

Why you should get up, stand up and even lie down at work

Written by The Conversation

In a letter to Felice Bauer in 1912, philosopher Franz Kafka lamented, “time is short, my strength is limited, the office is a horror, the apartment is noisy, and if a pleasant, straightforward life is not possible then one must try to wriggle through by subtle manoeuvres.” Modern workers may well empathise with Kafka’s description of his workplace. Much attention has been focussed recently on the current state of office design.

The huge response to a recent [article](#) on the trap of open offices suggests increasing numbers of workers might be inclined to agree with Kafka’s sentiments. It seems that being productive at work is becoming harder.

According to a [Gensler](#) report in 2013, just getting work done at all is difficult, with over half of employees noting they found it hard to concentrate at work. Being able to concentrate is a vital precursor to cognition in the workplace. [Studies](#) have shown that if we can’t think clearly, our performance, strategic decision making and responses to both internal and external events are compromised.

We seem to be getting it back to front. In many modern workplaces, the trend to open-plan collaborative spaces is almost an epidemic. Not participating in the drive for collaboration is seen as almost anti-corporate behaviour.

Workplaces that are born out of design briefs full of corporate jargon such as space optimisation, utilisation efficiency or brand alignment tend to, unsurprisingly, leave us cold. As employees we need to be both physically and psychologically comfortable. Usually, physical comfort is a central part of the design of workplaces. Unfortunately, psychological comfort is often not. If people aren’t both psychologically, as well as physically comfortable at work, they have less cognitive resources available to them. They are less productive, less creative and more stressed.

The cost and time involved to make large scale change to offices can seem overwhelming. However, new research has shown that even small changes to the workspace can have dramatic effects on the way people work. It will come as no surprise to many to discover that control over our environments makes a difference to how we feel. Personal control makes us feel more confident. Research has shown that employees who can personalise their space are 32% more productive. Two areas showing promising results are stand-up desks and [retreat](#)

[spaces](#)

within the workplace.

The idea of retreating to spaces that restore us is not new. The sixteenth century philosopher Montaigne famously worked in a tower replete with vaulted ceilings, a library and even a bedroom. Seinfeld's George Costanza stored a blanket, pillow and alarm clock under his desk so that he could take naps. Indeed, research shows that our need for prospect (or a view) and refuge remains biologically hardwired. [Environmental psychologist Sally Augustin](#) notes this need for refuge helps us to restore our attention and feel psychologically safe. Indeed, Augustin notes this as a reason why booths in a restaurant fill up faster, perhaps reinforcing Mafia folklore that it's a good idea to sit with your back to a wall.

Susan Cain, author of the New York Times bestseller *Quiet*, writes that solitude is an essential ingredient in innovation. Cain has recently been involved in a project to create [retreat spaces](#) for introverts within the workplace. Refuge spaces allow employees to access a place where they can retreat from distraction to restore mentally and physically. These types of spaces, as well as different furniture configurations, are becoming increasingly important for employees to undertake focussed work.

Stand-up desks are now a more prevalent feature in offices following studies finding workers spend up to 80,000 seated during their working life, leading to numerous [health issues](#). New research however by Andrew Knight and Markus Baer at Washington University, has shown the benefits of stand-up desks go far beyond health. In an empirical study of 54 teams engaged in a creative task, Knight and Baer found that the use of stand-up desks, rather than traditional, sedentary office furniture, increased excitement around creative processes, decreased the tendency for people to defend their turf, leading to better information sharing, ideas and ultimately improved team performance.

A [compilation](#) by Mason Currey on the workspaces and work habits of some of history's most prolific thinkers highlights the vast (and often amusing) differences in how we work. There is no one size fits all, so whether we like to sit, stand, lie down, or decorate our desks with our gnome collection, the ability to alter our workspace and take refuge from it, are important to us all.

Disclosure

Libby Sander advises organisations based on findings of her research. She has previously received research funding for a project from BeneAG.

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