

Stand and deliver

Jonathan Swan

April 1, 2012

At work ... the effects of prolonged sitting.

Some leading companies say offering workers the chance to stand at their desks rather than sit is paying off.

There is the beehive, the "ear chairs", the Ned Kelly lounge, the dinosaur bones, the secret forts, the lemon tree and about 6000 bankers.

The headquarters of the Commonwealth Bank at Darling Harbour feels more like a theme park than an office block, and that is kind of the point, said Jennifer Saiz, who recently moved the last batch of workers into the tower.

"It's ABW. Only a few of us are doing it," Ms Saiz, head of property at the Commonwealth Bank, said.

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ABW stands for activity based working - a Dutch design philosophy that abolishes anachronisms such as paper, landline telephones, desktop computers and assigned desks.

The Commonwealth Bank's ABW offices were designed for banker-type reasons - "improving productivity", "boosting morale", saving paper, energy and money. But a study published this week suggests the new building might give the bankers something else: a few extra years of life.

Researchers from the University of Sydney and the Australian National University surveyed 222,497 workers and found that people who sit for 11 hours or more a day are 40 per cent more likely to die within three years than those who sit for less than four hours. Those who sat for between eight hours and 11 hours a day were 15 per cent more likely to die.

When workers stay glued to their chairs, they slow the body's metabolism, raise blood sugar levels, and have a higher risk of diabetes, heart failure and early death than colleagues who break up their sitting time.

The study's authors say Australians should limit how much time they spend on their chairs and suggest that governments should do more to warn the public about the dangers of sitting. But given most of the sitting time happens at work, employers could make an even bigger difference, said Dr Hidde van der Ploeg, lead author of the study, which was published in the peer-reviewed *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

Most doctors agree.

More bosses should be thinking about how to get their staff sitting less and moving more, said Professor David Dunstan, from the Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute in Melbourne, who admits to being rather taken by the Commonwealth Bank.

At the new Commonwealth Bank, workers begin each morning at their "home zone", remove laptops from personal lockers and spend the day roaming about the wireless-powered building, switching from couches to conference tables to standing desks to private booths, depending on what tasks they need to tackle.

The bank is one of at least four Sydney companies trialling "activity based working" - the others include Macquarie Group, GPT Group and Jones Lang LaSalle - and Ms Saiz said in less than a year the bank had halved its use of paper, cut energy by 25 per cent and would save about \$1 million annually as it no longer needed to buy desktop computers, partitions and landline phones each time it hired a new employee. The Macquarie Group estimates its Shelley Street building will save about \$10 million a year.

But the biggest gain, according to both banks, has been the "improved productivity" of staff, though they concede it is difficult to measure.

Inside Commonwealth Bank Place and Macquarie's One Shelley Street, "productivity" is visceral. Bankers in shiny suits whiz up and down internal stairwells holding MacBooks. Groups huddle around SMARTBoards and lounge about on couches with their iPads.

In his latest research, Professor Duncan found that when workers hopped off their chairs for even short walks, equivalent to strolling to the tea room, they substantially lowered their blood sugar levels.

Christina Bolger, the director of work health at Comcare, the federal work health and safety regulator, said the government was concerned about the health risks of "prolonged sitting" and referred to a Medibank Private study which found that office-based, call centre and retail staff spent 77 per cent of their working day sitting.

Macquarie and Commonwealth bank staff interviewed by *The Sun-Herald* had not heard about the research and admitted health was rarely discussed when planning new office designs.

In the new Commonwealth Bank, and Macquarie Group offices, about half the desks are height-adjustable.

A project co-ordinator at Commonwealth Bank, Mikala Everett, 31, said she spent too much time in meetings and felt healthier now that she could break up all the sitting by standing at her desk. "It gives my back a break," she said.

The two banks may not know it, but they are running a large public health experiment.

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