

Ergonomics vs Economics: today's workplace debate

More than adjusting one's workstation or chair to reduce risk of injury, ergonomics is a strategic business initiative with financial, managerial, technical and human elements that yields a high return and increases overall productivity.

The U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics recently reported that more than 650,000 work-related musculoskeletal disorders result in costs over 20 billion dollars to employers each year. These costs include Worker's Compensation and medical expenses, the latter of which are increasing 2.5 times faster than benefit costs.

Today's connected worker continually interfaces between a laptop, a tablet, a phone, or a combination of the three, and sometimes more, simultaneously. The challenge, however, is that many organisations have not updated their workspace requirements to meet these demands. According to the Steelcase Workspace Futures global study which focused on 2000 people in 11 different countries, a well-designed workspace can increase employee efficiency by 36%.

Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office comments, "there is a direct association between the ergonomics and economics of a business. If you speak to CEOs, they will tell you that around 80% of their budget goes to their people while 7% is spent on the physical space in which they work. If they were to double their spend on space to 14%, and it only produced a 10% return in efficiency on their largest expense (their employees), they would actually be investing 7% in money terms for an 8% return in efficiency."

In addition to increasing employee efficiency, of the 30 different postures that Steelcase researchers observed during the global study, nine were entirely new. Andrews explains further by saying that much of today's seating was designed to support the traditional one-task, one-technology, one-posture experience. With our new age multiple devices, our bodies are forced to respond to these small technologies, leaving us unsupported. Work is an inherent social process that requires people to rapidly shift between individual, focused tasks and creative collaboration and that each new activity causes us to change postures.

inspiration at work

Since today's worker sits in nine different posture positions than those of yesteryear, technology has changed the game and employees no longer work a 9 to 5 in one chair, doing one task. Productivity is increased if employees' work areas are arranged to suit them and the type of work being done. Appropriate ergonomic adaptations have also been found to effectively reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders symptoms.

"The space in a like-for-like company really is the deciding factor in attracting and retaining the best talent," says Andrews. "Issues in today's office environment which cost businesses money in lost production include, for example, time off work due to back ache problems and presenteeism – when an ill and absent employee reports for work but is in fact inefficient."

Probably one to the most underutilized words in today's business vocabulary, ergonomics is not the easiest to measure and not the first option employers' link to increasing profitability. Here, Andrews provides four reasons to make ergonomic changes to the work environment:

1. Ergonomics improves the safety and health of workers
2. It reduces a company's costs
3. It addresses productivity and quality issues
4. It also responds to regulatory concerns.

In closing, Andrews says that ergonomics has a real and direct impact on productivity, "It can affect an entire business by enhancing the most important business component - the ability to let workers do their work.

"Often, office furniture and floor planning fall to the bottom of the budget list, but thanks to clever furniture leasing options which come with a number of benefits – the budget plea can be addressed immediately. Stylish, comfortable and supportive; task chairs and ergonomic work stations are investments that can pay dividends in both employee health and comfort".