“Get Up, Stand Up: The Effects of a Non-Sedentary Workspace on Information Elaboration and Group Performance”

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Could inspiring creativity in the workplace be as simple as encouraging employees to stand up? This new study finds that teams actually think better on their feet.

Professors Baer and Knight set out to investigate how different workspaces affect groups’ creative productivity. Their evidence-based research suggests that less furniture in a workspace—specifically, the absence of chairs—fosters more creative performance by teams.

There are currently two philosophies of how to design a room to promote innovative group work.

**PHILOSOPHY 1**

Sedentary Space Design: This view suggests that a room should be made as comfortable as possible—a calm environment with soft chairs. A sedentary space allows group members to feel unrushed and safe to explore a variety of new ideas.

**PHILOSOPHY 2**

Non-Sedentary Space Design: This perspective advises removing all chairs to encourage group members to stand during meetings. Standing activates people and encourages a more vigorous exchange among them.

Baer and Knight tested these design philosophies using teams of undergraduate students who were assigned the task of developing a creative university recruitment video. Three types of data were collected during the experiment. Students completed surveys at the end of the process. For an unbiased assessment, external reviewers evaluated the creativity of the video projects and the process each group followed. And perhaps the most novel measurement came from wearable sensors that objectively measured the students’ individual arousal and engagement during the lab sessions.

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Study participants wore the sensors to capture physiological metrics, including movement via an accelerometer and activation of the sympathetic nervous system via detection of bursts of moisture from sweat glands around the wrists. When people are more engaged, these metrics tend to increase.

“Wearable technology like FitBit and Google Glass is becoming more popular among consumers, but it is still relatively rare in this kind of research,” Knight says. “We think that the future holds great promise for integrating wearable technology into research; our study is one example of how doing so can enrich a study.”

The researchers expected the standing groups to be more collaborative, which proved true. But they were surprised that the chairless environment also reduced group members’ territorial ownership of ideas, which can derail the overall output of a group. Without chairs, participants could move freely through the workspace and embrace a more collective spirit, which, in turn, reduced individual territoriality. The non-sedentary workspace also increased group arousal and yielded better overall performance on the creative task.

Baer and Knight therefore suggest that a simple change in the physical layout of workspaces can positively affect creative outcomes by shaping group dynamics. In fact, when given the opportunity to select new furniture for their offices in Olin’s recently constructed Knight Hall, both professors chose adjustable-height desks so they can sit or stand while they work.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS for Managers**

- Workspace design matters. Layout and types of furniture can encourage collaboration and drive creative output.
- Non-sedentary workspaces reduce territoriality, encourage group members to collaborate with each other, and, as a result, drive creativity.
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