

Is It Worth the Cost?

By Carolyn Lundberg

Ergonomics is the practice of ensuring that the workplace properly accommodates the physical needs of the employees assigned to perform their job tasks safely at their assigned workstations. A program in ergonomics is the ounce of prevention that can reduce the cost of lost time and productivity from injuries.

Productivity is the key to any successful company. But many firms are unintentionally placing both productivity and their employees at risk because they have not considered ergonomics for injury prevention. Whether the employee recuperates away from work or is put on restricted duty, productivity suffers. And decreased productivity means increased costs.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the total number of injuries and illnesses requiring recuperation away from work beyond the day of the incident has declined each year since 1992. However, the number of injuries and illnesses reported with only restricted work activity, rather than days away recuperating, has increased during the same time period by nearly 70%, to more than one million cases in 1998 (the most recent year for recorded data).

But what does a program in ergonomic principles cost? Compare the cost of the implementation of such a program to the costs incurred when an employee is injured at the workplace. The prevention program will be only a small fraction of the cost of even one workplace injury.

Workstations and conditions in the shipping and receiving departments of businesses vary significantly, although they all produce basically the same service. It is difficult to quote the actual average cost for modifications implemented at shipping and receiving departments for this reason. However, the following recommendations may help companies identify the costs relative to their workplace.

It's been by experience that companies will strongly benefit by training their employees prior to implementing any worksite modifications. The employees will be much more receptive to workplace modifications and programs when they understand the reasons behind the changes. Training employees in small groups will be more advantageous than in large groups (i.e. no

more than 30 employees per session). Training should be interactive, allowing employees to ask questions and provide comments during the sessions.

Immediately following employee training, each employee should be observed performing his job tasks in the workplace. Photograph identified risk factors and discuss actual operations with each employee. Again, because each shipping and receiving workplace is unique, it is critical that observers study each step of the operation and make recommendations specific to that particular worksite. Should your company use a consultant for this, the average cost to observe, discuss job tasks and operations as well as make recommendations for workplace modifications is relative to the number of operations that are observed.

Then, start the physical modifications to the work areas. Typical fixes at shipping and receiving areas are those associated with rearranging the placement of the tools being used to perform the job tasks (labelers, postage meters, scales that require packages to be lifted by the employee, tape dispensers, etc.) The height of many machines is typically a problem. Either insufficient consideration was given to ergonomics when originally designing the work area, or the tools of the trade changed and nothing was modified to accommodate the new tools.

In general, we have observed that all the small parcel shipping operations areas are generally not as well designed as the freight and loading dock areas. Companies need to study workstations dedicated specifically to weighing the packages, the label printer's location and the height of the computer monitors and keyboards. Secondly, we recommend they observe the area provided for the employees to handwrite the necessary forms, as these areas are often overlooked and the employee uses whatever limited space they can find to manage their papers. Once the workstations have been properly designed or modified, we further recommend employees be taught stretching techniques to perform before and during their work hours.

As any shipping manager or dock worker can tell you, the majority of injuries in the shipping/distribution areas are to the back and upper extremities. Most musculoskeletal injuries are the result of a twist or turn experienced by a person whose muscles or ligaments were simply not prepared to perform the task, whether it was lifting or reaching for items. A group employee stretching program can help prevent or at least reduce the number of these injuries.

A group employee warm-up stretching regimen should take no more than five to eight minutes per session. Group stretching should be performed immediately before beginning work tasks and during the day. Stretching programs not only reduce unnecessary workplace injuries, but they also contribute to an increase in employee morale. However, it is important employers address the program as a stretching program and avoid the word exercise if they expect full participation.

Many safety programs have been successful as a result of incorporating an incentive program with the safety program. We recommend that in lieu of an incentive program, the company include the stretching program in the job description and require the employees take turns leading their department in performing the stretching regimen.

So what will this cost? A general estimate for the initial training is about \$35 per person. The cost of evaluating each operation will of course vary but can be as little as \$250.

The cost to implement an appropriate stretching regimen at a company will include the time to observe the employees at work doing required tasks. The cost may be estimated at a minimum of \$250 to design the stretching program and an additional \$10 per employee to teach the employees the routine.

Again, compare these relatively low costs to the cost of lost time and productivity from injuries. Ergonomics has been determined to be good economics for businesses. And any good employer would want to enhance the safety in the work environment for their employees.

Carolyn Lundberg is the President of ACE Ergonomics in Irvine, California. Ms. Lundberg has been assisting corporations as an ergonomics consultant since 1991. She may be reached at 949-278-8002 or Carolyn@aceergonomics.com.