

Leveraging

By Anita R. Goehringer, MS, CIE

Although it's possible to identify ergonomic problems and implement corrective measures without input from the workforce, managers and engineers engaging in this practice often find themselves missing an important piece of the puzzle. Employees are, in fact, the ergonomics "barometer" for your organization.

How do you know if you have an ergonomics problem in your facility?

You collect and process information generated from employee responses—injury and illness records, complaints of discomfort, quality problems, production drop-offs, high workers' compensation costs, lost work time, turnover, and so on.

How do you know if your ergonomics efforts are effective?

Again, you go to the employees to determine whether what you've done has generated the desired effect.

We rely on these individuals to apply knowledge gained from training, experiment with new tool and workstation designs, change work methods, perform stretching exercises, and learn new jobs, all while keeping up with production demands. These are the people who control the success or failure of your ergonomics initiative. If the workers like the change—success! If not, then what—failure?

Assessing opportunities

We place considerable responsibility on this group to generate the desired outcome. We should also give them the opportunity to assist in the effort.



In order to negotiate this in the most effective manner, it is first important to put employee participation and involvement into perspective. Understand the strengths and limitations of this resource. They are the experts on the jobs they are performing. They often have control over many elements in their work environment, including work methods, working postures, workstation arrangement and adjustment, tool handling and orientation for use, proper tool maintenance, sitting or standing, safety issues, housekeeping, and personal health. Keep in mind the elements that they seldom have control over—process flow; workstation layout; tool, equipment, and furniture selection; line balancing; weights of objects handled; produc-

tion demands; and budgetary issues. Employees often have a limited perspective on jobs outside their direct work areas.

Capitalizing on strengths

Emphasize the strengths of this working group and keep their goals in perspective. Employees can assist in pinpointing areas of concern through several ways, including discomfort surveys, one-on-one or team interactions, and early reporting of problems. It should be the responsibility of the ergonomics team to prioritize these concerns in a facility-wide or departmental scheme.

Encouraging change

Encourage and motivate employees to develop solutions to identified problems. Adopt a task force approach to give all employees working in the identified problem job or area a chance to participate in the process. In many cases, if employees have a part in the problem-solving and decision-making processes, they'll be more receptive to any changes that may be necessary.

Getting creative

Find ways to give employees the opportunity to participate, learn, and problem-solve. I'm sure you've heard a few fascinating stories of employee involvement, but one in particular stands out in my mind. A hospital products manufacturer, striving to find a more effective means of instilling and reinforcing good ergonomics principles in their workforce, abandoned all traditional methodology, and opted to hold a county fair. I know it sounds strange, but having witnessed this festival-style approach to employee participation, I can testify to its effectiveness.

Resources

Getting Employees Involved in Ergonomics

Manning booths, as on the midway, employees barked out questions relevant to ergonomics concerns—challenging co-workers to answer correctly. They had dart throws, hole-in-one golf games, strongest grip contests, box handling and the like, just for the chance to answer more questions. I can honestly say that I have never witnessed grown people get so excited over winning an ice scraper. Employees were engaging, inquisitive, and motivated. It was captivating. Weeks before the “event,” marketing campaigns were launched—drawing interest and ral-

lying enthusiasm. Departmental ergonomics teams made and manned the booths with help from the company’s core ergonomics team. The prizes weren’t expensive; the time investment for participants not more than one-hour, but the impact was great. I, as others, left with only one question unanswered, “What will they do next?”

As we are challenged each day to adhere to regulations, policies, and guidelines, produce more with less, and find better ways to do business, it’s easy to get bogged down in just getting the job done.

I encourage you to utilize the resources you have available to your, and their, best advantage. Get creative. Make participating in ergonomics fun. You’ll like the results. **151**

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Where’s the Risk? *Evaluating your Ergonomics Priorities.* If you’re spending most of your time reacting to employee complaints, you need a proactive solution. Next month, find out how to get the jump on these and other potential problems.