

How your environment can work for you or against you.



A white paper on the benefits of workplace ergonomics.

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Forming bad habits

For most of us, habits are hard to break. Work habits are no exception. Despite major technological advances in office equipment design, millions of workers struggle with poor posture, incorrect body mechanics, repetitive motion or poorly adjusted office equipment. And these bad habits can lead to chronic aches, strains and tensions, or worse.

Left to worsen, such conditions can result in lost work time, additional medical costs and the expense and hassle of finding replacement staff – all of which can hurt an organization's bottom line by driving both productivity and profits down, and increasing potentially avoidable costs. Putting in place programs to help employees can save 2-5% in total lost work time when targeting employees with back pain alone.¹

The facts

Technology supports a productive workplace, but workers may not consider how they are using that support. In 2019, for all private industries there were over 17,000 occupational injuries and illnesses involved repetitive motions, the wrists being most heavily affected.²

Carpal tunnel is the most common repetitive motion injury. Five percent of the working population suffers from Carpal tunnel syndrome, caused by continuous daily use of their hands and wrists. Second only to fractures, it accounts for the highest number of days lost among all work-related injuries; a median Carpal tunnel case resulted in 27 lost work days.³

Sprains, strains and tears accounted for almost 300,000 injuries with lost work time in private industries in 2019.³ Wrist injuries alone in 2019 say a median of 15 lost work days.⁴



GROUP BENEFIT
SOLUTIONS

Designing a better solution

The science of “ergonomics” focuses on designing workstations, tools and job tasks for safety and efficiency. Proper ergonomics are a function of the industry and the tasks performed in different jobs. It also needs to be tailored to the individual employee.

Effective ergonomic design, coupled with good posture and habits, can reduce employee injuries. It can also increase comfort, job satisfaction and productivity.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration specifically points out that especially work related musculoskeletal disorders can be prevented and work sites be made more productive using ergonomics.⁵

Evaluating the situation

While the principles of proper body mechanics are universal, their application varies considerably from one industry to another, and between job types. When conducting an ergonomic evaluation, the evaluator (often a Vocational Coach) must look at more than just the description of the worker’s job. They must also take into account the worker’s qualitative feedback on how he or she is actually performing the job. Inconsistency between a written job description and employee feedback can provide clues as to where to focus an ergonomic evaluation.

Working with Vocational Coaches

After evaluating the limitations and restrictions of the employee, a Vocational Coach applies their expertise to the situation. Vocational Coaches specialize in ergonomics and job accommodations. They teach workers in all industries how to adjust their equipment, use proper body mechanics and apply good posture. Workers are also coached on behavioral techniques to support the use of their workstation adjustments. What sets Vocational Coaches apart from other ergonomic evaluators is their expertise in health management, social programs and technical expertise. This broad array of knowledge allows Vocational Coaches to help individuals adjust to medical conditions both at work and at home. By providing encouragement and support in all aspects of an employee’s life, Vocational Coaches deliver robust services with compelling results.

Free resources available

There are free resources available that can help answer questions and provide guidance on workplace ergonomics. For example, the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) can be a good source of job accommodation ideas. JAN is a service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. It provides free education and information regarding job accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the employment of people with disabilities to all U.S. employers. JAN has produced a guide to ergonomics called “Accommodations and Compliance Series: Ergonomics in the Workplace.”⁶ It can be found on the publications page at: <https://askjan.org/publications/index.cfm>. Information from that Resource Guide will be summarized in the next section.

Making a job accommodation

Step 1: Job analysis

A thorough job accommodation process starts with a job analysis. This analysis should include:

- An interview with the employee and coworkers with similar jobs to document job tasks;
- An assessment of the physical environment;
- An examination of equipment used to perform job tasks;
- An observation of the movements required to perform tasks, as well as the sequence of activities and relationship of job tasks to each other; and
- A review of safety controls and potential hazards.

Step 2: Conducting an ergonomic analysis

The job analysis should be followed by an ergonomic analysis. This consists of assessments of the worker, the workstation and the worksite.

The worker

Assessing the worker needs to include the examination of the individual’s:

- Body proportions and physical stature;
- Restrictions or limitations associated with a health condition;
- Job tasks and routines; and
- Work environment and any special attire, protective devices and/or equipment used to perform the job.

Equally important in this assessment are psychological factors. Is the job performed in isolation or in tandem with others? Is the job high-stress? Are there individual psychological or emotional factors to be considered?

The workstation

When evaluating the workstation, some general principals apply to all settings. These include environmental factors such as lighting, noise, temperature, ventilation and flooring material. It can also include exertion (repetitive motion, lifting, pushing, pulling) and the duration and frequency of awkward postures (stationary, flexing, extending) that the employee uses to perform the job.

While some general principles apply, assessing the workstation varies by industry or work setting. There are four common settings that will be covered here: Office, industrial, service and health care.

Based on workplace setting, here are specific factors an ergonomic evaluation addresses:

1. Office

- Physical positioning of the individual in relation to their desk, keyboard and computer monitor (including screen glare);
- Quality and adjustment of their chair;
- Space and dimensions of their workstation; and
- Repetitive movements, particularly of the upper extremities.

2. Industrial

- Sturdiness and safety of work surfaces;
- Pace of performing job tasks;
- Any forceful exertions (gravity, friction) involved in performing tasks;
- Positions (bending, reaching, stooping, kneeling); and
- Availability of proper tools.

3. Service industry

- Height, reach range and adjustability of work surfaces;
- Flow of foot traffic and accessibility of goods;
- Repetitive tasks and movement (lifting, tagging, bar coding, typing); and
- Availability of mechanical aids (carts, lifting devices).

4. Health care industry

The health care industry is unique as jobs in this setting may combine tasks of jobs in other industries: Office and service; maintenance and technical. Many of them also require the addition of patient care. Direct patient care requires a unique set of physical demands and safety factors.

Ergonomic evaluations for health care workers include proper mechanics of lifting and transfer, as well as assisting patients in activities of daily living (bathing, toileting, ambulating, etc.). Patient care jobs also include tasks involving the use of office and service equipment.



Calling in the experts

Few employers possess internal resources with the skills and credentials needed to conduct an in-depth job analysis and ergonomic evaluation. That is where the consultation of Vocational Coaches can help.

Vocational Coaches are experts in:

- Assessing an employee's skills, functional capacity and motivation; then, matching them to the requirements of a given job or occupation;
- Providing counseling and technical assistance to employees who may be struggling due to physical or psychological limitations. These can be associated with an illness, injury, or even medication effects that may impact their ability to work; and
- Training employers to be better prepared to meet the individual needs of employees with disabilities.

In addition to this expertise, Vocational Coaches are also skilled counselors and program analysts. They are trained to examine each individual comprehensively. They look below the surface for other influences that may be affecting the employee's productivity and job satisfaction. Vocational Coaches recognize that employees who experience pain or discomfort on the job are often dealing with other factors that contribute to this struggle. These factors may include a health condition, injury, work-life challenge or psychological or emotional issues. Work environment, interpersonal relationships, company policies, practices and culture can also play a role.

Working together to keep employees at work

Whenever possible, Vocational Coaches also work with the employer's worksite (or off-site) health care professionals, such as a nurse, physician or health educator. This partnership enhances an integrated view of the employee by all members of the health care team, with a focus on functionality and productivity.

Vocational Coaches also work in tandem with other health management programs the employer offers. These programs may include employee assistance, chronic condition support, pain management, lifestyle management and medication management programs. This collaboration helps the employee address all of the influences in their life that may be affecting their ability to remain at work and productive.

Conclusion

Vocational Coaches are uniquely positioned to be a single source of expertise for employers who are interested in maximizing productivity, wellness, and benefits integration. Having a Vocational Coach conduct an ergonomic evaluation, select accommodations, and deliver manager and employee education can help free up benefits and Human Resources staff to perform their core duties.

An ergonomic-focused prevention plan can help employers reduce the impact of absence and lost productivity. Incorporating the science of ergonomics and the art of counseling into everyday business can lead to healthier and more satisfied employees, along with improved efficiencies and lower costs.

1. Integrated Benefits Institute. What's on the table for SAW/RTW strategies? Evidence from short-term disability claims. 2019.
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3. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Employer Reported Workplace injuries and illnesses, 2019. November 2020.
4. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nonfatal cases involving days away from work: selected characteristics, 2019. November 2020.
5. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Ergonomics. <https://www.osha.gov/ergonomics>. Retrieved 2/3/2021.
6. Job Accommodation Network. Accommodation and compliance series: Ergonomics in the workplace. <https://askjan.org/publications/Topic-Downloads.cfm?pubid=962768> 2018.

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