

Office Ergo

The Plan

Behind the Solution

By David M. Brodie, MS, CPE

What do you think office ergonomics is? A great chair, a sleek new keyboard tray, the cushy gel wristrest in front of your keyboard? Office ergonomics is much more than a quick fix to an achy shoulder or tender wrist. It's the total process used to find the right solution the first time and every time. Focusing solely on products as your solution is costly and ineffective. Take the old golf saying, "You drive for show, and you putt for dough." In office ergonomics, the products are the "show" that cost the "dough." The "putt" you're looking for—the one that will win you all the dough and the best solutions—is an ergonomics plan.»

“A commitment to ergonomics is a commitment to focus on the way the individual and the entire company executes its tasks in order to optimize performance. Simply put, a healthy, productive workforce is just good business sense.” —David Brodie, MS, CPE

Familiar elements of a successful ergonomics “program” often include: management commitment, employee involvement, musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) management, hazard analysis and control, training and education, and program evaluation. The ergonomics “plan” is actually more than just these elements; it’s your company’s transition from concept to real-world implementation, based on your needs.

From Concept to Action

Before you embark on developing an ergonomics plan, think about how each element applies to your company. You can easily find generic descriptions of each component, but they might not be relevant to your business operations. What purpose do you have for engaging in office ergonomics? What goals would you like to achieve—qualitative and quantitative? What will office ergonomics mean to your company and your employees? With your purpose, goals, and mission in line, look at how your organization can craft its most effective office ergonomics plan. Now, you’re ready for action.

Commitment to Success

It is safe to say that every company is interested in being successful. So, how does your company define success? Regardless of what business a company engages in, success is realized through well thought out goals

and objectives. A commitment to ergonomics is a commitment to focus on the way the individual and the entire company executes its tasks in order to optimize performance. Simply put, a healthy, productive workforce is just good business sense.

Encourage Team Ergonomics

The team approach to ergonomics in the office is more a coordination of efforts versus a group effort. A well-prepared plan that includes coordination of the whole team is essential to efficient problem solving. For example, when employee Jane feels discomfort while performing her work, Jane informs Human Resources that she has a problem. Human Resources lets Health & Safety (or Health Services) know that Jane needs help. Health & Safety works to identify the problem with assistance from Jane, and her supervisor then recommends potential solutions. Purchasing orders one of the specified solutions, Information Technology and facility personnel implement another, and the supervisor and Jane monitor to resolution. You don’t need to have twelve people in a room at one time peering at Jane and discussing her needs. You do, however, need everyone who may affect the solution to be working on the same page.

Emphasize Proactive Over Reactive

One of the most important ways for

employees to actively participate in the ergonomics plan is by reporting any symptoms of discomfort as early as possible. The development of a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) in the office will most likely result from cumulative exposure to physical, environmental, and psychosocial stressors. The longer someone lets the stress build up, the longer he or she may take to recover. Encourage employees to act as soon as possible. Report the pain, treat the pain, seek rehabilitation, and eliminate the cause. When you incorporate this fundamental into your ergonomics plan, you’ll more than likely see a reduction in injuries, lost-time, and workers’ compensation costs.

Remember the Basics

The office environment is significantly affected by the rapid evolution of computers and furniture. The ready availability of “new and improved” products may create a paper-thin goal of searching for the latest and greatest devices for ergonomics solutions. Financial considerations, stemming from factors such as company mergers and the rising cost of real estate, have created steady pressure to reduce the size of the office space provided to employees. This trend has spawned a frequently asked question, *How small a workspace is still ergonomic?* The answer is, remember the basics. The issue is not whether the office is big enough, the computer

