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## **COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE ERGONOMICS PROGRAM**

Working as a consultant for numerous companies and governmental organizations allows me to work within a variety of program structures for their ergonomics program. Those program structures range from companies that bring me in at the request and authorization of one designated employee who manages the program, to companies that allow the employees at large to contact me directly to request an evaluation, with no advance authorization or approval.

Regardless of the program structure, there are four elements in every ergonomics program, whether the ergonomist who performs the evaluation is an employee or a contractor.

1. Employee request process
2. Standardized report form
3. Designation of recipients of evaluation reports
4. Designation of equipment vendors

### **EMPLOYEE REQUEST PROCESS**

One of the foremost decisions that a company must make regarding their ergonomics program is how proactive or reactive they choose to

be. While ergonomics-related discomfort and common solutions are becoming more and more visible in today's workplace, many companies do not examine an employee's workstation until their discomfort has progressed to the point that medical attention and/or a Workers' Compensation claim has arisen from it. This is a very inefficient strategy because the results from an ergonomic evaluation of an injured worker's workstation consistently yield recommendations that, in almost every case, will be no different than if the evaluation had been performed when the discomfort was just beginning. Early intervention in ergonomics is the best means to prevent a discomfort report from becoming a Workers' Compensation claim, to avoid Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reporting, and to eliminate medical expenses. Accordingly, the sooner that discomfort reports are directed to an ergonomist for resolution, the sooner that recovery can be achieved. When the discomfort is allowed to linger, the measures needed to solve it increase in magnitude.

A reactive approach to discomfort and the injuries that traditionally reside within an employer's safety program should be reexamined to realize the unique potential that exists for injury prevention. Unlike workplace injuries of lacerations, falls, or foreign objects in the eye, ergonomic-related injuries will almost always show early signs of development, thereby allowing intervention before the condition becomes serious. Ergonomics-related discomfort is unique as a workplace injury in that the potential injury that could result will always broadcast warning signs that can be overcome, if those warning signs are acknowledged and addressed early. Additionally, even when an ergonomics-related injury reaches the attention of a medical provider, the provider may not request or suggest an ergonomic evaluation of the employee's work activities, which means that the symptoms will be treated without ever addressing the probable causes.

In contrast to the reactive stance, where the employee is clearly affected, the ways in which companies provide proactive ergonomic interventions vary greatly. Many large companies schedule a very brief evaluation for every new employee, and this is most effective if a company has a very standardized workstation layout that is replicated hundreds of times and the ergonomic "solutions" are also very standardized. Depending on how long a new employee has been at a workstation, he or she may not yet realize how work is affected by the workstation, and new employees may be reluctant to complain.

Many employers require that employees go through an online or computer-based ergonomics training program before an ergonomist is

assigned to work with them. The computer training can be a useful tool to help employees learn basic ergonomic principles and optimal workstation configuration, and they may solve their discomfort concerns on their own using that information. If that training does not resolve a discomfort problem, employees are then allowed to request individual ergonomic evaluations. I find that so few employees actually resolve all their issues from computer-based training that I dissuade companies from purchasing elaborate programs, since employees often request personal evaluations anyway. (For more about the benefits of providing personal attention to every employee, see the section “Unforeseen Benefits” later in the chapter.) Accurate ergonomic interventions are very individualistic within their common causes, which is why you will see that the evaluation excerpts presented herein often have similar scenarios but subtle differences.

To request an ergonomic evaluation in most companies, an employee is required to contact the health and safety or human resources department, which then contacts an ergonomist to work with the employee. Sometimes the employee’s department is charged for the cost of the evaluation, but that is difficult to structure because evaluation costs will vary depending on the severity of the problem and the extent of the recommendations offered. Many large companies in which the costs for ergonomic evaluations are built into the environmental health and safety (EH&S) program allow employees to request an evaluation from a website. A service request is then transmitted to an in-house ergonomist or an outside consultant without an approval process. Those organizations that contract with an outside professional for ergonomic evaluations provide the consulting ergonomist with independent access to their facilities and often direct access into the company’s computer systems. Many will even provide a company computer to the consultant so that the employer can control the hardware being used to access the internal computer networks. This model is a very streamlined process for the department responsible for ergonomic evaluations and often promotes early intervention from a responsive contractor who is motivated to work and produce results.

The common thread within any reporting system is that employees are able to recognize and report their discomfort early in its development, so that the remedies can be sought as quickly as possible. This requires that the employer have a safety program or visible mechanism that educates employees on the symptoms of ergonomics-related disorders and how to seek help in mitigating them. Such requirements are typically the thrust of regulatory agencies and insurers, and employers do their best to comply.

## **STANDARDIZED REPORT FORM**

Standardizing the evaluation report for each company is driven primarily by the company's requirements for organizing and using the data received. The resulting forms cover a wide gamut, from handwritten standardized forms, to a computer template that can pull information from specific fields into a database for tracking. Also, the computerized templates may include dropdown menus that have been populated with the typical posture problems to note and/or the solutions (ergonomic equipment items) that have been preselected for purchase.

Too often, the standardized form is a checklist that includes a finite number of "check boxes" that facilitate quick notation of very general postures or desk configurations and guide the ergonomist through the evaluation process. Such checklists are valuable tools to use during the evaluation so that the evaluatee's time is not prolonged by extensive handwriting, but they are seldom satisfactory as the only record of the evaluation. An evaluation checklist should have ample space for notes, and an example of a detailed evaluation worksheet is included here. Examples of evaluation checklists can readily be found on the Internet and from companies that sell "ergonomics packages." Throughout this book, the evaluation report format recommended will include an encompassing narrative that provides a comprehensive description of the setting, postures, findings, and recommendations. We do not delve into the legal ramifications, beyond stating that they are an underlying consideration (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, for example), just as is any other aspect of an employee safety program. Ergonomics adds a bit of specificity, though.

## **DESIGNATION OF RECIPIENTS OF EVALUATION REPORTS**

In companies where the employees are allowed to request an evaluation without authorization, reports are typically sent directly to them with a copy sent simultaneously to their manager and to the safety department. If workstation modifications are recommended, the evaluator may have a direct link to the facilities department and generate service requests directly. Otherwise, the safety department will direct the modifications, especially since the ultimate decision to make changes or to incur expenditures is a business decision. Some companies have the report (no matter what format) sent only to the person who requested the evaluation, who will review the findings and recommendations before any action is taken and before the report is sent to the

employee. Although the practise is rare, in some companies the employee never sees the evaluation report.

## **DESIGNATION OF EQUIPMENT VENDORS**

Small companies and those without an evolved ergonomics program may have no designated vendors for ergonomics-related items other than the office equipment supplier. In recent years office equipment suppliers have been expanding their offerings for ergonomic solutions, but they often do not carry the specialty items that are needed for some ergonomic challenges. If a company does have a relationship with an equipment supplier that carries a more sophisticated line of ergonomic products, the company will have a greater opportunity to acquire solutions that are more closely focused on the specific remedies needed and recommended. Also, ergonomists who are not dedicated to ergonomics often find that suppliers can educate them on new ways to position employees, their tools, and their workstations.

Many companies preselect a finite list of ergonomic solutions, which helps standardize the items for their employees and streamlines the process of making recommendations. However, as an ergonomist becomes more skilled at associating optimal solutions with the variety of discomfort and positioning issues that arise, having access to as many products as possible will increase the evaluator's effectiveness.

## **UNFORESEEN BENEFITS**

Beyond the company impacts and programs outlined above, there are some unforeseen benefits from an ergonomics program that I learned by accident when I implemented my first ergonomics program as an EH&S manager at a large high-tech company in Boulder, Colorado. I found that after I had introduced a proactive ergonomics program that included attending a new employee orientation every week, overall compliance with the company safety program increased dramatically. During the weekly orientation, I invited every new employee to allow me to spend 15 to 20 minutes with him or her at the person's new work area to conduct a cursory examination of how the workstation "fit." Often, I could provide a simple modification that was helpful, or if nothing else, the "safety manager" got to meet independently with the new employee, which would not have happened without the ergonomics component.

The weekly orientation became a standard component of the safety program, with the risk management department noting that employee compliance with safety activities was at an all-time high. Initially, this was attributed to any number of vague notions, such as social awareness, the culture of the community, or the charisma of the current safety manager. However, in the second year of these group presentations and individual visits, an employee survey distributed by the human resources department revealed that those who participated in a brief ergonomic evaluation during their first week of employment saw it as a positive experience within the safety program and became unwitting allies. By spending a short amount of time with employees learning a bit about what they do (which always arises from examining their work behavior), I became a closer work associate. Therefore, the survey indicated that subsequent requests for safety compliance in other safety-related programs, such as hazcom training or even fire drills, were heeded with much more attention, confidence, and perhaps obligation because of the tangible assistance they received from the safety program.

So not only are ergonomic concerns a hazard you can manage and reverse through early intervention, they can create an amazingly easy way to win sincere support for the safety program as a whole!