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Job Market

New path to fitness: Have a ball at work

By Vikki Ortiz

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

MILWAUKEE — When Peggy Behling replaced the chair in her office last year with a giant green exercise ball, co-workers stopped and stared.

Talk about wanting to be on the ball at work.

Today, like Behling, nearly a third of the salespeople at Promotions Unlimited in Racine, Wis., do an entire day's work while sitting — or attempting to sit — on bouncy spheres in their cubicles.

"It's the best thing for people who sit all day," said Behling, 61, who insists that the ball-chair provides all-day muscle toning that helps control both her back pain and her posture. "I would never go back to a desk chair. Never."

Scoff if you will. The guy over the partition at your office might be following the bouncing ball next.

With the growing popularity of Pilates and other core-strength fitness regimens, employees are experimenting with balls as chairs, a practice once reserved for cutting-edge California workplaces such as Google, where nearly half of its employees sit on balls.

"It definitely spices up your routine," said Julie Urban, 33, a technical writer who began working on the ball at her job at KHS USA in Waukesha, Wis., at the suggestion of a physical therapist.

Urban said at first her colleagues had, er, a ball teasing her for her silly-looking seat.

"They're, like, 'Why do you have the Hippity-Hop?' " said Urban, who occasionally rolls the ball away from her desk to stretch out in a backbend.

But after a few months, colleagues got used to her chair preference — and the occasional pumping noises that came with it. One co-worker was inspired to take up a chair ball himself.

"It's actually very comfortable," that co-worker, Mike Kostich, said. "You're not rolling over like people think you would be."

Most oversize exercise balls can be found at local sports-equipment stores for around \$30 and require only occasional pumping.

Chair-ball tips

Choose a ball that is big enough so that, when you're sitting on it, your hips are at a 90-degree or slightly greater angle to your legs. The more rubbery the ball, the more durable and comfortable it will be. The top of your computer screen should be at eye level or 20 or 30 degrees below.

Place the keyboard close to your body so your elbows are at your sides and bent at a 90-degree angle.

Don't throw away your office chair right away. You might have to work your way up to being able to use the ball for a full workday. Start using the ball for five to 10 minutes every hour until your core muscles get stronger.

Use common sense. Don't sit next to a heating vent or anything else hot. Don't sit on top of broken glass. Don't sit near stairs or open landings.

Source: "Working on the Ball: A Simple Guide to Office Fitness" (Andrews McMeel Publishing) by Jane Clapp and Sarah Robichaud

Derek Allen, a 6-foot-2-inch, 185-pound senior vice president for a London-based market-research company, swears the blue ball he rolls back and forth among the three computers in his home office in Yorkville, south of Milwaukee, has made significant improvements in his abdominal six-pack.

The ball "looks rather precarious," Allen said. "But now my stomach is rock-hard."

Fitness and physical trainers promote the idea of sitting on a backless ball at work as a way to exercise abdominal control. The concentration and balance required to stay upright on a ball all day helps build strength at times when people could otherwise be using bad posture or leave muscles unused, they say.

Jane Clapp, co-author of "Working on the Ball," a book released this year offering an illustrated guide to sitting on the ball at work, said that so far employers have mostly been receptive to the practice because of its health benefits.

"I think there's a general movement to recognizing how unhealthy office work is," Clapp said. "People realize that incremental exercise is just as good, if not better, than doing a chunk of exercise."

The practice is widespread in Europe and Canada, where entire office buildings have replaced regular chairs with colorful exercise balls. In the United States, its popularity has grown in the past two years, said Clapp and Sarah Robichaud, the book's co-author.

Of course, a big bouncy ball in the workplace can come with complications. Kostich said that shortly after sitting in front of his computer on one occasion, he heard what sounded like a tea kettle underneath him. Moments later, his nouveau chair was deflated. Even tape couldn't help Kostich that day, he said.

But other local exercise-ball users say the inflatable chair routine is surprisingly hassle-free.

The toughest part of ball-sitting at the office is getting used to the comments from co-workers, said Denise Valente, a personal trainer who recommends balls as chairs to her Racine clients.

"You've got to get through all the jokes out there," Valente said. "Sometimes, the first in fashion is the worst place to be."

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