MANAGING YOUR OHS PROGRAM: 5 Ergonomics Mistakes to Avoid

More companies are getting serious about addressing ergonomics-related hazards and injuries in the workplace. But in doing so, some are making costly mistakes that may undermine their ergonomics efforts. A report by a researcher at Humantech, workplace ergonomics consultants, boils down the top five mistakes companies of all sizes, industries and locations make in managing workplace ergonomics. Here's a review of these mistakes and the keys to successfully managing ergonomics in your workplace. (Go to the OHS Insider's Ergonomics Compliance Centre for more information, tools and other resources on managing workplace ergonomics.)

[learn_more caption="Mistake 1: Focus on the Wrong Goal"]

The main reason most companies try to improve ergonomics in the workplace is to prevent musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) and reduce the costs associated with them. There's nothing wrong with that motivation. But the problem is that as a result, companies measure the success of their ergonomics efforts based on injury rates, which focuses on the consequence (injury) and not the cause (exposure).

Injury rates are a *lagging* measure, tallying a score after the injury has occurred. And a workplace's injury rate isn't specific to the risk factors associated with MSIs. In contrast, companies successful in managing ergonomics use a *leading* indicator to provide an early warning system of

exposure to the causes of MSIs. Such companies proactively measure and track the level of exposure to MSI risk factors, such as awkward postures and infrequent breaks. Then they can take action to prevent injuries from occurring.[/learn_more]

[learn_more caption="Mistake 2: An Unsustainable Approach"]

Many companies approach ergonomics by establishing an 'ergonomics program' with a laundry list of elements that have to be in place, including employee and management involvement, risk assessments, workplace changes, training and injury management. But this dated approach can result in a narrow mindset that ergonomics is:

- Owned by a few (typically the safety department);
- Not well understood by most; and
- Difficult to sustain as staff, leadership and business conditions change.

Instead, companies should manage workplace ergonomics as a continuous improvement process. Aligning key elements of ergonomics management with an existing, active improvement process (such as a quality process, continuous improvement process or lean manufacturing system) results in more acceptance and widespread support. Managed as a process, ergonomics is:

- Owned by many, mostly those outside of the safety department, such as engineering, operations, managers, workers, etc.;
- Understood and supported by all levels of the organization;
- Familiar in process steps (for example, Plan, Do, Check and Act);
- Measured and tracked as providing value; and
- Sustained over time as people and business focus change.

The best approach to managing workplace ergonomics as a process is to:

- Establish a single, common goal based on reducing MSI risk factors;
- Use quantifiable, valid assessment methods to measure the level of exposure to such factors; and
- Align the elements of the ergonomics process to a system the company is already familiar with and using, such as CSA Z1000 or OHSMS 18001. [/learn_more]

[learn_more caption="Mistake 3: A Narrow View"]

The researcher says he found that many operations and safety managers saw ergonomics as a safety discipline, with an aim toward preventing injuries. This limited understanding of the application of ergonomics keeps many companies from achieving the full benefit of workplace improvements.

In contrast, companies that expand their view and application of good workplace design can improve many aspects of performance'not just injury prevention. Fitting the workplace and tools to the worker will not only reduce the causes of MSIs, but also:

- Reduce or eliminate non-value-added motions;
- Improve productivity and throughput;
- Reduce barriers to quality;
- Improve worker comfort and acceptance of workplace changes; and
- Improve worker engagement and morale.

Companies successful in ergonomics engage their engineers (including space planners, maintenance and new product designers) as full partners or owners of the ergonomic improvement process. They also integrate MSI risk assessment tools and ergonomic design principles into lean teams, kaizen events, quality teams and other existing resources and tactics for performance improvement. Thus, their results show simultaneous reduction of injuries, increased productivity and improved quality.[/learn_more]

[learn_more caption="Mistake 4: Ineffective, Inconsistent Tools"]

Over 25% of companies surveyed use some form of qualitative tool for conducting ergonomic assessments. But over half didn't use design guideline criteria to define correct ergonomic dimensions and limits for workplace changes. The problem is that using subjective assessment methods can result in inefficiencies and frustration. Qualitative tools (such as checklists) are good for screening the workplace to determine if an ergonomic issue might exist. But there are many versions of these qualitative tools and so using them may result in an assessment that isn't:

- Repeatable because different assessors measure differently;
- Based on valid data;
- Measurable, that is, it can't be quantified and compared to a threshold;
- Based on MSI risk factors or exposure time; or
- Able to define the root cause of the problem or exposure.

Companies with effective ergonomics processes use a defined set of valid tools for conducting ergonomic assessments. The tool set typically includes qualitative screening for MSI risk factors, a whole-body risk assessment, a quantitative manual lifting risk assessment and a qualitative push/pull/carry assessment. And for a limited number of industries, whole-body and segmental vibration assessments should also be conducted.

Using a small set of simple, shared tools lets everyone involved (JHSCs, ergonomists and engineers) assess and measure exposures consistently, identify the root-cause exposures to MSI risk factors and rank jobs for improvement. And because quantitative tools provide a number or score, these results can be used to classify jobs as low, moderate or high risk, allowing clear communication to management and a measurable

goal.[/learn_more]

[learn_more caption="Mistake 5: A Failure to Check"]

Whether you manage ergonomics as a program or a process, failing to close the loop'that is, verifying that your workplace changes were effective in reducing MSI risk factors'will prohibit sustained success. Many companies focus on conducting assessments, which lead to solutions. But many organizations (about 40-60% of benchmarked companies) don't conduct follow-up assessments to verify that the solution actually achieved the intended improvement. Verifying that a change to the workplace has been effective is a major step in the continuous improvement process and is also critical to ensuring that the same improvement can be duplicated elsewhere. To do so, you'll need to know the goal for improvement (Mistake #1), use the right measures (Mistake #2), engage the right parties (Mistake #3) and use valid and repeatable tools (Mistake #4).

Companies with successful ergonomics processes look at this 'check' phase to ensure their efforts were successful at two levels:

1. The improvement of an individual job task; and
2. The effectiveness of the overall ergonomic improvement process.

The most common indicator used today is the percentage of job tasks at a low/no level of MSI risk exposure. Tracking this metric as a regular business performance measure will ensure you are proactively identifying and reducing exposures that cause MSIs.[/learn_more]

***Insider* Source**

Five Mistakes Companies Make with Ergonomics, Walt Rostykus, Humantech

5 Keys to Successfully Managing Workplace Ergonomics

1. Manage the causes of MSIs’exposure to risk factors’not the consequences’injuries.
2. Manage ergonomics as a process, not a program.
3. Expand the ergonomics process to an engineering discipline that addresses additional aspects of performance, beyond just injury reduction.
4. Use a few valid assessment and solution tools appropriate for your workplace conditions and workers.
5. Always verify that the changes you’ve implemented reduce MSI risk exposure and achieve the intended results.