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WORK & FAMILY

# Searching High and Low for a Just-Right Chair



*For the Very Tall and Short, Many Office Chairs Just Don't Fit* By Sue Shellenbarger

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An estimated four million office workers are too tall or too short for the standard office chair. WSJ's Sue Shellenbarger and Tim Springer, president of Hero, an ergonomics company, join Tanya Rivero on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty.

Very tall and very short people are used to feeling conspicuous. But there's a place where they would rather have a little more attention: the office chair.

Most chairs are designed for the 5th to the 95th percentile of the population—people who are closer to average in size. That leaves roughly 4 million white-collar workers on the unlucky extremes of the bell curve—too small for their chair, with legs dangling, or too big for their chair, with knees bent up toward the chin.

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Mostly, they suffer in silence. It is awkward to ask for a special chair—especially one that could cost hundreds of dollars. And many very

tall or very short people are so used to "not being comfortable, ever," in standard-sized cars, airplanes and beds that they resign themselves to taking what they get, says Michael Kelly, a research fellow at office-furniture maker Herman Miller Inc.

Still, a growing number of well-fitting chairs are available for people at the extremes, and more employers are tuning in to their needs. If you're very tall or very short, ergonomists say, it helps to understand your particular pain points, and how to fine-tune your chair or ask for help.

At 4 feet 8 1/2 inches tall, Ellen Frankel believes





*Robert Neubecker*

chairs are one source of her chronic neck and back pain. Experts say most chairs' backs and armrests give too little support for very short people. Perched forward on the seat, they can't lean on the back rest, and back muscles become fatigued and painful from supporting the torso. Circulation in their legs can suffer if their feet dangle.

Ms. Frankel of Marblehead, Mass., a bereavement counselor, can't lean back in her chair because her legs would stick straight out in front of her, "almost like a kid," she says. "I would look very unprofessional," which might be "a little jarring" for patients, says Ms. Frankel, author of "Beyond Measure," a book about being short in stature. She has tried using a footstool, she says, "but it's in the way, and it kind of makes your knees go up."

She scoots forward and perches on the edge of her chair instead, crossing her knees and anchoring her body by pressing one toe against the floor. When working on her own or with colleagues, she tucks one leg under her or simply sits cross-legged.

At 6-foot-5, Nicholas Detrych of Chicago, a project manager, says his legs get numb if he sits too long in a chair seat that is several inches too short to support his upper legs. Experts say very tall people also are at risk of pain in the buttocks, back, shoulders and neck from folding their bodies into a too-small chair.

He tries to be diplomatic in seeking solutions. "You don't want to be the special-needs person," he says. To relieve the strain, he recently fashioned a standing desk by stacking two copy-paper boxes atop his desk and placing his laptop on top. "It isn't glamorous," Mr. Detrych says.

## WSJ Radio

Sue Shellenbarger has more about how some people can't find the right office chair on The Wall Street Journal This Morning.



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When his legs wouldn't fit under a desk in an office setup he was offered on an assignment in another state, he asked to see any spare furniture and commandeered a better-fitting chair and table from a warehouse supply room, Mr. Detrych says. The setup gave him room to get his legs underneath the table and hold his arms at a comfortable 90-degree angle.

Solving the problem can be complicated for employers. Some worry about fostering resentment if they give one employee a special chair, says Tim Springer, president of Hero Inc., a Geneva, Ill., ergonomics research and consulting company. Also, changing the size of a chair often means the desk must be raised or lowered, too, he says.

Manufacturers are offering more work tables that can be adjusted with an electric lift, a hand crank or movable pins in the legs. They are also making more work surfaces, keyboard supports and computer-monitor arms that can be moved on vertical rails, Dr. Springer says.

Most facility managers are under heavy pressure to hold down costs, however, and providing special items for a few workers conflicts with a common strategy of buying many standard items at discounted prices. Special chairs can list for \$1,000 or more—though employers buying in bulk may pay less than half of that.

Some employees resort to subterfuge. "If someone gets laid off or quits, they'll play chair mix-around" and snatch another person's chair that is a better fit, says Stephanie Fanger, a workplace strategist with Goodmans Interior Structures, a Phoenix office-furniture dealership.

When Dave Rasmussen was given a chair too small for his 7-foot-3-inch frame, the Milwaukee information-technology specialist built a kneeling chair and shifted to it several times a day to ease back strain. "It helped straighten my spine out and stretched me out a bit," he says. He also has placed 4-by-4-inch blocks under his desk legs to elevate the surface.

Many people stuck with one-size-fits-all furniture tinker with it. A short person might put a box or stool under her feet. A pillow or a rolled-up towel or blanket can provide lumbar support, says Don Chaffin, director emeritus of the University of Michigan Center for Ergonomics. Sitting on a foam pad or pillow can distribute the load on the buttocks. If a chair lacks armrests, he recommends moving close to a table or desk and placing the elbow and lower arms on a towel or foam pad for support.

Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who is 4 foot 10 1/2 inches, once sawed off the legs of his office chair and desk to make them fit. He was working as an assistant solicitor general in the Justice Department in the 1970s, he says, and the General Services Administration refused his request to shorten his standard-sized wooden desk and chair.

"I snuck in one weekend with my saw and did it myself, and sent the stubs to the GSA administrator," Dr. Reich says. His office chair later as Labor Secretary left his legs sticking out, so he held meetings standing up.

Furniture designers have since embraced standards for chairs that can be adjusted by the user in numerous ways, including the armrests, height, seat depth and back tension. Dr. Reich's current employer, the University of California, Berkeley, has provided a BodyBilt

model with "1,000 different knobs. You just twist and turn and eventually you get the perfect chair," says Dr. Reich, a professor of public policy there.

The need for adjustable chairs is growing. Steelcase Inc. recently studied the body shapes and postures of 2,000 workers in 11 countries and found that "extreme size is on the rise," says Ken Tameling, general manager of global seating.

A new Steelcase chair, Gesture, is designed to fit a wider range of body types and sizes. It has a seat that moves farther forward and back, an armrest that adjusts over a wider range, and a seat back that supports a wider range of body sizes when tilting back. Gordon Peterson, who is 6 foot 6 and the chair's lead engineer, says the seat back prevents people his size and larger from flipping backward when they lean back.

Herman Miller's Aeron chair comes in three sizes, serving the 1st to the 99th percentile of body sizes, says Gretchen Gscheidle, director of insight and exploration. "We priced all three chairs the same, so that the person who needs the largest or smallest chair isn't penalized," Ms. Gscheidle says.

More employers are offering a choice. The city of Phoenix, keeps 10 different chair samples in a room for any of its 14,000 employees to try out, says Steve Georgoulis, the city's facility manager.

For employees who are too embarrassed to raise the topic, Mr. Georgoulis says, managers are trained to help out. If a manager "sees somebody in a difficult situation, they might say, "Are you comfortable in that chair?" Just asking the question puts most people at ease, he says.

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