

## This \$5,900 chair may be the tech world's new key to productivity

October 18 2016, by Tracey Lien, Los Angeles Times

---

Che Voigt believes his company has solved problems that have plagued the working world since the advent of typing.

It's a solution to hunched backs, stiff necks and tight shoulders. It's a workstation that, with a push of a button, transitions from a [standing desk](#) to a seated table to a fully reclined platform like a dentist's chair. Its seat expands and retracts, supporting the whole body from head to heels. Its desk moves up, down and rotates. There's a screen and mouse and keyboard that follows the user's eyes and hands.

It's the way of the future, he says; the most comfortable you can possible be working at a computer. And it starts at \$5,900.

Before anyone scoffs, Voigt has a defense: 1) Don't knock it until you've tried it, and 2) If people don't invest in ergonomics now, they'll pay for it later.

And if Silicon Valley's track record is anything to go by, Voigt might be onto something. Tech firms have long embraced wacky inventions that promise heightened productivity and creativity - and the industry has a history of making them mainstream.

Height-adjustable desks and \$1,000 Herman Miller chairs that once seemed extravagant are no longer common just at software startups; schools, government agencies and even the White House have gotten on board. Whether it's open floor plans, ergonomic keyboards or yoga ball

chairs, workplaces far removed from the tech world often co-opt the quirky and often costly office cultures of firms like Apple, Google and Facebook in hope that some of their success rubs off.

"Comfort is material to creativity," said Voigt, 45, chief executive of Altworx, a company that builds each workstation by hand in a barn on a 65-acre family property shared with Zinfandel wine grapes in California's Sonoma County. "If you're stressed or distressed, the mind can't fall into creativity. We want to get into an area where you can be productive and do really good work."

Twenty years ago, ergonomics was about finding a decent office chair and doing the occasional stretch throughout the day, said Joy Boese, an ergonomics specialist at E3 Consulting who has worked with companies such as Toyota and Netflix. It was considered an office perk, something filed in the "nice to have" category. Today, particularly in tech land, it's expected.

"Now it's about tracking your health, tracking your steps, seeing how you spend your day, integrating fitness desks, treadmill desks, Zen rooms for people to take a moment to rest their mind," Boese said. "These companies want people to feel like it's more than just coming to work - they want a happy, healthy, engaged workforce."

Silicon Valley is at the forefront of this, Boese said, which is no surprise, given that it is traditionally "two to three years ahead of the curve."

But it's also characteristic of the Valley's ruthless optimization and productivity ethos.

It was software engineers who popularized Soylent, the liquid meal replacement for techies. It was tech CEOs such as Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs who streamlined their wardrobes into a uniform, a move that

Zuckerberg has justified saying it helped "clear my life so that I have to make as few decisions as possible ... on things that are silly or frivolous." And it was the tech world that normalized "lockdowns" - intense work periods when employees don't leave the office until a project is done.

These cultural quirks reflect the immense pressure that many tech workers face to deliver big projects on tight deadlines, justifying not only their own salaries but also their companies' lofty valuations. The Alwork Station is designed for these people, said Voigt, who describes them as "high-intensity computer users."

"Being comfortable at your desk is really important," said Helen Wu, director of growth partnerships at San Francisco tech firm AppLovin, where every employee can choose between a sitting or standing desk and request ergonomic gadgets.

Wu herself doesn't have an Alwork Station, but she uses a laptop stand on her desk, an ergonomic keyboard and a Handshoe mouse - a wireless gadget that looks like a fedora made for aliens - from the Netherlands.

"Having a setup where you don't have to worry about your physiology lets you focus on your work," she said.

The tech industry isn't unique when it comes to valuing productivity. Wall Street, which has a reputation for brutal efficiency and long hours, has also invested in ergonomics. What sets Silicon Valley apart, according to ergonomics specialists who have worked with both industries, is its lack of self-consciousness and its willingness to go all-in.

That's why five-toe shoes (with separate nooks for each toe, like a glove for the foot) and telepresence robots - tablet computers on rolling pedestals that offer off-site employees an in-person presence - are not uncommon on tech campuses, but remain rare in New York's Financial

District.

"We worked with a brokerage firm to redesign their office into an open plan space, and it was hard to get people out of private offices," said Melissa Steach, an ergonomics specialist at Herman Miller, the furniture firm whose midcentury designs are now ubiquitous in the [tech industry](#). "There was a lot of ego attached to it, the whole 'I'm a baller, I've earned this office and you don't have one.'"

Silicon Valley, meanwhile, isn't wary of workplace weirdness. It has embraced it - reclining chairs, bike-pedal footstools, treadmill desks and all.

There's a copycat element to it too, said Michael Lukasik, a brand development manager for West Elm Workspace, an arm of the housewares business that furnishes offices. Startups often express Google-shaped aspirations even if their businesses couldn't be further from Google's.

"These smaller companies are coming to us and saying, 'We saw images of Google's offices - can you help us accomplish this?'" Lukasik said. "Everyone wants to attract the same talent that Google or Apple attracts and retains."

It doesn't always work, of course. The Googles and Facebooks of the world were at least bringing in revenue before they started lavishing their employees with ergonomic perks. Some startups find themselves in the reverse situation, spending big before they've hit the jackpot.

"It's not unusual to hear that some company just got a round of financing and bought 20 (Herman Miller) Aeron chairs, or that another just bought 40 at a discount from another startup that went bust," said Mike Vorhaus, Silicon Valley and technology analyst. "I absolutely think this is

a follow-the-leader thing."

Still, many [tech firms](#) swear by it, reporting that ergonomic furniture has led to happier, healthier and more productive employees.

Outside Los Angeles, underwear subscription startup MeUndies has an office decked out in Herman Miller furniture, with \$660 chairs, \$1,000 sit-to-stand desks and an open floor plan designed by ergonomists.

"The most telling stat is employee retention," said Terry Lee, MeUndies' chief operating officer. "In the two years I've been here we've only had two employees voluntarily leave. In less than a year we've doubled our headcount. I think it translates to employee happiness, and workplace ergonomics tie into that."

For most companies, the draw of ergonomics is the effect that it is believed to have on the bottom line.

"The companies buying these know if they can get their project done a little sooner, it pays huge dividends," Voigt said. If a company could squeeze even 10 more minutes of worker efficiency each day, then the cost of an Altwork Station "is completely insignificant," he said.

Voigt is a mechanical engineer by trade and spent most of his career working on aerospace systems. He started on the Altwork Station five years ago when a family friend, who couldn't sit for long periods of time because of an injury, came to him with the idea of a chair that would let him work in repose.

Voigt didn't think the project would take long. After all, how hard could it be to design a chair?

"Well, it's not just a chair," he said. "You have to have a desk, and you

have to learn about the human body, you have to figure out what to do with devices, and there are all these wonderful problems to solve to get it right."

The Altwork Station is pricier than comparable offerings from Herman Miller and Steelcase, but it's more adjustable and, according to Voigt, the transitions are more seamless. Users can set their ideal position and the station will remember it.

Some of the Valley's biggest tech companies have already expressed interest in the Altwork Station, although Voigt wouldn't say which ones. The company, backed by self-funding and \$3 million from angel investors, started shipping pre-orders late last month.

Although he understands that productivity is probably the desk's strongest selling point, Voigt insists that the Altwork Station is a solution to neck, shoulder and back contortions we perform every day just to use a computer.

"Humans have created all these fantastic things while hunched over a computer," he said. "The fact that we've advanced all this tech but haven't supported our body in any different way is insane to me."

©2016 Los Angeles Times

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: This \$5,900 chair may be the tech world's new key to productivity (2016, October 18) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-10-chair-tech-world-key-productivity.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.