Action stations

Emma Goldsmith reports on her recent survey of workstation ergonomics and health among language professionals, and suggests some top picks

Earlier this year I ran a survey to gain an overview of workstation set-ups and upper-body problems of language professionals, and to investigate how respondents counteract the physical impact of working long hours at the computer.

Over six weeks, full- and part-time colleagues completed the survey through a link shared on social media and through various associations, including ITI. A total of 791 people responded, of whom 643 (81.3 per cent) were female. Age, grouped by decade, was fairly evenly distributed, except for a smaller group in their 20s. Over half the respondents had worked at a desk for 10-30 years.

Fewer than 10 per cent spent just one to five hours a day at the computer, including non-working hours. At the other end of the scale, just over 10 per cent spent 10 hours or more – which works out at most of their waking hours – working, studying, networking and procrastinating at the computer.

How do those long hours affect us? Hugely. Almost 70 per cent of respondents reported upper-body aches or pains in the past year. My data analysis of upper-body pain and eye strain is still under way, but in the meantime, I'd like to share the strategies and devices people use to tackle or prevent the negative impact of our sedentary work life.

To give you a quick overview, picture a typical respondent: she's in her 40s, works for eight or nine hours a day, takes less than 2.5 hours of exercise per week and moves away from her computer for short breaks during the day. She sits on an IKEA-type office chair with armrests at a fixed-height desk, touch-typing on a budget Microsoft keyboard, Logitech mouse to her right and two monitors in front of her. However, few of us fit that precise description, so read on to learn more about the specific adjustments and choices people make and why.

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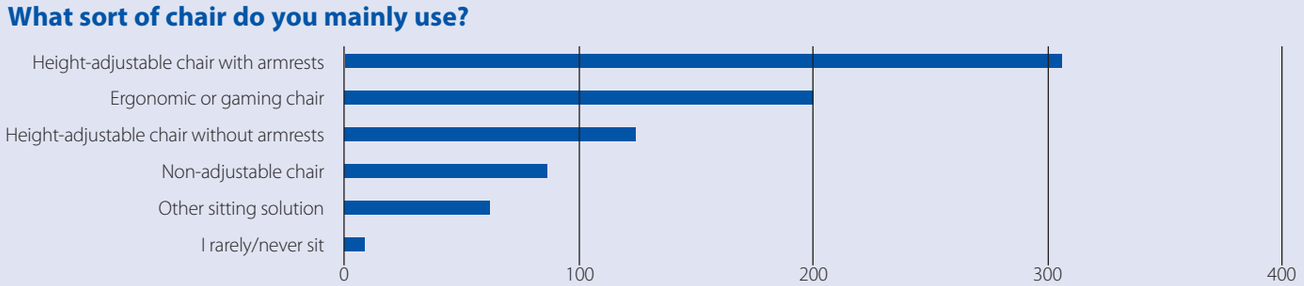
Keeping moving while keeping working

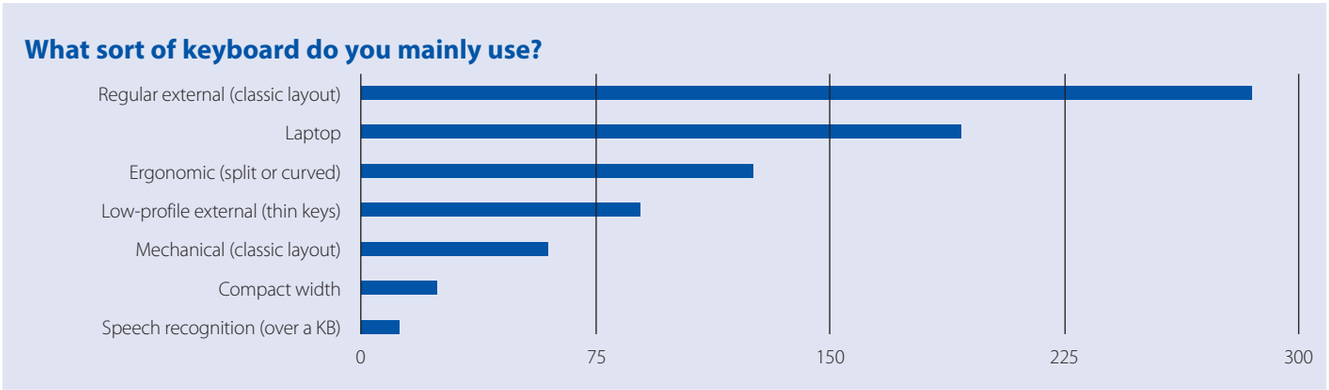
A fifth of respondents have invested in active options: a standing desk, riser (a platform positioned on a fixed-height desk to facilitate a standing position), cycling accessory, or a treadmill to walk while working.

Two-thirds of our standing, walking and cycling colleagues made this ergonomic change to prevent problems that might arise in the future. The remaining third did so to solve a problem that already existed, and while most reported that the strategy helped (sometimes together with other measures), six said it didn't help, and three said it actually caused new problems in knees or feet.

Some 32 people stand, walk or cycle most or all of the time, while 117 confess that they sit most of the time at their standing desk. Why do so many people buy a standing desk but end up sitting while working? A few mentioned fatigue or physical problems caused by standing, one person said that 'the fun wore off', and some explained they bought the desk to achieve the right sitting height. This in itself is a smart ergonomic approach, because fixed-height desks are usually 73 cm high, which best suits people who are 185 cm tall (according to the Ergotron workspace planner). However, men's and women's average heights in the UK are 178 cm and 164 cm, respectively, and therefore most of us should either raise our chair height, use a footrest (as a third of respondents do) or buy a height-adjustable desk and set it to the right height.

What sort of chair do you mainly use?





Desk bike: Jenny Zonnefeld keeps pedalling while translating

PHOTO © EJZONNEVELD

Are you – are you *really* – sitting comfortably?

Standard height-adjustable office chairs came top in chair types, followed by ergonomic or gaming chairs. Just under a third of respondents who used ergonomic or gaming chairs or other sitting solutions did so to solve a problem, and almost all of them found it helped, either on its own or combined with other measures. Top ergonomic picks ranged from the high-end Herman Miller Aeron to the budget-friendly IKEA Markus. Alternative sitting solutions cited were fitballs, saddle chairs and kneeling stools such as the Aeris Swopper and Varier Variable, which respondents raved about and dissed in almost equal proportions.

Even finding a comfortable new chair poses problems. One despondent owner of a Topstar Head Point acknowledged that 'trying to buy the right chair is really, really difficult. Despite having it on trial for 48 hours before committing myself, I still feel I've made the wrong choice.'

Of mice, keyboards and monitors

Moving on to mice, about one in 10 participants mainly use their laptop trackpad as a pointing device. Just over half have a standard external mouse, while roughly a quarter have invested in an ergonomic one. Of the ergonomic mouse users, about half bought it to solve problems and half to prevent them. Makes and models that definitely helped solve a problem included vertical designs (Evoluent, CSL, Jelly Comb, Logitech MX, Logitech Lift and Trust Verto); trackballs (Kensington Orbit, Logitech Ergo M575 and MX Ergo); thumb-operated joysticks (3M); and other ergonomic designs (HandshoeMouse and Microsoft Sculpt). The Contour RollerMouse was mentioned by 10 people. This 22-cm-long, centrally positioned, one- or two-handed device has a sliding bar cursor with left- and right-click, double-click, copy, and paste buttons.

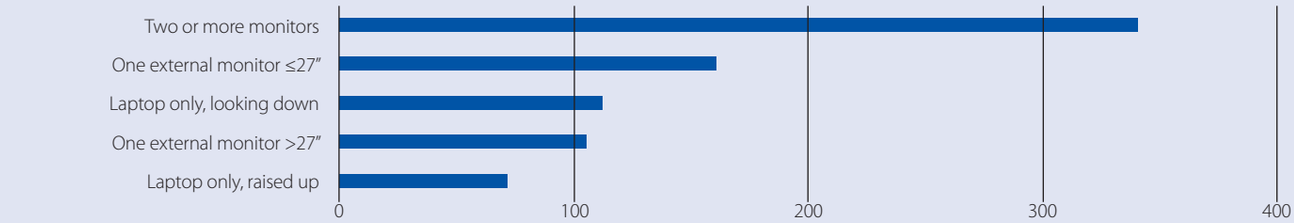
When it came to mouse techniques, unsurprisingly the vast majority of respondents reported using their dominant hand. However, 10 per cent alternate their left and right hands, and around the same percentage use their non-dominant hand only, either to solve a problem in the other hand or because they are left-handed and are poorly served by the mouse market. Some mice are ambidextrous; one such device recommended in the survey was the Penguin Ambidextrous Vertical Mouse.

A fifth of respondents wisely try to avoid reaching for their mouse as much as possible, using shortcuts, text expanders and macros specifically to cut down on repetitive finger clicking and arm abduction. One person mentioned using a laptop touchscreen for the same purpose. And, paradoxically, some respondents try to get more out of their mouse by using devices with multiple programmable buttons, such as the Elgato Stream Deck, or the Logitech G604 or MX mice to assign app-specific actions.

Investigating keyboard types, I found that about a quarter of participants use their laptop keyboard for typing, over a third have regular external keyboards and another third use ergonomic solutions with *low-profile* (thin) or *mechanical* keys (with individual metal switches under each key cap), *tenkeyless* (compact width), or curved or split designs. Among the people with ergonomic keyboards, a third bought their keyboard to solve a problem, and almost all of them found it helped either as a single strategy or together with other measures. The most frequently cited 'problem-solving' keyboards were Microsoft Sculpt, Logitech Ergo and Kinesis Freestyle. The remaining two-thirds who bought an ergonomic keyboard to prevent a problem (or for other reasons) mentioned models such as Microsoft Ergonomic, Microsoft Sculpt, Apple Magic, Logitech MX, Logitech Ergo K860 and Razer BlackWidow. Just 2 per cent of respondents said they use speech recognition more than a keyboard.

In response to the question 'How do you type?', 42 per cent said they touch-type with a classic home-row technique. A similar proportion, 39 per cent, said they type fast without looking at the keyboard but with unconventional finger travel. Touch-typing

What sort of monitor(s) do you mainly use?



Stand and deliver: Kate Sotejeff-Wilson

was influenced by age: it was much less common among people in their 20s (just 28 per cent) and increased gradually as age increased, reaching 50 per cent in the 60-plus age group. A notable 15 per cent of participants have to look down at the keyboard as they type, which is worrying because a hunt-and-peck technique lowers productivity.

Looking at monitors, most respondents have two or more, including a subgroup who use a laptop combined with an external monitor. Several people stressed how their productivity increases by having more than one program displayed at a time. Others enjoy similar screen real estate but concentrated in a single very large monitor (over 27 inches), which has the advantage of easy snapping (press and hold the Windows Logo Key + Arrow to snap the app you are on) without the display resolution minefield navigated by multiple-screen users. Again, age influenced monitor preferences, with the youngest age group accounting for almost half of laptop users who keep their device flat on their desk or their laps or – some confess – even work tucked up in bed.

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Over half of respondents adjust their monitors for brightness, contrast and colour, and one in 10 have dedicated colour filter software, such as f.lux and Iris, or use Windows' own night light. Almost a quarter recommend blue-light-blocking glasses, despite a paucity of robust scientific evidence to support their use.

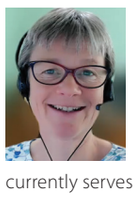
Wrist wrests, trays, supports and other accessories

In addition to the footrests used by 33 per cent of respondents, other ergonomic accessories include mouse wrist rests or gel mats (21 per cent), keyboard wrist rests (16 per cent), document holders (12 per cent), keyboard trays (5 per cent) and forearm supports (4 per cent). Dictionaries were used for raising monitor height and even as part of a curious elbow support system: 'I have my keyboard at arm's length and raised up 6 cm. I rest both elbows on two large dictionaries on the desk either side of me, also around 6 cm high.' While I'm delighted this respondent has found such a comfortable set-up, perhaps it's one we shouldn't try out at home.

Trying this at home (and aiming to cut down)

After reading about the most popular devices used by colleagues, you may be wondering whether I've adopted any of these top picks and what my own workstation looks like. Picture me sitting on a Steelcase Think 1 chair; at a fixed-height, custom-built pine desk; touch-typing on a mechanical Razer BlackWidow tenkeyless keyboard; with Logi MX Anywhere mice to the right and left; numeric keypad A Sixx to my far right; and two height-adjustable Dell monitors ahead of me (a 25-inch U2515H and a 24-inch P2416D). That's how I spend most of my waking hours, which means I'm one of the 10 per cent who spend 10 hours or more at their computer every day. I need to work on reducing those hours. Do you?

Remember that you can find a suite of wellbeing resources in the ITI knowledge hub.



Emma Goldsmith FITI trained as a nurse in London and later retrained – informally and formally – as a medical translator in Madrid. Her areas of expertise include clinical trial documentation, cardiology, emergency medicine and nursing. She writes a blog called *Signs & Symptoms of Translation* about medical translation and Trados, and currently serves as the chair of MET (Mediterranean Editors and Translators).

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