

Don't Take This Sitting Down

Teach and encourage workers to stand when working BY JAY CROSS



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In a large 21st century company, how far does the chief learning officer's responsibility extend?

Imagine you're CLO of a company with 100,000 workers. You read an article in *The New York Times*, "Is Sitting a Lethal Activity?" In the past you've learned how to lower workers' risk of heart attack, stroke and metabolic syndrome. All they have to do is to sit down. But new findings indicate too much time sitting is bad for your health. Office chairs kill.

No manager in your company is clearly accountable for this area. The savings are potentially huge. Would you take this on? Aren't we all responsible for improving the quality of our organizations? As chief learning officer, aren't you and your staff responsible for helping people learn — even if it's to learn to stand up for most of their working hours?

Stand up for something that makes people healthier at little cost.

Read the facts and then decide whether you'd speak up and push for change or just let this one pass. Ask your peers what they think.

In the *New York Times* article, Mayo Clinic's James Levine said: "Sitting is the new smoking. It's literally bad for you. People who sit more are more prone to cancers — breast cancer, prostate cancer, colon — I mean, multiple cancers. In addition, sitters are more prone to depression, to feeling blue. Even people who have mental illness, their illness is actually worse."

Sitting more than three hours a day reduces your life expectancy by two years. Watching more than two hours of TV per day takes another year. The more you sit, the greater your risk of having a heart attack or coming down with diabetes. Regular exercise does not counterbalance the bad effects of sitting.

Obese people sit an average of two and a half hours a day more than thinner people. With this in mind, a few companies are trying to promote standing up:

- They have instituted walking lunch groups and yoga classes.
- Timers remind employees to stretch, walk around and take breaks.

- People take phone calls standing up, which also boosts confidence and voice quality.
- Companies are removing tables and chairs from meeting rooms. This leads to shorter meetings.
- Employees take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- People walk to others' desks instead of emailing.
- Participants encourage everyone to stand at meetings.
- People can order stand-up desks and even treadmill desks

Adopting less sedentary work practices will be difficult. People don't like to be changed. If you make standing while working compulsory, many employees will engage in a sit-down strike.

Difficult does not mean impossible. Remember when smoking was banned in offices, restaurants and bars? Many of us didn't expect that to work any better than Prohibition did, yet today it's the law of the land, and it's enforced.

Unlike smoking, where worries about second-hand smoke endangering non-smokers' health led to regulation, people who sit excessively only hurt themselves and perhaps increase their employers' health insurance premiums. Unlike smoking bans, standing can be implemented piecemeal.

Standing all day isn't particularly good for you either. Too much standing wears out ankles and knees and can contribute to bad posture. Standing for 50 minutes and sitting for 10 may be optimal. On the plus side, standing while working increases longevity and the likelihood of dodging diabetes, heart disease, cancer, obesity and other maladies. On the minus side are the one-time cost of acquiring new furniture and the rebellion of workers who resist change. It makes business sense to encourage workers to stand and to make it easy for them to do so.

What are you going to do as CLO? Are you obligated to share this knowledge? Will you advocate standing up for something that makes people healthier at little cost? If not you, who? If not now, when?

As CLOs become responsible for channels, flows and connections instead of raw content, the limits are fuzzy. How much can you do? Would you tell workers that it's very well possible that sitting kills? **CLO**