

Furniture Manufacturers Craft First Industry-Developed Ergonomics Guideline By Anita Goehringer, CIE

“We felt we knew what worked best for our industry—who better then to craft an ergonomics guideline for furniture manufacturers.” —Bill Perdue, Director of Environmental, Safety and Human Resources, American Furniture Manufacturers Association

ONE YEAR AGO, THE AMERICAN FURNITURE Manufacturers Association (AFMA) forged an alliance with North Carolina and federal OSHA—the first to bring federal and state governments together with industry to develop voluntary ergonomics guidelines for a specific industry. One year later, to the day, AFMA released the *Voluntary Ergonomics Guideline for the Furniture Manufacturing Industry*, designed to give these manufacturers work-proven tools and techniques for controlling musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in the workplace.

The final document was unveiled at AFMA's Annual Environmental, Safety, Health and Human Resources Conference in Myrtle Beach, SC in early September, among a crowd of furniture manufacturers, government officials, ergonomics experts and furniture supporters. This is the first industry-developed guideline to be released and one of the most comprehensive to date.

Practical, useful information

This guideline provides practical suggestions for employers to reduce the number and severity of workplace injuries by identifying, evaluating and controlling hazards using methods that have been work-proven in the furniture manufacturing industry.

With a clear vision and mission to provide a usable and manageable guide for their industry, AFMA assembled a workgroup comprised of representatives from upholstery and case good furniture

manufacturers, the ergonomics and academic communities, and the North Carolina Department of Labor. “It was a tremendous effort, accomplished in record time, by a talented team with a strong commitment to see the furniture industry succeed in further reducing injuries and illnesses in this labor-intensive environment,” Bill Perdue noted as he presented the final document to the conference attendees and furniture community.

The voluntary guideline addresses five main areas: ergonomics program management, identifying ergonomics concerns, ergonomic control strategies, administrative management, and ergonomics program evaluation. Although these core elements are discussed in detail, the bulk of the guideline is focused on the “best practice” approaches assembled in the appendices. Numerous companies supplied examples of engineering interventions, work process solutions, successful teamwork structures, ergonomics plans, training ideas, reporting and analysis methods, MSD management techniques, and evaluation tools.

As the document took shape, it became apparent that many furniture manufacturers have been working to control ergonomic issues for some time. The volume of “best practices,” particularly in the intervention strategies section, became too numerous to include in one publication. A companion website was created by AFMA containing the full guideline and a wider selection of specif-

ic engineering and work process solutions to ergonomic stressors in the furniture manufacturing workplace. This website, located at www.afma4u.org, will be updated periodically and serve as a repository for new control strategies as they are developed and shared with the furniture manufacturing community.

A “roadmap”

The furniture industry will move forward using this guide as a “roadmap” for their successful ergonomics initiatives. As one furniture manufacturing representative aptly stated, “It’s a solid document, full of practical and useable tools and information. It will take the support and leadership of management and the participation of the workforce to see these principles be effective at the plant level.”

Ergonomics Consultant, Anita R. Goehringer, MS, CIE, was a member of AFMA’s workgroup on the development of the Voluntary Ergonomics Guideline for the Furniture Manufacturing Industry. Contact Anita at agoehringer@nc.rr.com, and 919.676.0553.

Learn more:

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