



EXERCISE EQUIPMENT AS OFFICE FURNITURE

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VIABLE WELLNESS OR UNNECESSARY RISK?

As workplaces try to incorporate wellness into the office routine, efforts to boost physical fitness can prompt alternative furniture as an attractive option. While workstation exercise equipment allows employees to simultaneously perform desk-related duties while increasing physical activity, they do not effectively replace regular exercise or fully facilitate work productivity, and thus, may have a net negative impact.

While the benefits of exercise are not questionable, respective experts are not likely to recommend workstation-style exercise equipment. This is because research has shown decreases in individual cognitive effectiveness, increased error rates, and awkward postures that can cause or increase discomfort. They can also be distracting to coworkers and may result in slip-and-fall injuries. The true focus should be on encouraging activities and movement away from the computer workstation itself.

Below is a summary of some desk fitness equipment considerations and concerns:

TREADMILL DESKS

Treadmill desks resemble a smaller treadmill that fits beneath a standing desk, and some are incorporated into the standing desk itself. While they do allow an employee to get more active steps throughout the day, some challenges with their use include:

- **Requiring employees to simultaneously pay attention to their work, gait mechanics, and upper-body posture.**
 - This requires much more concentration, and even a single distraction can offset an employee's task focus and physical balance.
- **Eliminating the arm swing component of walking, which benefits hip, pelvic, and spinal mobility.**
 - This may lead to awkward compensations at the shoulder, hip, and trunk.

EXERCISE BALLS

Exercise balls are popular alternatives to traditional task chairs, especially among certain populations (experiencing pregnancy, back pain, lower extremity discomfort, etc.). Research has shown that there is no advantage to sitting on a (core balance /stability) ball for longer than 30 minutes. They can exacerbate musculoskeletal problems and some challenges with their use include:

- **Negatively affecting supported posture.**
 - Exercise balls offer no back support or armrests and can cause an employee to overcompensate, straining certain muscle groups.
 - Inappropriate ball height can result in awkward postures and increased discomfort.
- **Causing a trip or fall injury.**
 - These balls are unstable and are prone to breaking. Common moves may result in slipping off the ball and striking against nearby furniture. They occasionally puncture, resulting in employee falls and other related injuries.
- **Increasing the amount of sitting time.**
 - Employees may take fewer breaks while perceiving to be more “active”.

DESK BIKE PEDALS

While desk bike pedals can be the safest option of the available desk exercise equipment, some challenges with their use include:

- **Aggravating ergonomic issues.**
 - If an employee sits improperly at their workstation, adding a pedaler will not correct the problem and may increase strain. Employers should perform an ergonomic assessment before allowing these in the office.
- **Distracting other employees due to noise levels.**
 - These may not have the large fans seen at a gym, but many are not quiet. Employers may have to address complaints from nearby co-workers.
- **Requiring a stationary chair.**
 - Rolling chairs, which are standard in most offices, will cause improper body postures while pedaling. Additionally, bike pedalers often move while in use and may require foot straps or weights to keep them in place.

CREATING A WORKPLACE POLICY

Adding desk exercise equipment or allowing employees to purchase specific models should come with careful considerations. This topic will need to be addressed in formal, written workplace policies. Some questions to consider include:

- Will the employer allow the use of exercise equipment, or does it pose too high a risk?
- If NO, should a policy or other formal correspondence document the prohibition?
- If YES:
 - What types of equipment will be approved and by which manufacturers?
 - Are only specific designs approved, and why?
 - Will employees be required to wear suitable footwear to prevent injuries?
 - Will all employees be allowed, or will it be a form of accommodation?
 - Will employees need medical documentation to request approval?
 - What if employees need a wardrobe change?
- What additional related or supporting policies need to be developed?