

New Jersey Law Journal

VOL. CLXXVI – NO. 1 – INDEX 27

APRIL 5, 2004

ESTABLISHED 1878

MANAGEMENT

By ELLEN RADER SMITH

Ergonomics in the Law Office

Applying ergonomics can help make all employees more comfortable and productive

Most attorneys are concerned about having computers that are fast and have lots of storage, but very few have given consideration to where the computer is placed and whether there are alternative placements that can facilitate user comfort. It is common that the computer is simply added to an already crowded work area.

Compare your office and that of your paralegal, legal assistant and secretary, to that of 10 years ago: What is the main difference? More files? More papers? Or the glaring presence of a computer and all its attachments? It's probably a combination.

As more lawyers prepare their own briefs, use e-mail and do research on the Internet, attention to ergonomics is more important than ever. If ergonomics is ignored, you and your staff are at risk of developing work-related musculoskeletal disorders — commonly known as repetitive strain or cumulative trauma

Smith, a certified professional ergonomist and occupational therapist, is the owner of Ergo & Rehab Services of Montville.

injuries.

Prudent employers and law office managers should consider ergonomics in the set-up of new offices, relocations within existing offices or concurrent with changes in job duties. Simply stated, applying ergonomics optimizes the fit between people and the work they perform so that the risk of injury is minimized.

It is easy to appreciate the fact that workers in pain are not as productive as their pain-free co-workers. Getting up every five minutes to relieve a backache, muscle tension knot in the neck/upper back region, or hand pain is downright annoying.

Where To Start

What are some of the biggest culprits of musculoskeletal pain and discomfort in the office? How many can you recognize in the list below?

- mice and keyboards on different work levels;
- extended hand/arm reaches to the keyboard or mouse;
- keyboard trays that are not wide enough to accommodate the mouse;
- screens too high, too far away or too close; or skewed to one side of the desk;
- no consideration for the visual needs of users who wear bifocals or trifocals;
- cradling the telephone while writing or keying;

- nonadjustable chairs;
- lawyers sitting in executive/management-style chairs that offer little back support;
- lawyers trying to get comfortable at a PC that is located atop a credenza;
- lawyers relying upon their laptop as their primary computer;
- glare or adverse lighting;
- overall crowded work areas;
- assuming awkward and/or constricted postures; and
- sitting for extended periods without breaks.

If any of the bulleted items sound familiar to you, then you may want to look more closely at your workstation.

The big comfortable executive-style chair that many lawyers enjoy as part of their office décor is not a proper chair for working at the computer. This chair is able to offer little or no back support when placement of the hands is required on the keyboard or mouse.

Ergonomic evaluations examine not only the chairs, furnishings and equipment, but the interface between users and these components. It is easy to understand that the same chair may not be appropriate for a petite woman and a large man. Similarly, people who have experienced musculoskeletal discomfort in the past are more prone to experiencing pain again if their workstations are not set up ergonomically and with their individual needs in mind.

From medical and ergonomic perspectives, it is important to exam-

ine the cause of a medical condition — for example, the presence of workplace ergonomic risk factors such as awkward or sustained posture, repetition, force and so on — and to address these issues as part of the person’s treatment. For instance, it would behoove a person who works regularly on a computer and who has had carpal tunnel surgery not to have their workstation examined and modified prior to their safe

return to work.

Most ergonomic fixes are inexpensive. Education is a large part of the process. Many workers think that their workstation set-up has to be the way it is because they “inherited it that way,” “because the IT department put the equipment that way” or because they simply do not think about ergonomic issues that could be affecting their health, until a problem arises. The law office is certainly no

exception to this mind set.

Believe it or not, getting up to move and stretch at regular intervals throughout the day can help relieve a lot of stress (both physical and psychological). Simply sitting in a chair that is touted as ergonomic or using ergonomic equipment is not the answer. How the equipment is used — and whether the equipment is appropriate for individual users — is the issue. ■