

By Anita Goehringer, CIE

# Where's the Risk?

## Evaluating your Ergonomics Priorities

Nearly every ergonomist has a hot button—something they push without fail. Mine is prioritization. Knowing where the real problems are, or will be, is the critical component to keeping your ergonomics initiative focused and on track. I have no desire to see you, or your team, waste valuable time and effort on costly fixes that fail to address the root cause of the problem or miss the problems completely. Taking time to evaluate risk, both in your facility and within jobs, can help you target real problem areas for change, utilize resources to your best advantage, and spend your company's money more wisely. (As the ergonomics champion, this can only make you look better to your boss.)

### Developing a starting point

I think most ergonomics team leaders have realized by now that it's unreasonable to think that you'll start evaluating jobs at the front of the facility and work your way to the back job by job. This could take an unrealistic amount of time and high-risk jobs may never be seen. Likewise, you don't just want to wait for employee complaints or problem jobs to surface on their own. Always reacting to problems can be costly and reduces the amount of control you have over the situation. The best approach is

proactive—know where your problem potential is up front. This process is termed ergonomics risk assessment.

Although this process can occur in various ways with differing pieces of information collected, there are several key prioritization methodologies



that can push you toward the most favorable outcome. Injury-based, symptoms-based, and stressor-based approaches provide the best information when establishing a facility-wide prioritization.

### Using the reactive to get proactive

Start by digging through some paperwork. To establish your injury-based priority, look at your facility's injury/illness records over the last several years. Look only at ergonomics-

related incidence such as muscle soreness, tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, trigger finger, and all associated symptoms, as well as back injuries and muscle strains. Narrow the information to department, job, body part of primary concern, type of problem (cumulative trauma disorder, back injury or muscle strain), lost time and restricted workdays administered.

Other information (and resources) should allow you to determine length of time in the job per case, as well as, the number of people performing that same or similar job. Dig deeper to correlate injury trends with workers' compensation claims, quality issues, production schedules, turnover, absenteeism, and tenure where possible. Now you should have a reasonable view of where your facility's ergonomics-related problems have been.

### Open wide and say "ah-h-h"

Couple the injury-specific information with employee input and you'll know where your employees think your problems lie. Incorporate employee comments generated through one-on-one conversations, suggestion boxes, and/or discomfort (or comfort) surveys to get a picture of the unreported (or recorded) discomfort revealed by any of these

methods. I realize that some may think surveys are a risky proposition—polling employees to determine areas of discomfort. And, quite frankly, many feel they already hear this information on a daily basis. But, what you may be hearing is a skewed version of reality in your facility. It's the employees who haven't reported problems that you want and need to know about. This symptoms-based approach is an optional method for helping to establish priority, but an important one nonetheless. This is how you really know you have the core priority in place.

While employee surveys are a good method for collecting discomfort information en masse, they need to be well-crafted, well-administered, and well-organized to supply the most statistically sound and useable information. Plan to use the information or don't waste your time and effort on delivery. It will only cause ill feelings among employees if they see no effect from the information they provided.



### Where's the risk?

Subjective input alone should not forge your prioritization course. Add some objectivity by taking a look at your jobs and tasks. Evaluate the extent that ergonomics-related stressors play a role. For consistency among evaluators, it's best to utilize a worksheet to answer a few key questions about force, awkward or extreme postures, static positioning, repetition and other physical stres-

sors within the job. This quick evaluation should assist with determining risk per body part and overall job, as well as add validity to the subjective input provided from other prioritization methods. Be ready to find jobs that have significant risk but few reported problems.

The combination of these methodologies should formulate the rationale for your overall prioritization scheme. Establish a plan to further evaluate key areas of concern in your facility so that appropriate long- and short-term strategies can be employed. Use whatever information you have available to help you to make decisions. Don't be surprised if your priority changes over time. Remember to always use rational judgment. And, above all, go with the flow.

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