

# STANDING UP FOR EMPLOYEE HEALTH (LITERALLY)

Frequent breaks from sitting can improve employee health.

By Fran Melmed, context

**W**hat would you do if you were passing by a conference room and saw a colleague or two doing push-ups? If you worked for the American Heart Association, you'd jump right in, because you'd know they were taking a two-minute Hotseat break.

Hotseat is a workplace wellness tool designed to minimize the risk of "sitting disease" — the label associated with the health risks of sitting uninterrupted for long periods of time. Hotseat is a health app that will create a personalized daily schedule of two-minute activity breaks based on a desired number of break goals, capability and comfort, and calendar availability. Hotseat allows users to play solo or use a multiplayer mode that involves theme-based challenges to be conducted among groups.

With work being a primary driver of our seat-bound lives, companies are embracing various ways to design movement back into the workday. Coupled with an employer portal and launch communications, Hotseat provides a simple, proven solution to a vexing problem.

## One Company's Experience

The proof was illustrated by Hotseat's pilot program undertaken by the American Heart Association (AHA).

Naturally, AHA is interested in helping its employees get more physical activity. Its mission is to build healthier lives that are free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke, and physical activity is a major component of this goal. AHA is similarly interested in understanding how new technologies can aid them in their

mission. This drove the organization's interest in evaluating Hotseat.

In June and July 2013, 10 percent of AHA's eligible population tested Hotseat to see how it influenced their behavior. The company created personal activity libraries from Hotseat's extensive exercise library, set daily break goals and defined what days and hours they wanted to take their breaks. They played solo and in team challenges, they took spontaneous group breaks, and some even played in the mall.

By the pilot's end, AHA experienced 78 percent engagement. A post-pilot survey found:

- 86 percent were excited about using the app
  - 74 percent found activities they wanted to do
  - 81 percent valued the ability to choose their own activities
  - 76 percent were more mindful of their time spent sitting
  - 67 percent took more activity breaks.
- "Hotseat was successful in helping us achieve the main pilot goals," said Avneet Jolly, a consultant to AHA and the project lead. "Use of Hotseat increased employees' awareness of hours spent sitting and increased the number of breaks they took from sitting."

### Is Sitting Really a Problem?

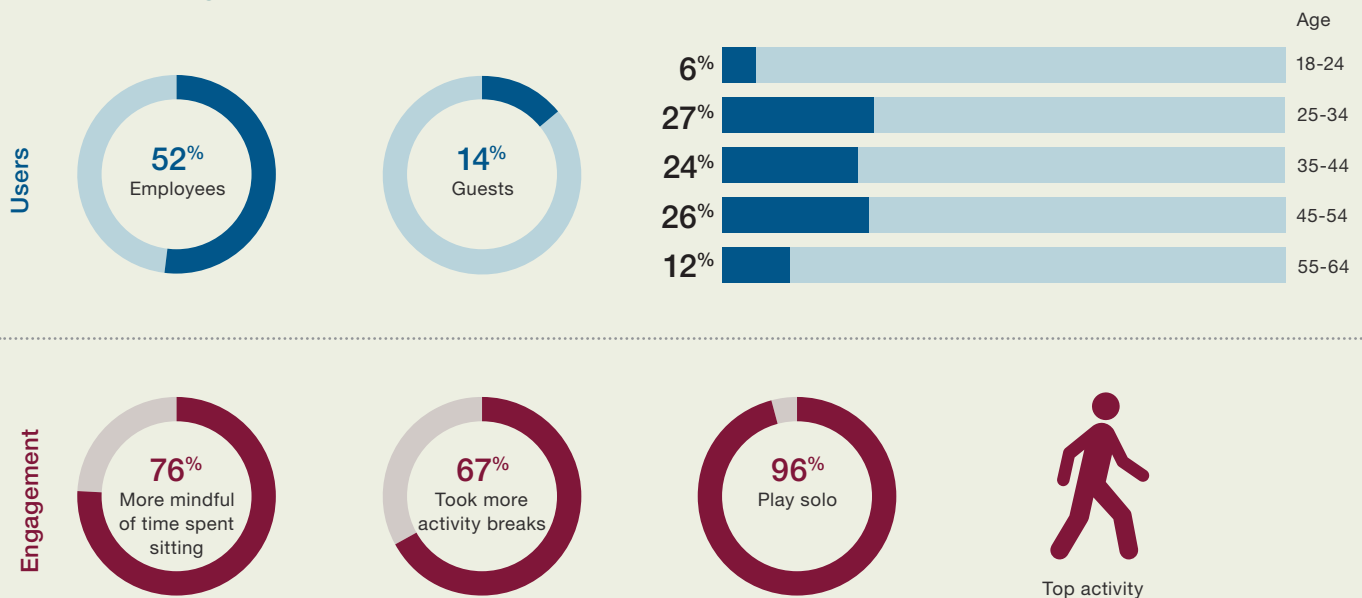
It's difficult to think of sitting as dangerous or as a disease. We sit for so many things: commuting, eating, working and entertainment. Yet it's sitting's commonplace position in our daily lives that's the problem. "Chronic Disease and Sitting Time in Middle-Aged Australian males," a study published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2013), ties sitting for more than four hours per day with an increased risk of chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Another study, "Association of Sitting Time and Physical Activity With CKD: A Cross-Sectional Study in Family Practices," published in the *American Journal of Kidney Diseases* (2012), concluded lower levels of sitting time are associated with a decreased risk of chronic kidney disease. A study conducted by Peter Katzmarzyk and colleagues at Pennington Biomedical Research Center, "Sedentary Behavior and Life Expectancy in the USA: A Cause-Deleted Life Table Analysis," published in *BMJ Open* (2012), estimates individuals gain two years in life expectancy by reducing their time spent sitting to less than three hours per day.

One could conclude from the research that we should ditch our chairs and permanently stand. However, that overcorrection presents its own problems. Standing all day is not only tiring, it increases the risks of varicose veins and carotid atherosclerosis. Furthermore, researchers behind these studies admit they haven't pinpointed the optimal number of breaks or time spent moving versus time spent sitting. As studies pursue these answers, what we can say with confidence is we'd all be better off if we just got out of our chairs with some regularity.

### A Nudge to Get Up

Knowing you should get up throughout the day and actually doing so isn't as easy as it seems. For many of us, our jobs tie us to our desks. Meetings, phone calls and computer work all generally revolve around a chair. Hotseat is designed to take the thinking and initiative out of one's hands. After each employee sets parameters, Hotseat prescribes when to get up and what to do next. This customization and guidance rated highly among the AHA pilot users. It also led to some surprising changes in the office. Michelle Nostheide, vice

Figure 1 | Defeating the Chair



# From sophisticated trackers to health apps, health technology is also playing a key role in encouraging people to stand up.

president of marketing and communications for AHA's mid-Atlantic affiliate, is one pilot user who noted how Hotseat took hold. "I stair climb over to my co-worker's office," Nostheide said.

Hotseat's not the only tool looking to shake things and people up, however. There's a sea change regarding the way we work, and human- and technology-based interventions abound.

Because moving is the antidote to sitting disease and our greatest bulk of sitting time is work-related, it makes sense that walking while working is part of this sea change. Walking meetings eschew the chair and conference room for an outdoor meander. There are a number of high-profile people singing the praises of walking meetings. James Levine of the Mayo Clinic is credited for coining the term "sitting disease" and is behind the invention of the first treadmill desk; he also pioneered the walking meeting.

David Katz, founding director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University, picked up Levine's cry in "Disease Proof: The Remarkable Truth about What Makes Us Well." In this book, Katz discusses how people can fit exercise into the "nooks and crannies" of their day, with walking meetings playing a part.

Ted Eytan, a doctor and the director of The Permanente Federation with Kaiser Permanente, brought some practicality and guidance to the subject in his series on walking meetings on his eponymous blog, tedeytan.com. Recently, Merchant, an author

and strategist, used her TED Talk to further amplify our discussion about why we should walk while we work.

While walking meetings may be beneficial for just a couple of people at a time, organizations are also tackling the need for regular movement at the group and organizational level. Sodexo's Talent Acquisition Team instituted a video-led workout prior to its regular team calls. Overit Media runs hourly exercise breaks. Others are following suit, using in-house fitness-certified instructors, working with external partners, or simply deferring to home-grown exercise enthusiasts to lead scheduled activity breaks.

## The Wave of the Future

These efforts inject activity back into portions of our day. For consistent breaks, more than a cottage industry has sprung up around office furniture to tackle sitting disease. Treadmill desks, adjustable-height desks and furniture that actually moves a person are finding their way into companies of all sizes and industries. TrekDesk, one of a few makers of treadmill desks, has seen its sales grow tenfold since it opened its doors in 2008. Steelcase and Ergo Desktop report similar surges in growth, but for adjustable desks that allow users to sit or stand with the flip of a button. The interest has steadily grown to the point that workwhilewalking.com, a leading destination for treadmill desk product reviews, has opened the first retail store exclusively devoted to treadmill and standing desk products.

From sophisticated trackers to health apps, health technology is also playing a key role in encouraging people to stand up. Activity trackers like Fitbit, FuelBand and Up have replaced the pedometer, bringing more robust information about how and how often we move. Health apps like Human, Moves and Hotseat do the same, but via smartphones. Until recently, employees purchased these products for themselves, which meant employers lost a rich data source. With consumer interest increasing and the price point decreasing, more employers are evaluating how to include digital health tools in their wellness programs. Companies like Jiff, a digital health technology company, will make doing so even easier. Jiff's platform, Health Outcomes Marketplace, allows employees to select and purchase the device and apps they prefer — with money from their employer. Then Jiff aggregates and distills the collected data to inform and guide employers' overall program and incentive design.

## All in a Day's Work

Companies the world over are seeking ways to inject activity into their employees' stressful and sedentary days. We don't know yet what will successfully help us get unstuck. Surely, the prevalence of new furniture and gadgets, a renewed focus on active design and the restoration of common-sense habits like climbing the stairs instead of taking the elevator will soon make getting up all in a day's work. **WS**

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