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## TEXAS A&M BECOMES A LIVING LABORATORY FOR WORKPLACE HEALTH

*Texas A&M School of Public Health will utilize Texas A&M employees to learn how to improve work environments*

September 6, 2017

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The Ergonomics Center at the Texas A&M School of Public Health is studying if there's a way to disrupt one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's health epidemics—sedentary work environments—and using volunteers at their own university as test subjects. Researchers have recruited employees of the Division of Student Affairs at Texas A&M University to see if standing desks and software prompts can improve not just their health, but their productivity, too.

The study, which begins this week, will spend about three months collecting data. Each participant has a standing desk, and each standing desk has a sensor. For the first part of the study, the software will gather baseline information on each person's sitting and standing time while using their computer and relay that information to Parag Sharma, a doctoral student at the School of Public Health.

Prolonged time either sitting or standing during work hours needs to be reduced to help maintain health. Multiple biological problems—such as glucose level and decreased metabolism—are all reduced by breaking up the time people either sit or stand. Ideally, Sharma says that people should change their positions at least twice an hour.

A healthy workplace has become a high priority at Texas A&M and multiple initiatives across the university have been implemented to improve the work environments for all staff. Utilizing employees at the university for studies like this one not only helps foster a healthier environment, but engages staff in research that can later benefit employees at the university, and ultimately, across the globe.

Sharma is utilizing the research as part of his dissertation. "We want to find the answer to how we can best use technology to our

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advantage to create and maintain healthy behaviors,” Sharma said. “The challenge for many employees today is, ‘how do we remain productive and move constantly throughout the work day without having to step away from our desks?’”

That’s where the second part of this study comes in. The device that’s attached to the desks and synced with the employees’ computers will begin giving them prompts for the second three-month portion of the study. This part of the study is called “intervention.”

Each employees’ work station is set up with their individual goals in mind, and participants can track their progress daily, weekly and monthly. “An employee can set a goal of standing for 50 percent of the week,” Sharma said. “And the software then prompts them when they should stand or sit.”

In addition to reaching their movement goals, participants are also incentivized because they’ll be members of teams, and they’ll be competing against one another. This is called gamification. All teams can see the other teams’ scores and use it as motivation. The goal is to build a team environment and help bump up scores to beat the other teams.

The device accounts for sitting and standing time and is triggered by movement in a person’s keyboard or mouse so that time spent away from the desk is not factored into the score. Employees are dispersed throughout campus in, in true Aggie fashion, [twelve](#) buildings. At some point researchers hope to pull in 24/7 movement along with diet and social cues to better inform the algorithms.

Sharma is a doctoral student of Mark Benden, PhD, CPE, director of the Ergonomics Center and head of environmental and occupational health in the School of Public Health. Benden has already established [research](#) that shows that there is a notable increase in workplace productivity with the use of standing desks.

“It is exciting for us to change the way America is working,” Benden said. “This research helps employers invest in their employees’ health in a way that provides a competitive advantage to the company and a lifelong benefit to the employee.”

Funding for this research study was provided by Varidesk, Inc. and Wellnomics.

— Katherine Hancock

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