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Stretch for Success

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The best businesses are nimble, agile and extremely flexible. In fact, so are the most effective business owners. In part two of our small business fitness guide, learn simple strategies for staying loose and sitting up straight. Both your spine and your bottom line will benefit.

By: MATT ALDERTON

As a rule, small business owners are stiff. Their thumbs are permanently crooked from typing on their handhelds. Their hands resemble claws from gripping too tightly their computer mice. Their backs have humps from spending hours on end in a forward-leaning lurch. Even their necks, once straight, seem to have a permanent crook in them from so many client calls.



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Unfortunately, when your back is out of whack, it's not just your posture that suffers. Your productivity feels pain, too, according to health expert Janice Novak, author of [Posture, Get It Straight!](#)

"We have become a nation of professional sitters," Novak says. "By stopping the slouch, supporting your back properly and avoiding the head-forward position, you will be able to work more comfortably and productively."

Naturally, when you're able to work more comfortably and productively, you're also able to work more successfully, to the benefit of both your body and your business. It pays, therefore, to straighten up. Here's how.

Perfect Posture

Whether you work from your home or from an office, chances are that running your business is ruining your back.

"You could walk into any office building all around America and see people sitting behind computers in really bad posture positions," Novak says. "Necks craning forward, slumping upper backs, rounded shoulders."

Sitting too long, she continues, is a major contributor to back and neck discomfort, as sitting puts continuous pressure—40 percent more pressure, in fact—on the muscles in your lower back, not to mention the disks in your spine. What's more, sitting in poor alignment causes your abdominal muscles to weaken, which spells trouble for that six pack that you've been doing crunches every night in order to get.

"The more you slump, the weaker your muscles get," Novak says.

In order to find your strength again, consider Novak's tips for perfect seated posture:

- From a side view, your ear, shoulder and hip should be in a straight line.
- Your head should be centered over your shoulders, not dropped forward.
- Your rib cage should be slightly lifted, not pressing on your lungs.
- Your arms should be supported by padded armrests.
- Your shoulders should be relaxed.
- Your butt should be against the back of your chair.
- Your lower back should not be rounded backward.
- Your thighs should be fully supported by the chair seat.
- Your feet should be flat on the floor, or supported by a stool.

"If you realize you are slumping forward," Novak says, "lift your ribcage up a few inches, as if a string were attached from your breastbone to the ceiling. This little movement will stop the upper back slouching and bring your head back over your shoulders."

A Complete Workplace Workout

When you sit properly, Novak concludes, you'll be able to work harder, smarter and for longer—and without looking like Quasimodo.

But what if you've still got cramped hands and restless legs? Then you'll need more than a lesson in good posture, according to nationally certified [personal trainer](#) and active lifestyle coach Linda Gottlieb. You'll need a full-body workout—or at least a full-body stretch.

"Getting up out of your chair after 45 to 60 minutes of computer work allows the body to realign and your mind to refresh," Gottlieb says.

Of course, when you finally get up, you don't have to head for the gym in order to kick your kinks. You can get a good stretch and a modest full-body workout in between client calls at your desk, according to Gottlieb. Here's how:

- **Hands and Wrists:** To relieve stress from your arms due to working at the computer, try making a fist with both hands after every 45 minutes of computer work; start with your hands open and your fingers spread widely, then slowly close them into a tight fist. Repeat the exercise five or six times whenever your hands are tense. "You can also stretch your arms up as high as you can, as if you're trying to pick an apple from a tree," Gottlieb says. "Do this 10 times, alternating sides."
- **Neck:** To release neck tension, try relaxing your shoulders and rolling your head slowly forward with your chin tucked in. Slowly rotate your head forward from one shoulder to the next, being careful not to raise your shoulders.
- **Shoulders:** You can loosen up your shoulders, chest and back by doing what Gottlieb describes as a "funky chicken" like exercise. From either a sitting or standing position, place your fingers on your shoulders and then point your elbows outward, putting them as far back as you can and then as far forward, until they touch. Next, lift them up as high as they'll go and then down, like a bird flapping its wings.
- **Face:** Relax your facial muscles by tightly closing your eyes and mouth, holding them closed and clenched for five seconds, then releasing and repeating.
- **Back:** Stretch your back after prolonged periods of sitting by interlocking your fingers, turning your palms outward and extending your arms away from your body as far as you can. Do this from your desk chair, keeping your back straight and your arms parallel to your desktop; stretch further by turning your shoulders to the right, center and left.
- **Abs:** Get the six-pack you've been craving—the stomach, not the beer—by using your abs to lift yourself up from your chair when you stand up; that means standing without the assistance of your chair's arms. Also try sitting on physio ball while you're working to engage your core.
- **Legs:** You can build strength in your legs, and also stretch them out, by holding onto your desk while standing, then slowly lifting one heel at a time toward your butt. Slowly lower the heel back to the ground and repeat 12 to 15 times on each leg.
- **Glutes:** To build up your butt muscles while you're working—and to keep them from falling asleep—squeeze them together six to eight times in a row several times a day; hold each squeeze for 5 to 10 seconds, then release.

Finally, when your whole body is feeling tense and you simply can't work for another minute, try standing up and shaking your body—your arms, hands, legs, feet, head and shoulders—like a dog does after getting wet.

"Not only will you create a stronger, healthier you with reduced stress," Gottlieb concludes, "but you may even find yourself more cheerful and productive!"


For more information on health and fitness for small business owners, read [part one](#) in our multi-part small business fitness guide. Or, stay tuned for our next installment, which will feature nutrition tips designed to keep you as healthy as you keep your business.

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