

# ERGONOMICS: What Does It Mean for You?

By Chad Cooper & Brian H. Kleiner

Increase productivity (and head off workers' comp claims) with these steps.

**M**ost poor productivity and accidents in the workplace are caused by human error. And such error can often be attributed to poor ergonomics.

“Repetitive motion injuries have increased 770% over the past decade.”

Ergonomics is the study of equipment design to reduce fatigue and discomfort. It describes the interaction between employees and their job functions. The focus is on reducing unnecessary physical stress.

It's management's responsibility to reduce or eliminate such stressful conditions. Here are steps to do so:

## 1. Understand Common Injuries.

The most common injuries related to poor ergonomics are MSDs (musculoskeletal disorders). They're also called RMIs (repetitive motion injuries) or CTDs (cumulative trauma disorders). These include tendinitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, and lower back pain.

Such injuries have increased 770% over the past decade (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics). They result from repeated motions and exertions over time. They affect many parts of the body, and their interactions can be quite complex. For example, pain in the hand can result from a problem with the wrist, arm, shoulder, or neck.

For computer users, eyestrain is the most common complaint. Symptoms include burning, itching, watering, blurry vision, headaches, fatigue, concentration difficulties, and irritability.

These injuries aren't to be taken lightly. Many ergonomic injuries can progress to long-term or even permanent disabilities if not taken care of properly.

## 2. Pinpoint Problems in Your Organization.

It's crucial that you keep abreast of any ergonomic problems in your workplace. But how do you find out where your ergonomic problems exist?

Start by looking at your illness logs. See where there is employee turnover, absenteeism, or a large number of jobs that have to be redone because of poor quality. Ask immediate supervisors if they've noticed employees having ergonomic problems. Follow up by talking to employees to gain their perspectives.

## 3. Keep Up-to-Date on Ergonomic Developments.

Everything — from computers to chairs, telephones to workstations — can be made better and easier to use. Here's how some workplace products are being improved:

**Computer Products.** The constant innovation of the keyboard is a big part of attempts to make ergonomic products. Bell-shaped keyboards let people assume more natural positions, while keyboards packed with more functions keep people from having to use the mouse so often. The evolution of the mouse includes molded finger

## Sit Up!

Share with your employees these tips on how to reduce physical problems related to computer work:

- **Sit as far away** from the computer screen as possible, as long as you can read the words on the screen.
- **Keep the mouse** as close to the keyboard as you can.
- **You don't need** to keep the keyboard directly in front of your work area, as long as your forearms have support, your wrists are kept straight, and your elbows aren't resting on anything hard or sharp.

adapted from office-ergo.com.

cups and wheels that let fingers scroll up and down without moving the entire mouse, reducing fatigue of the hands, wrists, and fingers. To alleviate eyestrain, computer companies are designing monitors with increasingly better resolution. Faster screen refresh eliminates flicker. Glare filters reduce static and radiation.

**Telephone Headset Technology.** Once used almost exclusively by telephone operators, headsets have become a large part of today's organizations. The option to talk hands-free without crunching the phone between head and shoulder has reduced neck injuries. New technology allows headsets to be lighter, more flexible, and customizable for the user. Sound quality continues to improve and will eventually be good enough to make voice-recognition software popular.

**Office Seating.** The office chair has come a long way. Workers can adjust today's chairs to the perfect height, reducing stress on the back and neck. Other features include adjustable contoured backrests for the lower back, firm seat cushions, tilt adjustments, foot rests, and foot rings. All these features combine to create a custom chair for each employee.


## 4. Create a Plan.

Once you've pinpointed problems in your workplace and reviewed the newest ergonomic developments, put a plan in place to reduce or eliminate problems and potential problems. Some ideas:

- **Replace old computer monitors, keyboards, chairs, and other products** with modern ones designed with ergonomics in mind.
- **Provide telephone headsets** for anyone whose job involves talking on the phone a great deal.
- **Let people trade off jobs** so no one's stuck on the same repetitive job for long.
- **Give employees training** on how they can avoid workplace injuries.
- **Look at ways you can streamline your organization's processes** to reduce repetitive tasks.

“Start by looking at your illness logs.”

## 5. Weigh the Costs and Benefits.

Will these steps be cost-effective for your organization? The answer is almost certainly yes. Applying ergonomics improves productivity, quality, and safety. It also provides an excellent opportunity to squeeze waste out of your systems and boost your organization's efficiency. Morale will increase because employees feel better and see that you care about their well-being. Performance will improve simply because your employees are at work more often and are healthier. Not to mention the savings in possible workers' comp claims. Studies show that the better your ergonomics, the better your organization will be. 

*Chad Cooper is an engineer working in the entertainment industry in southern California. Brian H. Kleiner, Ph.D., is professor of human resource management at California State University, Fullerton. You may contact the authors at 551 Santa Barbara Avenue, Fullerton, California 92834.*

## Better Ergonomics = Better Workers

For more on raising morale, reducing stress, and boosting productivity, take a look at these articles:

“Don't Let ‘Sick’ Workers Undermine Your Organization,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 1.\*

Egenberger, David, “Advances in Headset Technology,” *Telemarketing and Call Center Solutions*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

McKay, Shona, “Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.\*

Sotoa, Sammy & Kendrick Kleiner, “How to Accommodate Common Disabilities in the Workplace,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 31, No. 3.\*

Sujansky, Joanne, “The Overwhelmed Office: Six Fixes for the Stressed-Out, Productivity-Challenged Workplace,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 28, No. 4.\*

Tyler, Kathryn, “Sit Straight: Ergonomics in the Workplace,” *HR Magazine*, Vol. 43, No. 10.

\*Starred resources are available at [NonprofitWorld.org/members](http://NonprofitWorld.org/members).

## moving? let us know!

Send old AND new address, with mailing label if possible, to:

The Society for Nonprofits  
P.O. Box 510354  
Livonia, MI 48151

The post office WILL NOT forward copies of **Nonprofit World**. So let us know BEFORE you move so that you won't miss any issues.