



Workplace ergonomics - a bottom line issue

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**Office workers increasingly prone to work injuries*

**Only 40% of SA workers feel their workplace supports wellbeing*

**Well designed office space increase efficiency up to 36%*

Think desk workers spending their days in front of a computer aren't likely to get injured on the job?

Think again.

More than half of all workplace injuries are related to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) - injuries that are common among those who engage in repetitive motion activities such as typing on a computer keyboard.

Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy with offices in Johannesburg and Cape Town, said that even the seemingly 'safest' jobs lead to employee injuries and a large cost to the bottom line of business.

"In fact, nearly 60 percent of employees doing office computer work say they have wrist pain.

Long days hunched over keyboards can lead to cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs) and lower back ailments."

Here are some other common complaints:

- Muscle fatigue or pain. Working for long periods in the same position or in awkward positions can put stress on hands and wrists and lead to injury.
- Eye strain. Sitting too close - or prolonged staring at - a monitor can reduce eye blinking and may lead to dry or aching eyes.
- Lower back pain. Using laptops or non-adjustable office furniture can cause employees to work at awkward angles and lead to back stress.

Andrews noted that several trends make CTDs a special concern for today's typical office workers.

"So many employees use computers all day and then also sit down at the computer at home to surf the Internet or even catch up on work."

"Secondly, specialized jobs are on the increase the world over. This means more people are doing the same thing all day. And finally, people are living longer and also working longer which means many more years of wear and tear on the body."

According to South African workplace research company Know More, only 40% of 10'000 South African workers surveyed feel that their workplace environment supports their wellbeing.

And this doesn't just exact a physical toll on employees, it can have a significant impact on businesses' bottom line.

"For example, in 2003 in the US, the average medical claim associated with a CTD was over \$43'000. Now it's over \$50'000. And that doesn't even include the hidden costs for employers of lost productivity when an employee is injured or the cost of hiring and training a replacement worker."

So what's a business to do?

"Don't think that a desk and chair is all that employees need," Andrews advised.

Ergonomics, or the process of safely and comfortably relating workers to their workspaces, can help by reducing the likelihood

of work related injuries through greater emphasis on a well designed workspace.

"Studies have shown that a well-designed office space can increase efficiency by up to 36%."

Andrews added that Inspiration Office has increasingly installed several 'collaborative spaces' with furniture like couches and coffee tables.

"These are designed not only for teamwork, but also encourage people to move around and change their workstations to reduce repetitive actions during the day."

Moving is particularly important: according to the same Know More survey, only 21% of South African office workers feel that their workplaces offer sufficient areas to allow physical activity.

It needn't be costly either. "When one considers that in most organizations 80% of the budget is allocated to people in the form of salaries, while only 7% is allocated to space, by leveraging the smallest cost line item better - businesses can obtain a return in efficiency in the biggest cost line item," said Andrews.

For instance, the United State's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests measures such as leaving enough room for range of motion, adjusting desk chairs to individuals, positioning monitors so eye level is at the top of the screen and

finding a pointing device, such as a mouse, stylus or tablet, suited to the individual.

There are many other simple things employers can consider to help protect their workers and their pocketbooks. For example:

- Stress the importance of good posture at the computer
- Use smart lifting techniques and tools that can make the job easier
- Appoint someone on your staff to take responsibility for safety issues. Have this person understand ergonomics best practices, review resources provided by your workers' compensation insurance company, train employees, and make changes to workspaces as needed
- Take breaks throughout the work day to walk about

Major risk factors that add to cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs):

- Static posture
- Awkward posture
- Repetition
- Force and/or vibration
- Extreme temperature

Safe behaviors that limit CTDs:

- Good posture
- Correct workstation setup

- Occasional rest breaks
- Task variation
- Proper lifting techniques

"Common sense measures can go a long way to preventing these types of injuries," Andrews added.

"Adjust workstations, take advantage of training, see what other equipment is available. You may not prevent every CTD, but you can take actions that will help prevent problems."

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