

# Four Steps to an Effective Office Ergonomics Program

# Insight

By Mike Wynn, M.B.A., CPE

Office productivity is a major factor in the economic health of any enterprise. How well office workers do their jobs impacts the company's bottom line, and ergonomic challenges can cost the company a fortune—not just in workers' comp payments, but in time lost to paperwork, unearned benefits (medical leave), and lost productivity as well. A good office ergonomics program can reduce the number of dissatisfied and/or injured office workers, improve productivity, and have positive effects on employee morale and the effectiveness of the entire operation.»

Here are four key factors in establishing an effective office ergonomics program.

### **Step 1: Obtain Management Support**

Like every other business activity, you need the support of management to get the resources needed for genuine improvements. Demonstrating bottom line value and presenting a planned approach are two proven methods to obtaining that support. Studies have shown that ergonomic improvements can lead to productivity gains in office tasks as much as 20%. But assuming even a modest gain of 4% and a \$30,000 annual salary, you can project an increased contribution per office employee of \$1,200 per year. Numbers like these, calculated over some percentage of the office staff, are significant for management. A

planned approach must involve an efficient, cost-effective assessment to identify and prioritize the areas of highest concern. The plan should be based on data. For example, you might plan to assess 40 workstations in the next quarter. If you predict that twelve of them (30%) will need improvements that will average \$150, then all you are asking for is \$1,800 and some time. This kind of finite investment is one that management can agree to, especially if you can demonstrate the potential increased contribution for those 12 individuals.

### **Step 2: Conduct an Efficient Assessment**

Ergonomic analysis is the key to ensure that you are focusing your company's investment on the most important concerns and the most effective solutions. Without some measure of how important prob-

lems are, the tendency is to concentrate efforts on the individuals that complain the most or who have the most political influence, missing what may be higher priority concerns. The danger is that a cumbersome, over-extensive analysis will only slow the process down, waste time and money, and postpone needed improvements. What is needed is an efficient evaluation method that provides rapid, accurate information on both specific concerns and general trends—in other words, one that enables you to understand and quantify the level of concern at each workstation and across the organization (quickly and effectively).

### **Step 3: Train the Staff**

Education is the next key component in a successful office ergonomic program. It provides the road map for solving ergonomic problems,



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—Mike Wynn, MBA, CPE

enables employees to make a meaningful contribution to the improvement process, and avoids a number of pitfalls. Simply refurbishing the office with high-end, “ergonomically correct” equipment and furniture does little if a solid employee training effort does not support it. For instance, giving an untrained employee a chair with adjustable arms, back, seat, and height can

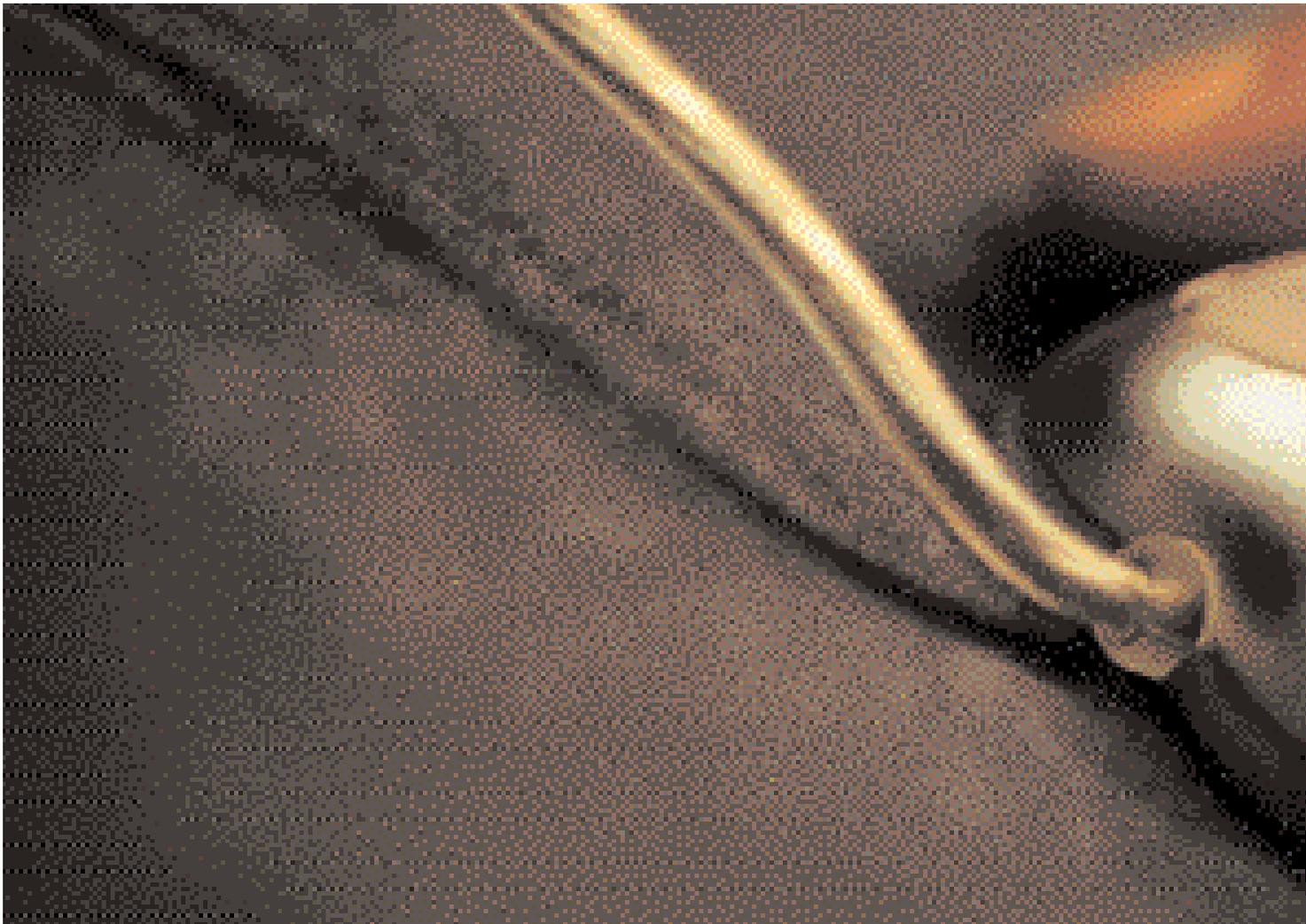
make a bad situation worse. If the user doesn’t know the basics of good working posture, you’ve just provided more options for getting it wrong.

A successful training program educates employees to recognize symptoms before they move to illness or injury, and offers possible solutions to ergonomic challenges. Some form of ongoing training

should also be available, both to counsel staff as problems arise, and to train new employees in correct ergonomic practices.

#### **Step 4: Improve the Workplace**

Your efforts to improve the workplace may include implementing administrative controls—measures such as mandating frequent breaks from high-risk jobs, limiting over-



time, or redistributing job responsibilities.

Primarily, however, the focus will be on physically modifying the workplace environment. Some of the areas you will want to consider include the following:

- Chairs with adjustable height, back, and arm rests
- Desks with adjustable height keyboard trays
- Footrests to support the operator's legs
- Wrist rests to alleviate strain and promote neutral wrist postures while typing
- Earplugs to help those employees who are more bothered by background noise

- Task lighting to supplement existing lighting

- Monitor screens to reduce glare and increase privacy

- Document holders to eliminate neck strain

- Headsets for extensive phone use.

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**Additional resources and ergonomic solutions:**

*The Office Ergonomics Research Committee*  
**[www.oerc.org](http://www.oerc.org)**

*Humantech, Inc.*  
**[www.humantech.com](http://www.humantech.com)**

**[www.ergosolutionsmag.com/officeergo](http://www.ergosolutionsmag.com/officeergo)**

