
Research...in Motion



By Pierre Chandon , L'Oréal Chaired Professor of Marketing, Innovation and Creativity at INSEAD

Tools that keep us active while we work could give companies much needed productivity gains and reduce the costs of keeping employees healthy.

Take a walk with me. We don't need to go outside. I'm writing this on a treadmill desk. "A what?" I hear you say. "A treadmill desk". I get that a lot. It reminds me of the early days of televisions or mobile phones. The fact that you have one becomes a topic of conversation and amazement to those around you. Like the BlackBerry or iPhone there's a good chance, as costs decrease and companies buy in bulk, treadmill machines too will lose their novelty factor and become standard issue. Many workers in Silicon Valley already have one.

The treadmill desk, a treadmill with a raised desk so workers can walk and work on their computers at the same time, has created a lot of buzz. Journalists at [Business Insider](#) and [The New York Times](#) have been checking them out and academics have been researching whether these walking desks **actually have benefits** to productivity. It turns out that they do. That's according to [Dr. James Levine](#), an endocrinologist at the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix, who has been a longtime advocate of the need for office

workers to get out of their chairs.

Levine built his first treadmill desk in 1999 using an elevated table made to fit over a hospital bed and a secondhand treadmill from Sears. He started researching why some people were prone to gaining weight and others not and found those who managed to stay thin had increased “non-exercise activity thermogenesis”. In other words, they moved a lot; fidgeting, pacing or shaking their legs. His subsequent research demonstrated that too much **sitting increases risks of death** from cardiovascular disease and cancer. Levine also concluded that spending a few hours a week at the gym doesn’t significantly offset the risks of too much sitting.

From research to motion

The prescription for a healthy work environment is movement. You don’t have to be a marathon runner at your desk, slow steady exercise works just as well. Sounds simple. There is, however, a yawning gap between prescription and action. As someone who does **research on eating, obesity, and food marketing** for a living, I had read about Levine’s work in scientific journals. I knew he was right and I knew what I had to do, but still I did nothing for about two years.

The impetus to take action came from a **New Yorker article** I read one night a year ago. I already knew pretty much everything it said, yet had failed to act without any good reason. I slept poorly that night and decided that I would finally convert my intention into action (ironically, another **subject** of my research...).

Finding a treadmill desk in Europe wasn’t as easy as in the US and, in the end, I spent €995 on the DT510 Walkstation. The big question now was, would I use it? I find exercise terminally boring and was worried that it would sit in my office gathering dust. One month later, I have already walked 150 km, at 2 km/h. Just the right slow speed to forget about it. I don’t know how many calories I have burned and I don’t care: I’ve found a way to be active while working.

Standing, walking, meditating at your desk?

The growing focus on fitness in the office has been exacerbated by the increasing chatter around new ways to manage ourselves as our lives become ever busier. My colleagues **Randel Carlock** and **Zoe Kinias** have

looked at how meditation - even 15 minutes at the office desk each morning - can help executives make better decisions.

Other colleagues of mine have opted for standing desks. [Uri Simonsohn](#), from our [alliance partner](#) Wharton, swears by the standing desk. In fact he believes that 90% of office workers would be happier standing than sitting at their work station. I have tried the standing desk as well but, oddly, (like 25% of the population, according to Uri's statistics) I find walking to be a lot more natural than standing still.

Perception of progress

One unexpected consequence of walking while working is that it gives me a sense of advancement. Although I'm only walking on the spot, my body tells me I am "moving forwards" as I tackle my work tasks, and I get the feeling that I've "covered a lot of ground."

These perceived advances are a great example of what psychologists call "embodied cognition" - the idea that mental activity and concepts are intrinsically linked to the senses that we use to perceive our physical environment - an important consideration for marketers who study consumer behavior. For example, studies have shown that if you are holding a warm cup of coffee and talking to someone, you feel like the person is warmer because of the misattribution of the warmth from the coffee to the person. People think that if the environment in the room is warmer, the people in it are friendlier. More insights like these can be found in "[Customer Sense](#)" a great book by University of Michigan professor (and collaborator) Aradhna Krishna.

The future?

Much research remains to be done to determine all the benefits of this new trend, but based on the initial findings, there is much to celebrate. Treadmill workers are more productive, creative and they're definitely healthier.

On the downside, the lines between work and life continue to blur as we're able to work out at the office and work at home interchangeably and seamlessly. It's not ideal, but now that we have the tools to do so, managing all the demands we place on ourselves is bound to get easier.

The only other drawback is that when I enter a meeting now my colleagues playfully tell me I don't need a chair and that I should pace around the room

instead. The first cell phone users could relate. Perhaps in time the novelty will wear off.

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