

# The Right Fit: Healthy Work Environment – Talking Points and Data Sheet

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## **Ergonomic Workstations & Active Furnishings**

- Physical inactivity can have serious health implications; the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 2 million deaths per year are attributable to physical activity, prompting them to issue a warning that a sedentary lifestyle could very well be among the 10 leading causes of death and disability in the world.<sup>1</sup>
- Long ago, researchers and public health officials were concerned about the effect of the environment on human health and well-being - today, they are focused on the prevention of chronic disease, which leads to a greater quality of life and contributes to individual work-life balance. Daily physical activity, “defined as walking briskly for 30 minutes, 5 or more days per week,” reduces the risk of premature mortality, improves psychological well-being, and helps prevent weight gain and obesity. 55% of Americans currently fall short of these guidelines, and 25% report complete inactivity when not at work. However, the built environment can facilitate physical activity and office spaces can be structured in ways that give employees more opportunities and choices to be physically active<sup>2</sup>.
- While many active design components (such as staircases, physical activity spaces and pedestrian-scale elements around the office building’s exterior) are largely out of the firm’s control, there is opportunity - for a nominal cost - to modify workstations to increase employee physical activity, further contributing to work-life balance.<sup>3</sup>
- Active workstations (treadmill desks, pedal desks) are effective at decreasing time spent sitting, therefore increasing physical activity - evidence also suggests that active workstations have no detrimental effect on work performance or cognitive function. Evidence also suggests that, along with offering active workstations, education, corporate prompts and/or behavior change counseling may support sustained behavior changes and encourage movement throughout the day, contributing to improved psychological health and work-life balance.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Physical Inactivity is a Leading Cause of Death and Disability,” The World Health Organization.

<https://www.who.int/news/item/04-04-2002-physical-inactivity-a-leading-cause-of-disease-and-disability-warns-who>

<sup>2</sup> “Does the Built Environment Influence Physical Activity? Examining the Evidence - Special Report 282”, The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. <https://www.nap.edu/download/11203>

<sup>3</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Movement, V01 Active Buildings and Communities Introduction. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/movement/feature/1#>

<sup>4</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Movement, V07 Feature: Active Furnishings. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/movement/feature/7>

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- Auditing the ergonomic conditions of your workspace can also help employers implement changes or recommendations which improve physical health, productivity, and engagement, leading to greater work-life balance. In 2016, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) ranked 7th on the list of top drivers of global disability, with low back and neck pain as the core issues. MSDs typically present as one of the most common drivers of “presenteeism”; or working while sick, when the employee is not fully functioning or productive in the workplace because of an illness, injury, or other condition. While the employee may be physically present at work, they may not be able to fully perform their duties and are more likely to make mistakes on the job.<sup>5</sup>
- By performing an ergonomic audit and investing in ergonomics process - including providing management support, training and education, and implementing solutions to control hazards (even in a remote setting), employees have seen up to a \$10 return on a \$1 investment in ergonomic solutions<sup>6</sup>.

## **Indoor Air Quality**

- Humans spend 90% of their time in enclosed spaces - at home, in offices, schools or other building environments. Psychological, physical and mental effects associated with exposure to indoor air pollution can be short- and long-term, and range in severity. Less severe symptoms can include headache, dry throat, eye irritation or runny nose, while more severe outcomes range from asthma attacks, carbon monoxide poisoning and cancer. By improving indoor air quality, filtration and outside air ventilation, employees gain numerous health benefits which coincide with greater productivity, cognitive performance and an improved sense of work-life balance.<sup>7</sup>
- With poor air quality negatively impacting employee health, measures can be taken through ventilation effectiveness, increased ventilation and air quality monitoring to improve indoor air quality in your

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<sup>5</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Movement, V10 Feature: Enhanced Ergonomics. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/movement/feature/10>

<sup>6</sup> “A prospective study of a macroeconomics process over five years demonstrates significant prevention of workers’ compensation”. Alison Heller-Ono. <https://zenodo.org/record/3536114#.YRWH34hKhPY>

<sup>7</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Air, Overview. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/air>

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offices. One U.S.-based study discovered that sick leave attributable to insufficient provision of fresh air in buildings is estimated to be 35% of total absenteeism.<sup>8</sup>

- For nominal costs, employers can hire an engineer to verify proper HVAC system design, identify regular systems maintenance and additional filtration, and recommend individual equipment, such as desk air purifiers, which could effectively improve indoor air quality.<sup>9</sup>
- Enhanced air quality has been positively linked to physical and cognitive development in children, and researchers have established a clear relationship between indoor air quality and human productivity in office buildings.<sup>10</sup> On average, 10% of productivity loss could be attributable to health issues related to poor indoor air quality in buildings.<sup>11</sup>
- Providing enhanced indoor air quality above current codes and guidelines requires source control strategies, passive and active building design and operation strategies, and human behavior intervention. When this is not economically feasible, achieving natural ventilation through open windows can provide a positive human experience, with naturally ventilated buildings reporting fewer instances of sick building syndrome symptoms than mechanically conditioned buildings.<sup>12</sup>
- Employees can seek greater work-life balance, improved health and increased work productivity through a variety of strategies, including: requesting IAQ monitoring and testing; having the company subsidize the cost of a personal air purifier for their workstation; selecting a new office or building which offers increased outdoor air distribution or operable windows; or engaging an HVAC engineer to examine ventilation systems and optimize filtration.

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<sup>8</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Air, A03 Feature: Ventilation Effectiveness. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/air/feature/3>

<sup>9</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Air, A03 Feature: Ventilation Effectiveness. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/air/feature/3>

<sup>10</sup> "The Impact of Green Buildings on Cognitive Function", Joseph Allen. <https://thecogfxstudy.com/study-1/improved-productivity-quantified/>

<sup>11</sup> "Productivity is Affected by the Air Quality in Offices", Pawel Wargocki, David Wyon and P Ole Fanger, International Centre for Indoor Environment and Energy, Technical University of Denmark. [https://www.aivc.org/sites/default/files/airbase\\_13466.pdf](https://www.aivc.org/sites/default/files/airbase_13466.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> The WELL Building Standard, v2 Pilot Program, Q32021 - Air, A07 Feature: Operable Windows. <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/air/feature/7#>

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## Helpful Resources

- The WELL Building Standard, v2 pilot, Q32021, from the International WELL Building Institute: <https://v2.wellcertified.com/v/en/overview>
- Joseph Allen’s Landmark Study Linking Air Quality to Cognitive Performance, *Director of the Healthy Buildings Program at the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard*. <https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/10.1289/ehp.1510037>
- “Too Much Sitting: The Population-Health Science of Sedentary Behavior”, published in *Exercise and Sport Sciences Review*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3404815/>