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MANAGEMENT

Setting Up a Low-Cost Ergonomics Program: Q&A

You can protect your workers and your wallet at the same time

Proactive ergonomics programs can help prevent devastating and costly employee injuries, known as musculoskeletal injuries or cumulative trauma disorders. Won't it cost a fortune to have an ergonomically sound setup, with fully adjustable chairs, desks, and state-of-the-art keyboards? Before you assume you can't afford to take care of your employees' health -- and your own -- consider that musculoskeletal disorders absorb \$1 out of every \$3 spent on workplace injuries in the U.S., according to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Doing nothing can be an even more costly mistake.

Reporter Michele Marrinan talked with Carolyn Lundberg, president of Ace Ergonomics (<http://www.aceergonomics.com>), an ergonomics consultancy in Newport Beach, CA. about ways small companies can afford an ergonomically sound setup. Lundberg launched her company in 1991 to reduce the workplace injuries and workers compensation claims of computer operators and industrial technicians. She concentrates on education, awareness, and work-site assessments. Her clients are in healthcare, finance, banking, insurance, law, and manufacturing.

Q: What is your philosophy on ergonomics? A: You have to look for the most economical, reasonable modifications to the work site. One that will best suit the needs of the employee to perform their job tasks and improve productivity.

Q: What are the biggest ergonomic challenges facing small businesses? A: Usually, small companies are limited on space. They have to maximize each work site, like a jigsaw puzzle and still allow for fire codes with aisles and everything. Sometimes, you find storage boxes under the desks. But often, there's more congeniality among personnel in smaller companies than in larger companies, which is a positive force in improving workstations. But small businesses typically just don't have the knowledge of ergonomic issues.

Q: What basic tips do you offer small clients? A: I recommend that they train all their employees prior to making any work site adjustments or ordering any so-called ergonomic accessories. Their employees are bright people; they're intelligent, and they will be much more receptive to modifications to their work site with the knowledge that they'll obtain in training. I recommend that they train in small groups -- no more than 30 people -- and that the training be very interactive. They are entitled and encouraged, for example, to ask questions instead of being put in front of a video, where there's no interaction.

Q: Can you recommend some low-cost solutions? A: I recommend that small -- and big -- companies work with what they have in terms of desk, chairs and lighting. They should not feel that they have to replace everything. Modify the work site to best suit the needs of the person assigned to it. That may include raising the monitor to the appropriate height for roughly \$35, or buying a \$35 height-adjustable footrest. If they have old 1950s L-shaped desks, they can add a corner fill-in unit for about \$70. They can put the keyboard and the mouse on the unit so that they don't straddle the L of the desk any more. It's not a Band-Aid solution, but it is a customized modification to suit that person, whether they're 5'1" or 6'8". You don't have to replace all the desks. You can customize or modify little things to make it work. One size does not fit all.

Q: How much does it usually cost a small company to implement an ergonomics program? A: Let's use the following

example. Company A hires an ergonomics consultant to perform a one-hour, interactive seminar with employees in groups of no more than 30. Following the seminar, a cursory work site assessment with an employee is performed, and it is determined that their work site deserves some modification. Then you can estimate that the cost to the employer, including the training program and the accessories -- or time spent at the work site following the seminar -- at \$50 per employee. That would be \$15 for the seminar, plus possibly \$35 for a foot rest, copy holder, monitor riser, keyboard or padded wrist support. Worst-case scenario -- the chair needs to be replaced. That may cost the employer between \$275 and \$400 for a model ranging from a steno-task chair to an executive chair with a 12-year warranty.

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