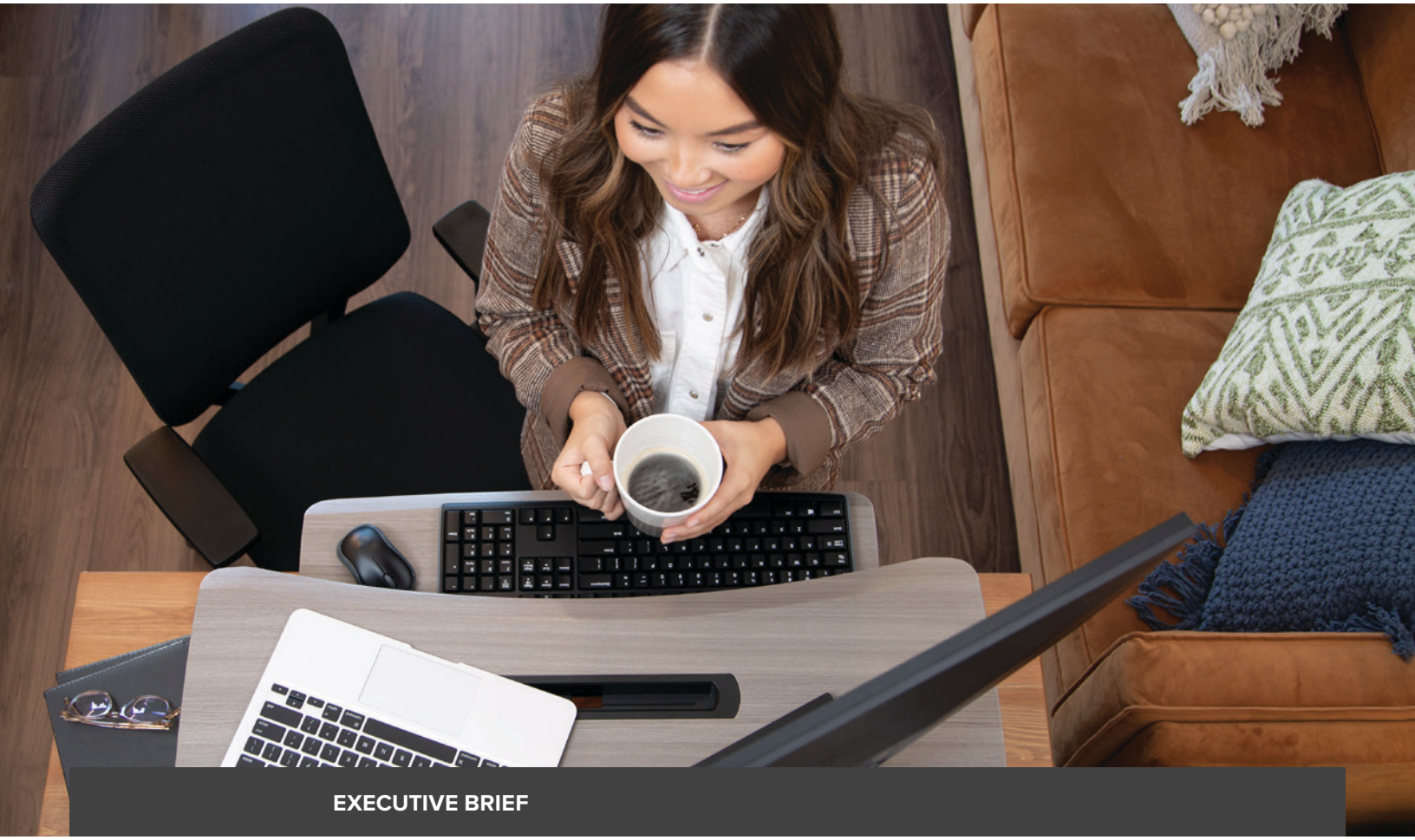
Improve the Comfort and Productivity of Remote Employees



EXECUTIVE BRIEF

How to use ergonomics to support employee well-being

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OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic forced an unprecedented number of knowledge workers to work from home. The transition was challenging but also demonstrated the many benefits of remote work and a growing desire of employees to do so in the future. Walmart CTO Suresh Kumar stated: “As we’ve moved to virtual work, we haven’t just coped; we’ve actually thrived. We are more focused on the things that have the greatest impact for our customers, associates and the business. We have great momentum and need to figure out how to carry it forward.”[1]

As organizations embrace post-pandemic hybrid workstyles, they must pay attention to remote workstation design.

Post pandemic, organizations are considering downsizing office space as they give employees the flexibility to work from home. Building more formal structure and policies for remote work will ensure it becomes a long-term way of doing business that’s healthy and productive.

With this change to permanent remote work arrangements, a top concern is the liability associated with employees using poorly designed workstations. Research suggests that remote workers are especially vulnerable to mental and musculoskeletal stress. Although currently unregulated, occupational safety standards may require employers to take action against the negative mental and physical pain points associated with sedentary computer work.

This brief will outline why supporting employees with the resources they need to work comfortably and productively, such as standing desks and ergonomic training, is vital to a thriving team.

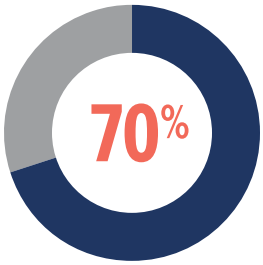
CURRENT RESEARCH

As a result of the work-from-home measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, physical and mental health conditions are on the rise.

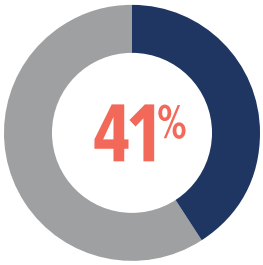
A study published in August 2020 found the home environment inadequate for remote workers, citing an increased risk for musculoskeletal and mental health problems.[2] Potential consequences of increased physical and psychological stress include higher healthcare and disability expenses, lost time and productivity, and a negative impact on the employee experience.

The impact of non-ergonomic furniture on remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

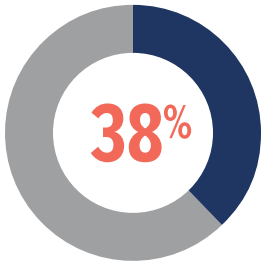
In an analysis of the home working population during the COVID-19 emergency, 86% of employees had a single tabletop that was not adjustable in height.[2]



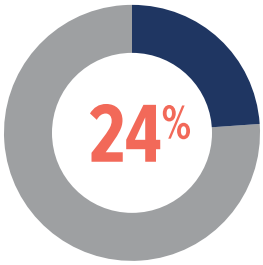
REPORTED MUSCULOSKELETAL PAIN



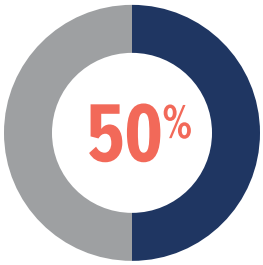
REPORTED LOW-BACK PAIN



REPORTED INCREASED LOW-BACK PAIN SEVERITY

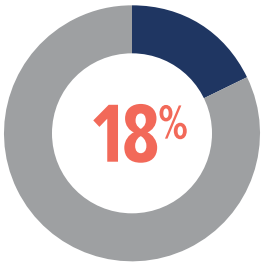


REPORTED NECK PAIN

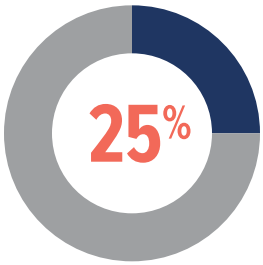


REPORTED NECK PAIN THAT WORSENED WHEN USING LAPTOPS WITHOUT HEIGHT-ADJUSTMENT

Healthcare claims data from Q4 2019 compared to Q4 2020

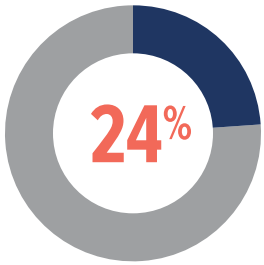


INCREASE IN CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

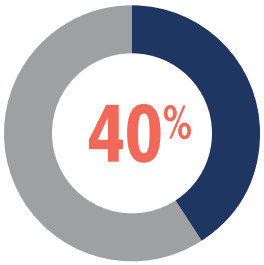


INCREASE IN LOW-BACK PAIN

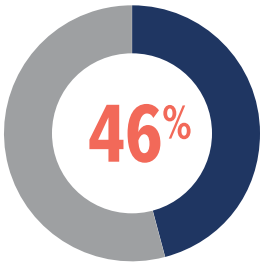
The mental health impact on remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic[8]



DECLINE IN MENTAL HEALTH OVER THE PAST YEAR



OF WORKERS WITH ONE OR MORE ACUTE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS



SAY THAT EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH HAS DECLINED

Spend estimates put 2021 employer-paid musculoskeletal (MSK) treatments at 40% greater than in 2019, with an average of $5,687 spent per employee with an MSK condition.[4]

Physical inactivity exacerbates the problem. Increased sedentary behavior and poor posture while using equipment that's not adjustable or ergonomic seemed to promote the onset of musculoskeletal disorders, particularly low-back pain and neck pain.[2] Teleworkers sitting for long periods who did not practice enough physical activity reported a significantly higher low-back pain intensity.[5]

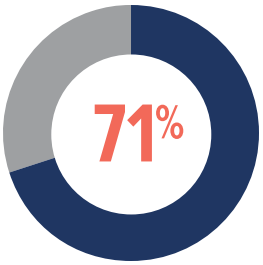
Computer work is highly sedentary without proper interventions and can go uninterrupted when working from home. Only 20 minutes of sitting in a bad posture is enough to deform ligaments.[6]

Lower physical activity levels at work are linked to higher levels of perceived stress[7] and more than half of remote workers report being stressed in the last year.[8]

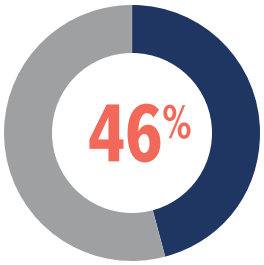
True workday comfort requires a combination of neutral postures and movement through low-intensity physical activity. The investment in adjustable office furniture makes this possible and is recommended for remote employees.[9]

One element includes adjustable monitor arms and keyboard trays, which can improve posture when sitting. However, they don't interrupt sedentary time, which remains one of the biggest barriers to workday health and well-being. Only standing desks can provide the flexibility to address both physical activity and ergonomics without interrupting productivity.

OF MOVEMENT IS ENOUGH TO INCREASE MENTAL FOCUS[10]



REPORT BETTER FOCUS AFTER REDUCING SITTING TIME BY ONE HOUR[11]



PRODUCTIVITY INCREASE REPORTED WHEN USING A STANDING DESK[12]

Remote employees without pain report significantly higher job satisfaction,[2] and when employees believe their workplace supports their health and well-being, they are more than three times as likely to be highly engaged.[13]

"Frequent postural change appears to be the most beneficial for musculoskeletal health, metabolic health and brain health."

– Professor David Dunstan, Head of the Physical Activity Laboratory at Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute

ACTIONABLE STEPS

A focus on office ergonomics can have a powerful impact on employee health and well-being.

Organizations should undertake an ergonomic initiative to ensure employees have adequate equipment and education on safe working postures and the health benefits of an active workstyle. One strategy is to form a task group with the following goals.

Conduct an assessment.

To identify the unique needs of the organization, conduct an employee workspace survey. Inactive employees are a top concern, in addition to those working primarily on a laptop or without any adjustable equipment, such as monitor arms and keyboard trays.

Sample questions for an employee survey:

1. *Do you work primarily on a laptop?*
2. *Do you use a separate/external monitor? (not the laptop display)*
3. *Is your monitor adjustable in height?*
4. *Do you use a separate/external keyboard? (not the laptop keyboard)*
5. *Do you use a separate/external mouse? (not the laptop trackpad)*
6. *Is your desk or table height adjustable?*
7. *Is your chair height adjustable?*
8. *How many minutes do you spend sitting during the workday?*
9. *Does your workstation cause any mental or physical pain?*
10. *Would you like office equipment that promotes movement/standing and neutral postures/ergonomics?*

The results can be evaluated internally or by an ergonomics specialist and used as a roadmap to determine which products and programs will have the greatest impact. Employees will need the appropriate tools first, followed by training on best practices for adopting an active workstyle.

STANDARDIZE THE PRODUCTS. Work with an ergonomic specialist or product representative to select equipment that will address the needs of most workers. This commonly includes a chair, standing desk, external monitor with monitor arm or mount, external keyboard and external mouse. Choose products with multiple points of adjustability to fit a broad range of users. Each product should be vetted for safety, ergonomics and durability.

TRAINING AND CULTURE CHANGE. Most employees need training on how to work in a way that truly supports comfort and helps reduce the risk of computer-related injuries. Sitting, especially in bad postures, is a habit that takes time to reprogram. Best practices include supportive policies, leadership involvement and regular reminders.

Training on ergonomics and healthy workday movement can happen virtually or in person, as a group, or one-on-one. Most individuals can be taught basic posture principles and apply them to their workspaces without further assistance. For individuals with a special condition or concern, a one-on-one evaluation and equipment selection is recommended. Use regular reminders or adopt software to prompt employees to stand and move frequently and correct posture mistakes.

CONCLUSION

Sedentary work and poor posture negatively impact comfort and productivity. Inadequate home workspaces are a common culprit, and a lack of support for remote workers can put organizations and employees in a vulnerable position. Standing desks, adjustable monitor arms and other accessories are popular, research-backed solutions to support an active and ergonomic workstyle. The investment in high-quality solutions directly impacts employee comfort, productivity and well-being daily, ultimately benefiting the entire organization.

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