



MEDIUM, HIGH, OR LOW?



Standard workbench height is great for most hand- and power-tool tasks, but sometimes it pays to gain a higher stance or to elevate the workpiece.



Work at the Right Height

Optimize the elevation of your bench for the task at hand

BY CHRISTIAN BECKSVOORT

Everybody has an optimum height for their workbench. Standard benches are usually 36 in. tall, but some folks prefer one that's a bit shorter or taller, depending on their own size. The rule of thumb is that the bench should come up to about your wrist. That's great for 90% of all bench work, but it's not perfect for every operation. For example, planing requires more upper body strength, so a lower bench is better. Jobs like carving or sawing dovetails are both easier on your back if the bench is higher.

I have two methods for making my bench higher or lower, and as a result more user-friendly. With a little up-front work, both are quick to implement. I have a platform that lives under the bench that I can pull out and stand on in a minute. I also have an auxiliary bench that I keep close at hand; when I want to do some high work I simply lift it up, clamp it in place, and get to it.

Both add-ons to my main bench have made me a more comfortable and efficient woodworker.

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IS YOUR BENCH COMFORTABLY SIZED FOR COMMON TASKS?

If you stand next to your bench with your arms at your sides, the top should be at wrist height. This general rule should see you through most tasks at the bench—chiseling, belt-sanding, planing, layout, marking, drawing, etc. My bench, like its owner, is on the tall side.





Tucked away until you need it. Becksvoort built a platform to store perfectly between the legs of his bench. Limited by the clearance beneath the bottom rail of the bench, Becksvoort added a lift system under the platform. Once he pulls the platform out, he can add to its height by folding down hinged risers.

LOWER BENCH PUTS YOU ON TOP OF THE WORK

My workbench is 39 in. tall, which is great for the vast majority of my work, even a lot of planing tasks. However, when I need to plane or flatten an entire panel or when I want to sand or plane tabletops or large panels held vertically in the vise, a lower bench surface would really help. Since I can't make my bench lower, I keep a 2¾-in. platform under it, fitted between the legs. I pull it out and stand on it, giving me a work surface that's effectively 36¾ in. high. If that's still too high, the platform has two hinged 3-in.-wide boards underneath that I can brace open with long spinners. Fold them down and the bench is 35 in. high, and I can really get into my work.

When returning it to its home under the bench, I found that the platform tended to bind if not pushed in straight. So I added strips between the legs to assure that the platform slides in straight. If you have a European-style bench with sled feet, the guide strips won't be necessary. If you want a platform the full length of your bench, you'll have to store it elsewhere. The platform can be made out of leftovers or cheap wood and can be built in just over an hour. It's an hour well spent, since it will make your work much easier. I also included a small nylon handle to make the platform easy to pull out.



More height means more power. The platform allows Becksvoort to work at a height that's most effective and ergonomic for planing a wide panel.

A BENCHTOP BENCH PUTS THE WORK WHERE YOU NEED IT

Making a higher work surface can be more complex, but it's worth the effort since it greatly improves the ergonomics of sawing tails and pins for case sides, and of letter carving. Unlike planing, which usually takes 5 to 10 minutes, carving can last for hours. Spending that much time hunched over is tough on your back. The high surface is also useful for fussy jobs such as inlay, where you need to be close to the work.

I have a 12-in.-high auxiliary bench that I clamp to my workbench. Its top surface is 51 in. off the floor, so I can rest my arms comfortably on it, and it is perfect for carving. No more backaches. The front edge has a 24-in. Lie-Nielsen chain-driven vise. That makes it easy to clamp case sides for sawing dovetails. The vise doesn't rack, since both spindles turn at the same consistent rate. The 12-in., 18-in., and 24-in. vise hardware is all priced the same, so go for the big one.

You really don't need an auxiliary bench as complex as mine, and you may not need the full 12-in. height. Use your imagination to come up with a solution that satisfies you. You can buy a variety of vises and carving tops suitable for auxiliary benchtop benches from Lee Valley, Tools for Working Wood, and Lie-Nielsen. Prices range from \$69 to \$890. You also can get some guidance from Steve Latta ("Minibench Works Wonders," *FWW* #244) and Jeff Miller ("A Benchtop Bench," *FWW* #176).



Bring the work up. With the smaller bench clamped to the main bench, Becksvoort can work at a level that will be comfortable for extended periods of time and allow him to use his body position productively.



Same features as the main bench. By adding a vise to the auxiliary bench, Becksvoort keeps his usual methods intact while working at the optimal height.

