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User Training and Education

- The Missing Steps

By Steven Price

Many people would agree that there has been a slow, and often uneven, acceptance of ergonomic products for the office environment in North America since the tools began gaining popularity in the early 1980s. There are many possible reasons: equipment, training and the responses of individuals who may not make a link between their discomfort and workplace equipment.

Using a "discomfort assessment" questionnaire to pinpoint worker complaints can go a long way toward ensuring that people use ergonomics equipment properly.

Two decades ago, height-adjustable workstations and pneumatically adjustable chairs were only available from Europe, where proper accommodation of office staff has been a common practice for more than 30 years. Anyone who has toured offices there, especially in Scandinavia, has probably seen employees sitting in upright postures with fully supported backs, while working at desks correctly adjusted to suit their individual needs. There seems to be a real commitment to implementing an ergonomic office environment.

The same claim cannot be made of North America. Although the company manual may say adjustable workstations are what's needed, an essential step is frequently missed: the application of an effective implementation program that includes user training and education.

Ensuring that users clearly understand the importance of equipment adjustment - and fitting the equipment to the person - remains a challenge. It's not very difficult to identify when effective program implementation has either been missed or improperly completed. Usually it is when an employer requests help with a worker who has complained of pain or discomfort.

The employer, in fact, is often surprised that anyone could be experiencing discomfort at all. "We gave them an ergonomic workstation," they often say, as though they believed checking off that single item constituted a comprehensive ergonomics approach.

Almost invariably, a visiting consultant will find that the employee's workstation and chair are not adjusted to suit that person's specific physical requirements. It is not uncommon for the consultant to also discover that none of the other workstations in the surrounding area are adjusted for the occupant - even in offices with hundreds of employees. People are frequently found sitting and working in awkward postures. They are forced to twist, bend, reach and alter their postures in ways that would obviously take a physical toll.

Some companies have found that using an anonymous "discomfort assessment" questionnaire can help identify the frequency of discomfort among employees. The questionnaire may contain the question - "To what do you attribute your discomfort?" - that, when answered, explains why employees rarely complain about the discomfort they experience on the job and why they often do not understand the importance of having properly adjusted workstations and chairs.

The answer to the question is surprising. Although the exact words may vary, the sentiment expressed in the majority of responses is more consistent: people think there is something wrong with them. The perception is expressed in far-ranging comments that have nothing to do with their workstations, their chairs or their monitors. "I have a bad back", "I suffer from migraines", "I have bad eyes", "My mattress must be too soft", "I think it's an old college injury," or "I was in an accident". They continually attribute their discomfort to anything but the way they sit and work.

Since many people attribute their discomfort to a personal weakness, they would be less likely to complain to their employers about their pain or to properly use their chairs and workstations. Even if workers do believe pain could be the result of improper accommodation of their physical needs, it does not necessarily follow that they would have a clear idea of what adjustments should be made to ease their discomfort. In fact, people are often the architects of their discomfort by unknowingly making the wrong adjustments to office equipment.

For that reason, a demonstration for workers that explains the relationship between a wide variety of discomforts and the way they sit and work has proved very successful. After being shown how adjustments to their chairs and workstations can eliminate the physical demands that cause those aches and pains, employees are asked to return to their workstation and apply what they have learned. The downside is that, as consultants who have used the approach will attest, rarely will an employee correctly determine what adjustments are needed to accommodate his or her specific physical requirements.

The ergonomic consultant must visit the worker in the workstation after the demonstration and must make the recommendations directly to the occupant. The whole purpose of the demonstration is to ensure that occupants will listen to the consultant and follow his or her recommendations. Without the visit, employees will have no idea how they should utilize their chair and workstation, in spite of the recent demonstration.

Both productivity and efficiency can be substantially improved with ergonomic workstations that are properly planned and implemented - mostly by making the work easier to complete and dramatically reducing on-premises absenteeism.

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