



PAIN IN THE NECK

Info for the end-user.

BY JON PACKMAN

Most things that end in 'ics' or 'phy' you can get a degree in, and ergonomics is no different. It's a science concerned with the 'fit' between people and their work. Putting people first and taking account of their capabilities and limitations, ergonomics' basic premise is that working conditions should be designed around the workers themselves.

Not only do employees benefit from an ergonomic workplace, the company does too. Accidents, injuries and ill-health can be reduced, and performance and productivity improved. In fact, employers are duty bound to comply with health and safety legislation and observe ergonomic principles – whether you work in the office or at home.

While it also deals with social and psychological aspects such as unclear tasks, poor support or inadequate training, the typical application of ergonomics is to solve a physical problem – normally through product design or best practice. These days, designers are much further removed from the end user, which makes it more difficult, but even more vital, to adopt an ergonomic approach.

So how do you go about applying ergonomic principles to the workplace? Problems can be identified pretty easily by general observation or a checklist of risk factors. Start by asking whether you're sat in a comfortable position, if you experience aches and pains, fatigue or any other discomfort. Then have a look at your equipment and make a note of anything that frustrates or isn't easy to use. Everything in your workspace should be placed according to your own individual needs, not dictated by some archaic company-wide tradition.

Solving the problem could just be a matter of a simple alteration. For example, adjusting the height of your chair; removing obstacles from under the desk; or arranging items on shelving so the heaviest and most often used are between waist and shoulder height.

Computer users are twice as likely to suffer increased back and neck pain. Poorly designed furniture and bad posture can lead to a long term problem, so good seating is vital. To avoid discomfort, you can either adapt your chair by adding a device like a seat wedge to increase the strength and flexibility of your spine, or opt for a new chair that offers dynamic seating –

GET ASSESSED

Recent research carried out by Fellowes UK highlights risks associated with simply working at your desk, with one third of workers claiming that they do not know if their work station has ever been assessed for potential risks.

Workstation assessments have proven to help employees by reducing the number of working days lost through RSI related injuries and creating a productive, healthier work environment.

Louise Shipley, Fellowes UK Ergonomics expert, said: "With an estimated 0.5 million British workers suffering from repetitive strain injury, ergonomics is an issue which businesses and employees should not ignore."

Further information can be found at www.ergonomix.info.

i.e. adjustable arms, back and height. When sat, your hips should be higher than your knees, with your feet firmly on the floor or footrest.

Neck pain is usually down to poor head posture, which forces you to poke your chin forward and puts pressure on nerves. There are many causes, including screens being placed too high (the top of the screen, not the monitor, should be at eye level), and armrests being too high or too long, thus hitting the desk edge and making you lean forward to reach the keyboard and look up at the screen. Frequently clamping the telephone between your ear and shoulder is another sure fire way to damage your neck, but these days it's easy to overcome the problem by

because of the way you sit is a frequent cause of discomfort, as is crossing them. Try rearranging your desk so that the task you do most is carried out in a position where you can support your feet comfortably.

Prolonged mouse or keyboard use can lead to wrist pain if you don't take care to keep them in a neutral position, instead bending your wrists to the side, or taking an upwards or downwards posture. If changing the slope of your keyboard doesn't solve the problem, consider buying an ergonomic mouse or keyboard, or specially designed supports. Again, wireless devices can offer a greater amount of flexibility in terms of positioning. And if you rarely use the numeric

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using a headset device – many of which are now wireless for extra flexibility.

Other common complaints among office workers are shoulder, ankle and wrist pain. The former is often caused by tension in the muscles that lift the shoulders and support the neck. This can be due to sitting too low because your armrests hit the desk, or the feet being unsupported when you set your chair at a comfortable height to work. Footrests can help here, as can adjustable desks and chairs. In some cases, a sit-stand desk which allows you to work from both positions may be the best option. And if you are using a keyboard, you can support your elbows on adjustable armrests, taking the stress off your shoulders.

Ankle pain can be reduced by footrests, too, and by tilting ones in particular. Having your ankles constantly bent or extended

keys, try a keyboard with the numeric pad on the left, as this will allow you to move the mouse closer and avoid having to reach over so much to the right.

More and more laptops are being used both at home and in the office, and the ergonomic advice here is to use them separately with a keyboard and mouse. Ideally, despite the obvious connotation, they should also be placed at a suitable desk height. A variety of innovative stands and devices are also now available to help you find the best working position.

Ergonomically designed products are increasingly making their presence felt in the workplace – arms, raisers, slopes, stands, holders, wrist and footrests, mice and keyboards ... the list goes on. Buy according to the principle of putting people first, and both they and the employer will see the benefits. ■