

The office environment and corporate wellness

South Africans are now close on a par with the rest of the Western World when it comes to working longer and harder. A 2010 international workplace study revealed that South Africans worked an average of 9.5 hours in their offices per day, putting in more hours daily than workers in the US, the UK, China and Australia.¹

"With many of us spending more waking time in our offices than at home, how we sit, what kind of chair we sit in, how often we stretch our legs and how our offices are designed can all have significant impact on our overall physical and mental wellness," said Cherine Leishman, Sales and Marketing Director of the Dauphin HumanDesign Group.

These are some of the factors that will be highlighted during Corporate Wellness Week, from 1 to 5 July, 2015, when employee wellness will be in the spotlight.

In a recent office wellness survey² of South Africans conducted by Dauphin, 60% of respondents said the thing they most wished they had in their office that would make them feel more productive was an ergonomic chair. Second was a more collaborative work environment, followed by a standing work station and a sleeping pod. In relation to the rest of the world, where the sleeping pod is starting to take off, it seems South Africans are not ready just yet for siestas at the office and instead prioritise the right chair and ergonomic office design to meet their wellness needs in the workplace.



The work environment

"As we are spending more hours working, it's important to consider the environment in which we work and how this affects the wellness of employees and productivity," said Leishman. "From the chair we sit on to the overall design of our workspace, and how we carry out work activities, all of the many physical and mental aspects of office wellness are not things we can ignore."

Correct seating is fundamental to Dauphin HumanDesign Group's seating solution philosophy, as Leishman stated: "We believe in the concept of good ergonomic seating in which the office chair has the ability to be adjusted from a static to a dynamic position, enabling freedom of movement and good healthy work habits, as no two people sit in the same way."

"The importance of having the spine in the correct position has everything to do with the femur," said Corporate Wellness coach and founder of Employee Lifestyle Improvement (ELI) Marilu Meiring. "Any more than a 60 degree angle and the femur pulls the pelvis into a curve, which causes most of the back stress over long periods of time," she said.

This philosophy has been technologically interpreted and developed into the furniture company's Syncro Active Balance Mechanism, which Leishman explains is "an automatic seat-tilt adjustment mechanism (up to -12°) that causes the pelvis to tip forward, thus raising the thorax and stretching the cervical spine. The spinal column is straightened from the C-shape into the desired S-shape like that of the standing position. This encourages an active seated posture so that muscles work harder in supporting the spine as if one was standing."

Yet in spite of all the knowledge about the benefits of ergonomic seating, it is still not as widespread in South Africa as it should be. "If our forefathers saw how we work today, sitting for hours on end, they'd be stunned," said Chiropractor Dr Athol McLean. "They had to be athletic and physically active in order to survive and keep their families safe and fed; today's sedentary workplace is the antithesis, and without some intervention in the form of innovative design and ergonomics, could end up being dangerous to our health, as well as corporate profitability."

Physical activity

According to the 2014 Discovery Healthy Company Index³, 68% of employees do not meet physical activity guidelines. Yet, movement is critical to both our physical and mental wellbeing. "Twenty years ago people used to get up to collect printing, send a fax or to answer a phone or do something physical around the office, but today we have streamlined our work to do everything from our desktops," said Meiring.

Moving from sitting to standing can do us all a lot of good. Trend forecaster and analyst Dion Chang said that "all should rise for the standing boardroom".⁴ What he's referring to is 30-minute standing meetings, which enable more focus, alertness and productivity, the direct results of standing.

The implications of this for office design, according to Leishman, require a different approach. "The workstation footprint would remain the same; it is simply the operating function of the workstation that would change. This means that desking would no longer be static and cabling would have to accommodate height-adjustable desks," she said. This is something Dauphin has already flagged and developed, namely, the Bosse M3-Desk, an adjustable workstation that accommodates sitting as well as standing.

According to Chang, standing really is the next frontier, and the idea of standing meetings is part of a greater trend he calls 'agile working'.⁴ This is closely aligned with Dauphin's dynamic seating philosophy, namely that office workers flourish in environments that allow them to move and work freely. "This thinking results in a collaborative workspace in which employees can openly meet, brainstorm and exercise creativity," said Leishman.

"Other aspects that need to be considered in employee environments are sensory influences, differing preferences for working environments (some prefer enclosed offices, others like a light environment) and individual wellness, including daily exercise, nutritional intake, recovery (sleeping and down time) quality and motivation," said Meiring. Another key aspect is ventilation, which was cited as a problem by 77% of respondents in a workplace survey.⁵ Poor ventilation can be linked to allergies and other health issues.

"Employees are organic beings," added Meiring. "Offices are normally done in a symmetric design (which is not natural to any living organism). Any office space that is designed with organic shapes, colour and forms will have a positive effect on humans."

"For our collective wellness, it's vital that the design of office space and office furniture consider both the physical and mental needs of employees, and to keep up with the fast-paced evolution of ergonomic studies," said Leishman.

References

- 1 LexisNexis International Workplace Productivity Survey (2010)
- 2 Dauphin Survey conducted by Survey Monkey (2015)
- 3 Discovery Healthy Company Index (2014)
- 4 [Bizcommunity article \(2015\)](#)
- 5 [Health 24 article \(2015\)](#)

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