Changing employee behavior often requires more than training. Beshears suggests that HR help facilitate greater adoption of all three areas of ergonomic best practices through multiple initiatives. These include walking around the office and soliciting employee feedback, listening to concerns, consistently communicating about ergonomic best practices, and trying to increase excitement about using the products or engaging in new behaviors, such as switching between sitting and standing, through rewards and recognition.

“You have to have some way to incentivize or educate people to use ergonomic solutions,” Beshears said. “Even a little recognition can go a long way in boosting morale and encouraging people to participate.”



Make Ergonomics a Workplace Focus

At Fujikura, investing in ergonomic best practices paid off in multiple ways. Not only did they reduce physical discomfort, sit-stand desks improved communications because employees could move around more when working while standing, which encouraged employees to talk to co-workers throughout the office. Employees also noted sleeping more soundly at night. This was an unexpected, yet welcome effect of the sit-stand workstyle and other ergonomic controls, especially since studies show that a good night's sleep can enhance employee performance.

Your company can achieve similar health and well-being results, as well as improved productivity, by also focusing on ergonomics. By implementing all three aspects of an ergonomic program—engineering controls, administrative controls and workplace practices—you will provide employees with not only the proper tools to work comfortably but also the incentives to change their behavior. The end result will be a happier, healthier and more effective workforce.

5 Steps to a Successful Office Wellness Program

1. Assess employees to see if they maintain a neutral posture and move throughout the day. Periodically walk around the office and observe postures and whether people are sitting or standing.
2. Where you see poor posture or lack of mobility, consider ergonomic controls, such as sit-stand desks, adjustable chairs, monitors, keyboard trays and footrests.
3. Implement administrative controls that will help increase mobility and improve posture. Think standing meetings, specific break times for employees to get up and walk around, or an office designed to encourage standing and walking.
4. Increase employee adoption of ergonomic practices through education and training, as well as through incentivizing behavioral changes with rewards and recognition.
5. Gather and respond to employee feedback, listen to their concerns and continually communicate about the importance of changing their posture and behavior in ways that will reduce discomfort and increase movement.



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