

GOOD FORM

Comfort for workers is more than just a corporate tracksuit. Jane Smith looks at ergonomics and how its application in your office can help raise productivity and efficiency.



In the mid-nineties, ergonomics in the office products sector had a high profile because everyone was talking about the new EU legislation relating to display screen equipment. Products such as screen filters, footrests, wrist rests and copyholders were promoted heavily as a result, in order to comply and contribute to reducing the risk of such complaints as RSI and improving posture and comfort while sitting at a PC.

As the years have passed the demands of the workplace have increased. We are often working longer hours and more intensely, with most of us spending hours at a time pouring over a PC or laptop. We are also not always as aware as we should be of the long-term damage we might be doing to ourselves through not respecting the importance of good ergonomics. We should also recognise other trends in our work, home and personal life and see the convergence of a number of aspects of a good working environment.

To explain: Added to the pressures of full time working, many of us also run homes, bring up children and have other responsibilities. This increases pressure even further and many of us have started to look for smarter, more flexible ways of working. Some of us now have home offices and split our time between there and the office. We try to use our time more effectively and may alter our travelling times to reduce the amount of time we spend in the car. Others are working on the move, using hot-desking and taking

advantage of the new breed of hotel facilities or enterprise hubs.

In terms of products we now look for compatibility and possibly mobility of office solutions. A prime example of this is the laptop where many of us now only have a laptop and access networks remotely (working part of the time in the office and part at our home office). The traditional monitor stands have given way to laptop stands and we look to utilise technology such as 'blue tooth' for seamless communication whether mobile phone, the internet or company networks.

Increasing health and safety legislation is also having an effect on how we are working and contributing to higher levels of awareness and understanding of how to keep ourselves 'safe' at work.

As an example, we've just been notified of a new piece of legislation coming into force in March 2006. This demands that companies carry out their own Fire Risk Assessment check. This is a good time to let customers know about what's around the corner so that they can source products relating to this to ensure they comply.

Whilst this is often seen as a 'corporate' purchase, companies must consider their employees when choosing the type of desking and seating

Stewart Superior are just producing a poster and tick box booklet so that companies can complete and audit this new procedure knowing that it has been done properly.

When you look at all these factors the edges do begin to blur but the opportunities are possibly even greater. Working comfortably is a huge factor to productivity. Happier, healthier employees is a good business strategy too as it will inevitably lead to lower costs from sickness and absenteeism and an increase in output which equals better profitability.

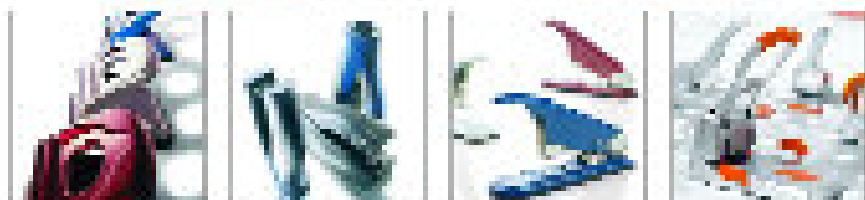
As with many concepts, a lot arrive before their time and many fail before re-emerging where they are adopted by the masses. Ergonomics, it seems to us is no exception. Evidence is building and ignoring good ergonomic practise will soon be at our peril. Awareness is key. Many of the companies you visit on a regular basis just have not thought about it and need you to bring it to their attention.

So, let's run through some of the considerations for ergonomic, balanced, healthy working environments.

This is a huge area and can take many forms. Well-ventilated offices

Ignoring good ergonomic practise will soon be at our peril

are a must for keeping up concentration. For those in new buildings these things will already be in place. Older buildings tend to be fine as far as heating is concerned but are usually inadequately equipped for hot summers. In this case fans and portable air conditioning units are a good idea. Lighting needs to be at the right level to ensure maximum visibility and minimum glare. Also, consideration is needed for natural light where blinds may be needed to avoid glare on computer screens. Cleanliness and ambiance can all contribute to the way we feel, our perceived levels of stress and ultimately our productivity. Consider a range of cleaning products for screens, keyboards, telephones and desktops. Fellowes are just introducing a new range of computer accessories made from a material with natural anti-bacterial qualities. >>



R&P: for desking and seating

USP•0913



WWW.RAPIDR&P.COM

TOP TIPS for an Ergonomic Audit

- 1.** Ensure that the viewing distance from the VDU is correct and that there is suitable protection from monitor glare and static through the use of a screen filter.
- 2.** Correct monitor height and correct seating position are important for the neck and shoulders.
- 3.** The correct work surface height and the position of the keyboard and mouse/mouse mat will also help back, neck and shoulders.
- 4.** A good chair appropriate for the length of time it is in use and adjusted to suit the individual will reduce the risk of back problems. Good lumbar support and a footrest can also help.
- 5.** Forearms/Wrists/Hands: The main reason for the increase in RSI is that computers now enable us to complete more tasks which previously allowed us to change activities or take frequent breaks. We now tend to spend long periods at the keyboard carrying out repetitive, precise muscular activity that stresses and strains these parts of the body. A correctly positioned keyboard and support products such as ergonomic mice and wrist rests will help.
- 6.** As it is in the skies, it seems it is in the office too. There is now good research available telling us that poor posture and long periods sitting in one position restricts circulation can be damaging. To enhance circulation in the legs a footrest can be used. This will not only support the legs and feet, but the built in adjustability and different surfaces can help with mobility and massage.
- 7.** Adequate ventilation and lighting will help to avoid eye strain and improve concentration and productivity.
- 8.** Access to water coolers is now commonplace both in offices and schools. Research has shown that people who are dehydrated are not as able to concentrate as those who take on board fluid more regularly.
- 9.** Good standards of health and safety demonstrate a company's commitment to their staff and customers. For example, fire extinguishers and procedures, first aid products and procedures, clear signage, attention to cables and wires so that they are not a hazard.
- 10.** Security issues have been in the headlines recently and are an aspect of the working environment that should not be overlooked. Good procedures to manage visitors and temporary/contracted staff in and out of buildings as well as protection from identity theft and fraud by having adequate facilities for employees to destroy confidential and sensitive data.

We now tend to spend long periods at the keyboard carrying out repetitive, precise muscular activity that stresses and strains these parts of the body

Other products that can help relieve stress are personal organisation products. Durable's Sherpa range or Tarifold's t-office or t-technique are only a couple of examples. Desk accessories manufacturers, including big brands like Esselte promote ergonomics as a philosophy. A lot of its product development is geared to products of high quality but with a non-intrusive ergonomic feel on the desk top for example its Allura range, being launched for 2006.

Furniture and seating are another important aspect of our working environment. Whilst this is often seen as a 'corporate' purchase, companies must consider their employees when choosing the type of desking and seating.

Seating needs to be appropriate to the employee using it. The length of time a user is sat is important. After that it's down to providing enough adjustment to suit personal preferences. Furniture suppliers such as the Arenson Group are keen to demonstrate their expertise when it comes to ergonomics. Arenson's

new BARON chair is available as a low-back or high-back, plus extra-high back with headrest. It has an elegant design with a host of mechanisms, giving the user the flexibility to meet any work style or solutions. As well as reclining angle adjustment, tension control and seat height adjustment, features such as seat depth adjustments, lumbar support and adjustable arms for PC work are incorporated within the design, so that the user can set and operate the chair to match their own body shape.

Desking is just as important, with new ergonomic shapes such as wave and softly radiused profiles to maximise the use of the desktop and the comfort of the user.

From top to toe, ergonomic products help create the best relationship possible between people, their jobs, their equipment and their environment. In respect of working with computers, Fellowes and Acco are particularly proactive in this area and have produced some great support literature and interactive guides.

Familiarise yourself with the key points to working comfortably and observe. Where you see monitors propped up on telephone directories or secretaries straining to read documents lying flat on the desk and a receptionist who can't see the screen properly because of the glare then speak up. By having a general conversation you can carry out your own ergonomic/environmental audit. Remember, happy, comfortable, safe employees leads to lower costs and higher productivity and efficiency. It is worth the investment. ■