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Staying healthy

Our health is important. **Andrew Peck** reflects on protecting it in the workplace.

I dislike articles that come with 'disclaimers', as I feel that literacy should be accompanied with the ability to reflect and critique, but if this article works as intended you should have a reaction as when we talk about health, we're really talking about bodies, and we all have one of those, warts and all.

My body has been broken for a while, and that's not a metaphor, there was a bone in my foot that was in two rough-edged bits when it should have been whole. Last week I was fixed, which involved drugs and the kind of surgical implements Joseph of Nazareth would have recognised. The resulting limitations on my mobility and working life have got me thinking a little bit more about the health implications of our chosen profession: Monty Python were strangely right, desk workers are the galley slaves of the modern workplace. So what ails us? And what are the remedies?

Sitting

Sitting has an impact on everything including the longevity of our spines, but there is a particular weighty concern. We cannot possibly burn as many calories sitting as we could walking or being otherwise more animated. My old job was awesome as when I wasn't pacing around the classroom, I took part in physical training and regular exercises: the weight gain and fitness loss when I became a technical communicator was visibly noticeable (plus we're notably better fed at TCUK than at the average academic conference). I'm heavier and get out of breath quicker than I ever did when I had a running-about job.

The solution is either fewer calories in, or finding a way to do more exercise, neither of which is as easy as it sounds when time is split between work and a young family. I walk to and from work (about two miles each way) and do something active most weekends. In hindsight I should have cut down my food intake to match my new lifestyle the minute I stopped running about quite so much. I sometimes wonder if there'd be a way to get an employer to pay for a treadmill desk in the same way that they're liable for our eye tests now that the EU recognises obesity as a disability.

However, even if that's not an option you can still insist your employer buys a suitable chair and other posture supports under existing rules.¹

Monitors

Our eyes are one of the most primitive and most versatile parts of our bodies: optical sensors more capable than any product currently on the market, yet made out of jelly. A boxer is taught to protect his eyes and maybe we need to do the same. Focusing on minutia for too long strains the muscles in the eye, as does focusing at a fixed distance which is the ocular equivalent of working as a human statue: the muscles in the eye, like all muscles are designed to be exercised. The first important piece of information is that your employer has to pay for your eye tests if you habitually use a screen for a significant part of your work. If the eye test recommends glasses specifically tailored to using a monitor, you can have your employer pay for these too.¹

Don't get hung up on the free stuff, the most important thing is to take time away from the screen for a few minutes an hour and take the time to give your eyes both a work-out and a rest: I'd suggest that the habit of throwing balls of paper into a bin across the room is a useful if unoriginal way to get the eyes to focus on something at a distance that isn't the monitor. Of course, getting up, walking around and chatting to your co-workers would also refocus the eyes and deal with the final threat group.

Isolation

I once took a course on 'first aid when alone'. It was fascinating stuff and involved such interesting tricks as applying bandages with one hand and doing a lot of the basics in a slightly different order (with a view to being 'recovered alive'). These physical threats, while real, are not the biggest problem with working alone. The biggest threat is psychological. The real hit to my system when I became a technical communicator wasn't that I put on weight, but that I was suddenly isolated. The profession is 'technical communication', but a lot of the time what we're doing is 'technical writing' which means we aren't engaged

with our co-workers. Having gone from a role in training, I became downright miserable during my first year as a technical communicator. I'd leave the house before the family was awake, get home to a sleepy or cranky child while being steered through occasional teleconferences with the client's US office. I probably wouldn't have gone the distance if I hadn't managed to keep some of the university lecturing work going on in the background. Luckily my boss isn't some corporate machine and I was able to add to our bureaucratic literature with a 'dog policy' and the family with a puppy which meant that my walks to and from work stopped being unaccompanied, and I'd always have someone to play with when it was just me, the screens and some mind-numbing project (we also need to stop talking about work as if it's always brilliant. It seems to be part of modern professionalism, but some of the things we're asked to do are just not fun).

A dog in the office isn't for everyone (although there's no reason why not provided your dog is well behaved and you don't have a colleague with allergies. The insurance that comes with Dog's Trust membership covers you for having the animal in the workplace), but we can all be aware that there is a mental aspect to our health that requires balance. I won't even pretend to be an expert, as for some of us it means some quiet time, for others some adventure or excitement in an otherwise dull day. What I do know is that isolation is hard to tackle alone, so feel free to reach out if you're feeling down, or to check on a colleague if you notice they're not smiling as much as usual. **C**

¹ Health and Safety Executive 'FAQs - Display Screen Equipment'
www.hse.gov.uk/msd/faq-dse.htm
 (accessed February 2015)



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