GET UP, STAND UP

Law librarians reject their office chairs’ cold embrace

By Mike VanderHeijden

I suffer from the unhealthy habit of worrying about my health. I try to eat well, supplementing with vitamins. I exercise. I floss. I use sunscreen before stepping out to check the mail. I avoid talking on my cell phone. For a few months in the late ’90s, I worried about the health effects of electromagnetic fields. So a year or so ago, when studies began circulating about the harms associated with prolonged sitting, I had to take action. Or if not “action,” per se, the situation at least required some research.
Lively Up Yourself

I found that the recent trend away from sitting at work in favor of alternative standing arrangements isn’t necessarily the result of some news-induced hysteria; it’s soundly science-induced. Genuine scientists are concluding that too much sitting likely increases the risk of a host of unsavory diseases and conditions.

Apparently, when you’re sitting for extended periods, levels of something called lipoprotein lipase (an enzyme that takes fat away from the bloodstream) begin to fall, which in turn leaves fat free to cause trouble in your body—serious trouble, like chronic kidney disease, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, cancer, and heart disease, according to “Television Viewing Time and Risk of Chronic Kidney Disease in Adults: The AusDiab Study,” published in *Annals of Behavioral Medicine.* And according to “Sedentary Behaviour and Life Expectancy in the USA: A Cause-Deleted Life Table Analysis,” published in *BMJ Open* August 1, 2012, it doesn’t matter whether you exercise two hours a day or not at all; the levels still drop when you drop down into your ergonomically designed office chair.

An Australian study by J. Lennert Veerman, “Television Viewing Time and Reduced Life Expectancy: A Life Table Analysis,” published in *British Journal of Sports Medicine* in 2011, estimated that prolonged TV viewing (a marker of how much time is spent sitting) reduces life expectancy by birth by 1.8 years in men and 1.5 years in women. Conversely, “Sedentary Behaviour and Life Expectancy in the USA: A Cause-Deleted Life Table Analysis” indicates that if we wish to increase our life expectancy by 1.4 to 2 years, we should limit sitting to less than three hours per day and TV viewing to less than two hours per day. That’s assuming a causal relationship between sitting and mortality—a relationship on which there is still disagreement.

Setting risks aside, there are more immediate benefits to standing. Standing for just two and a half hours per day reportedly burns 350 calories! Of course, ask any supermarket cashier, and they’ll tell you that prolonged standing can also cause discomfort, varicose veins, night cramps, dangled arteries, and back pain. So if you’re migrating to a standing desk, don’t throw out your chair.

After catching up on all of this information, I made the decision to try using a standing desk while working. Until recently, I imagine most people who stood at work did so for specific medical reasons. During my first week of standing, I thought I was mimicking another stander—the vigorous Ernest Hemingway. So I was surprised when colleagues and faculty who noticed the new arrangement kindly inquired instead about my health.

But times change. For example, Facebook Inc. is adding 10 to 15 standing workstations per week. There are now approximately 350 standing workstations for its 3,000 employees. And when I asked a few fellow librarians who stand at work why they do so, they voiced a desire to improve their health, generally, and said they were motivated to do so by the recent attention on the dangers of prolonged sitting. So perhaps it won’t be long before standing at work turns no more heads than ergonomic keyboards and core-strengthening office chairs.

Treat You Right

Some associate directors are already there. Teresa Miguel, the associate librarian for administration at Yale’s Lillian Goldman Law Library, considers standing desks to be one option among many for making sure the library is a healthy, productive workplace.

“It’s not a luxury item,” explains Miguel. “We appreciate the unseen uniqueness of everyone on the staff, and we’re willing to experiment in order to make sure people are happy in their jobs. Along the same lines, Elizabeth Farrell, associate director at Florida State University Law Library, puts standing desks in the same category as other ergonomically correct products. “At a previous employer, ergonomics experts periodically evaluated our offices and workstations to make sure that everything was set up correctly—knees, elbows, monitors, all at the proper angles and heights. Although these consultants don’t inspect our law library, offering the option to stand and sit at our desks is one thing among many that we can do to accommodate people here.”

An entire article could be dedicated to types of standing desks, workstations, and related considerations for purchasing one model over another. Suffice it to say that it’s important to buy something appropriate to its intended use, budgetary constraints, your technological requirements, and possibly your institutional decor.

My initial request to purchase a budget model from a local start-up manufacturer of “cardboard furniture for the urban nomad” (see www.chairigami.com) was not well thought out. What’s good for the urban nomad isn’t necessarily good for a career law librarian. I settled instead on an all-oak, adjustable-height, podium-style model which sits on top of my conventional desk (ergodesk.com/category/43-ergo-stand-up-desk.aspx). A colleague, Jason Eiseman, who needed something to accommodate his wider monitor, uses an adjustable height computer workstation (www.ergotron.com/product/640/Default.aspx).

If, like Farrell, you intend to change positions many times throughout the day, you might consider something else entirely (www.ergotron.com/rabbit/640/Default.aspx).

The good news is none of these options costs more than many popular ergonomic office chairs, which might help justify the costs if you’re already in the market for a new chair.

Keep On Moving

Extended periods of standing can be taxing. Flat shoes and a floor pad will help with any initial discomfort. To break up longer periods of standing, I assign specific tasks to sitting: professional reading, selecting, ruminating, reference desk shifts, staff meetings. Farrell similarly splits her time, standing while responding to emails, phone calls, and catching up on professional reading. Eiseman, on the other hand, powers through the day on his feet. He says: “I’d like to stand during meetings and wouldn’t mind standing at something like an Apple Genius Bar instead of sitting at a reference desk.”

Many of the people I spoke with said they didn’t feel as tired after a day of standing as when they worked sitting down. Tom Boone, reference librarian at Loyola Law School Library captures well the effect of a day spent standing:

“The general malaise which might have otherwise set in toward the end of the day or after work isn’t there anymore. I might feel more physically exhausted, but I also fall asleep and wake up more easily than I did before.”

Crediting notions of a “mind-body connection,” Farrell believes that, “When seated, it’s easier to let your posture slide. As you slump, so can your attention. But when standing, I feel more engaged.”

My own standing arrangement has had a subtle impact on reference consultations. When standing, my time with patrons seems more collaborative and active, less like a reference meeting than a lab. But, if you stand up, don’t assume that the other person is uncomfortable standing. Farrell advises taking a cue from your guest. If a student comes in and immediately sits down, then sit. So if you spend a good deal of time meeting with patrons in your office or workstation, consider an arrangement that allows you to both sit and stand.

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the reference desk

Q: Help me, please. I’m caught between my supervisor and our director. I really like my job, and I’m lucky to have it. I received my M.L.I.S. about 18 months ago and found a job in the city where I live. My supervisor and I get along all right, and I’ve learned a lot from her. I don’t have much contact with my director, but she has always been courteous to me and appreciative of my work. Recently, my supervisor asked if I would present with her at the AALL conference, and I was thrilled. I was nervous about being in front of so many librarians, but my supervisor was to do the majority of the presentation.

I thought things were going well. All of a sudden, in the middle of the presentation, my supervisor began to criticize our director, using her name. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she turned to me and asked me to agree with her. “Isn’t that right?” she asked me. She did this more than once. I didn’t know what to do and wanted to melt down into the floor. Although I didn’t agree with her, I didn’t confront her either. I tried to change the subject and said something like, “I think we’re cutting it close with the time” and “I thought I saw someone raise their hand.” I didn’t like what she did, but I don’t know what to say to her. I have to believe that our supervisor on task. It wouldn’t have been smart or politically wise to try to correct her behavior, and, as a newbie librarian, you shouldn’t have had to. However, it isn’t too late to speak with her and explain your feelings. (“When you criticized our director and asked me to support you, I felt blindsided, embarrassed, caught off-guard, etc. Please don’t do that again.”) You’re expressing your feelings and stating your expectations.

A: You were in a tough spot, but it sounds as though you handled the situation as best as you could under the circumstances. We all know what should happen, in an ideal world, but the human element keeps the world messy and far from ideal. I see the parallels between your situation and what happened at the 2009 MTV awards when Kanye West hijacked Taylor Swift’s moment. Fortunately for Taylor Swift, she had that classy Beyoncé to remedy the situation. You were on your own.

Actually, you were wise to downplay the situation by attempting to keep your supervisor’s bossy tendencies in check. It wouldn’t have been smart or politically wise to try to correct her behavior; and, as a newbie librarian, you shouldn’t have had to. However, it isn’t too late to speak with her and explain your feelings. (“When you criticized our director and asked me to support you, I felt blindsided, embarrassed, caught off-guard, etc. Please don’t do that again.”) You’re expressing your feelings and stating your expectations.

If you’re asking whether you should say something to your director, then the answer is yes. However, you should trust your instincts. It’s likely that someone has already done that for you. We’re a close-knit association, and we tend to take care of one another. It’s not your responsibility to correct your supervisor’s behavior; that privilege belongs to your director. However, your director can’t manage if he/she is kept in the dark. Again, when you relate the incident to your director, try to do so in an unemotional, factual way. Use the EQ “I” statements—“I was surprised...” “I didn’t know how to re-direct...” etc. Ask your director how you should handle this situation if it recurs. You said that you’ve learned a lot from your supervisor. It’s now time to extend that privilege to your director.

Your mentor did you a disservice, but she wasn’t alone in that. We, individually as your law librarian colleagues and collectively as your association, also let you down. Beyoncé had Taylor Swift’s back, and we should have had yours. I hope that at least one person sought you out after the session and offered some support, such as “I enjoyed your presentation,” or “You handled yourself very well,” etc. I hope that happened, because it should have happened. Your colleagues, we have an obligation to nurture young librarians and to help them become the best they can be. I think that your experiences have reminded us of that. I wish you the best.

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Don’t Give Up the Fight

If you think you sit too much, but, for whatever reason, standing for these longer periods is not an option, you might adopt some of these no-cost strategies to keep moving:

• Don’t use your library catalog’s “virtual shelf browsing” options.
• Drink more water (take more bathroom breaks).
• Send fewer emails to your colleagues (but visit them instead).
• Set an automatic reminder to get up in whatever task manager or calendar you use.
• Stand up when you’re on the phone.
• Take the stairs!
Everyone with whom you spoke is pleased with their new standing arrangements. It’s a great relief to me to be able to cross off “serial sitting” from my ever-changing list of health risks.

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