

UNBOXED

Taking a Stand for Office Ergonomics



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

Dr. Toni Yancey, professor of health services at U.C.L.A., gets work done while riding a recumbent bicycle at home. She also uses a treadmill desk at the office.

By STEVE LOHR
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Dr. Yancey goes further. She has a treadmill desk in the office and works on her recumbent bike at home.

If there is a [movement toward ergonomic diversity](#) and upright work in the information age, it will also be a return to the past. Today, the diligent worker tends to be defined as a person who puts in long hours crouched in front of a screen. But in the 19th and early 20th centuries, office workers, like clerks, accountants and managers, mostly stood. Sitting was slacking. And if you stand at work today, you join a distinguished lineage — Leonardo da Vinci, Ben Franklin, Winston Churchill, Vladimir Nabokov and, according to [a recent profile](#) in The New York Times, Philip Roth.

DR. JAMES A. LEVINE of the Mayo Clinic is a leading [researcher in the field of inactivity studies](#). When he began his research 15 years ago, he says, it was seen as a novelty.

“But it’s totally mainstream now,” he says. “There’s been an explosion of research in this area, because the health care cost implications are so enormous.”

Steelcase, the big maker of office furniture, has seen a similar trend in the emerging marketplace for adjustable workstations, which allow workers to sit or stand during the day, and for workstations with a treadmill underneath for walking. (Its treadmill model was inspired by Dr. Levine, who built his own and shared his research with Steelcase.)

The company offered its first models of height-adjustable desks in 2004. In the last five years, sales of its lines of adjustable desks and the treadmill desk have surged fivefold, to more than \$40 million. Its models for stand-up work range from about \$1,600 to more than \$4,000 for a [desk that includes an actual treadmill](#). Corporate customers include Chevron, Intel, Allstate, Boeing, Apple and Google.

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Today, Mr. Sharkey’s company, [Ergo Desktop](#), employs 16 people at its 8,000-square-foot assembly factory in Celina, Ohio. Sales of its several models, priced from \$260 to \$600, have quadrupled in the last year, and it now ships tens of thousands of workstations a year.

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