



# **OFFICE ERGONOMICS**

### WHAT IS ERGONOMICS?

Ergonomics is the science of designing the most effective and healthy way of enabling the environment you work in, which includes all the tools and equipment you use for your job to fit **YOU** the worker, rather than physically forcing your body to fit the job. It is irrelevant to the type of work you perform, the science of ergonomics can be applied in every workplace and working environment.

### WHY SHOULD WORKERS CARE?

Working consistently in a poor ergonomically designed work environment can lead to very serious and long-term injuries. These injuries include umbrella terms such as: Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs), Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), Cumulative Trauma Disorder (CTD) and Repetitive Motion Injury (RMI). These types of injuries can affect the muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves throughout the entire body. Most of these injuries will develop as a result of repetitive, forceful or consistent awkward movement of joints, bones, ligament and other soft tissue in the body as workers perform tasks.

### ARE THERE SYMPTOMS TO BE AWARE OF?

Some of the more common symptoms include persistent or reoccurring: Back Pains, Muscle Strains, Tendonitis, Carpal Tunnel syndrome, Rotator Cuff Syndrome, Tennis Elbow, Shoulder Pain, Neck Pains, Eye Strains and much more. All of the associated injuries can start as a mild discomfort but they also run the risk of developing into a severe and potentially permanent disability. According to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), MSDs represent over 40% of all lost-time compensation claims in Ontario.

# DOES ONTARIO HAVE ERGONOMIC LAWS or REGULATIONS?

Not for lack of trying. Workers and unions have lobbied for years. We have focussed on the issue at RSI Day every February and also at Injured Workers Day every June, calling for Ontario to implement specific regulations for Ergonomics. In Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act, we rely on Section 25 2(h) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) that contains a general duty for an employer to take reasonable precautions in the circumstances to prevent injuries and illnesses. Several provinces (including British Columbia, Quebec, Alberta and Saskatchewan) do have regulations that address ergonomics and prevent Musculoskeletal Disorders.

### WHAT CAN WORKERS DO?

Workers need not wait for the pain and strains to start before taking action. Do others at work have the same working conditions? Join with workers and link with your joint health and safety committee/health and safety representative to identify workplace hazards such as poor work stations, awkward posture tasks, or repetitive work. Develop a collective strategy moving forward. There are several things to do to start off the process to prevent yourself or anyone from suffering injuries related to poor work set-up or organization. First, do what you can to ensure that workstations are set up properly. Ergonomics is about fitting the work to you - **NOT** the other way around. If assessing a work station, OPSEU/SEFPO recommends accessing the Office Ergonomic Calculator provided by the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) at <a href="http://www.ohcow.on.ca/ergotools/newoffice/index.php#collapse1">http://www.ohcow.on.ca/ergotools/newoffice/index.php#collapse1</a>

Rev. July/2023



# **HEALTH AND SAFETY**

### WHAT CAN MY JHSC OR H&S REP DO?

Workers must report poor workstations and other hazards to their supervisors and follow up for a response. An employer can't take action if the hazard is not reported. If the issue is not resolved, workers should approach their health and safety committee members and the union for help. Workers can ultimately file grievances if employers fail to address hazards that are brought to their attention. Once a month a worker committee member inspects the workplace to identify hazards. The monthly inspection is a chance for workers to interact with their JHSC members and to report hazards related to ergonomics. The committee has the right to make recommendations to the employer to address hazards and prevent injuries. The union has tools that can help. OPSEU/SEFPO has an Ergonomics Workstation Checklist that can be used to also evaluate your work area. Used in combination with the OHCOW Ergonomic Calculator the data collected can be brought to an upcoming JHSC meeting for discussion with the employer representatives as an accurate account of the overall needs for all workers in the workplace. It is very valuable for all work parties to recognize poor ergonomic design in the workplace can lead not only to long term injuries but lost productivity an overall unpleasant workplace. It is to everyone's benefit to take more than a passing interest to the benefits of proper workplace ergonomics.

## WHAT EQUIPMENT IS AVAILABLE TO IMPROVE OFFICE ERGONOMICS?

There is a wide array of 'ergonomically designed' office equipment in the marketplace including desks, chairs, keyboards, a computer mouse and even writing utensils. However, it is important to remember, in the absence of regulations any manufacturer is able to simply put the words ergonomically designed on a product but that does not mean it is appropriate for **YOU** at your workstation. Recently, there has been a lot of attention paid to sit/stand stations giving the ability for the worker to adjust their position as they work. Standing all day can lead to strains and injuries too. Research shows that it greatly increases the risk of carotid artery disease and varicose veins. Likewise, prolonged standing can also diminish our fine motor skills.

### RIGHT TO ACCOMMODATION

The employer has a duty to prevent hazards and set up the workplace to be as safe and healthy as possible—to take all reasonable precautions in the circumstances for all workers. Employers also have human rights obligations to accommodate workers who need it short of undue hardship. The employer's approach to ergonomics must include both, and go beyond individualizing the issue through accommodations. The approach must identify, assess, and implement controls for ergonomic hazards before workers get injured or suffer pain and continued as an ongoing process in the workplace. Workers, JHSCs and unions must ensure that employers are attending to overall prevention and that they also provide individual accommodations as required by law.

### **ONE FINAL WORD**

To really improve office ergonomics and improve the overall working environment, employers need to evaluate the overall workplace with a willingness to change the traditional design of the overall workplace. For that to happen, workers, JHSCs, health and safety representatives, and unions need to use all opportunities at their disposal to identify all ergonomic hazards associated with work, and develop and suggest recommendations that will make work healthier and safer. Work with employers to develop solutions before injuries happen. Work with others to assert your rights under health and safety legislation and the collective agreement so that you go home without injury every day. And follow up and make sure that you are doing everything that you can, both individually and collectively to make work safe.

Rev. July/2023