

Participatory Ergonomics Team

Problem:

Management and workers want to decrease injuries, but lack knowledge of ergonomics. Instructions on safe practices from outside experts in ergonomics or from management may fall on deaf ears.



- Management may be unaware of the severity and costs of ergonomic hazards.
- Changes made without worker input may be resisted. Old habits die hard.
- Ergonomics consultants can address immediate problems, but not ongoing education and follow-through.

One Solution:

Set up a joint ergonomics team of workers and managers.



- Knowledge of ergonomic principles leads to better solutions.
- Workers' job insight ensures the most important problems will be addressed.
- Workers' day-to-day knowledge provides a reality check on suggestions.
- Ergonomic concerns filter down from management team members to other levels of management, and from worker team members to rest of work force.
- Ergonomics experts and other resources can be brought in as consultants, as needed.
- Team can develop ongoing ergonomics education program and address new problems as they arise.

Ergonomics Team

Why Set Up a Participatory Ergonomics Team?

The participatory approach—involving workers and managers—produces the best ideas for preventing injuries. It also means that the ideas will be used, rather than collecting dust on the shelf. The participatory approach recognizes workers' knowledge and uses it both to single out the worst hazards and to develop solutions. Workers are in on the decisions about which jobs to improve, and how to improve them. They spread the knowledge of ergonomics and of the specific solutions to the rest of the work force.

Who Should Be On an Ergonomics Team?

Keep the size of the team small. Involve production workers and supervisors from the different departments—the people who will put the job improvements into use—and also the maintenance workers or engineers who will build the needed tools. Include a representative from each major type of job. It is important that the person who has decision-making power to implement the team's recommendations also be a team member.

Hold training and meetings during work hours; participation should be seen as part of the job, not an extracurricular activity. Hold training and meetings in the workers' first language. Sometimes this will mean using two languages, with translation.

What Are the Tasks of an Ergonomics Team?

1. The team should receive training in basic ergonomic principles. See the Resources section of this pamphlet for a good training video, *Listen to Your Body*, and a pamphlet, *Blueprintstwo*.
2. Identify the ergonomic risk factors in each major job.
3. Rank jobs by urgency, based on the risk factors present, number of people affected, and number of injuries. The team should have permission to look at all injury and cost data, to help them set priorities.
4. Develop solutions. Look at equipment or tools available in your industry or in other industries, or design new tools. Call in engineers or consultants as necessary. Look for ways to change how the job is designed, so work safety is built into the job. This is

more effective than changes in instructions or work rules.

5. Try out the solutions in daily use.
6. Get feedback and modify as necessary.
7. As it works, the team should keep management and the work force fully informed of its goals, progress, and successes.
8. Design a program to educate all workers on ergonomic principles. For example, at one tree nursery, the Ergonomics Team drew up information sheets, specific to the nursery, that outlined the risk factors for the major jobs and some methods to work more safely. This information became part of new employees' orientation training.

What Are the Costs of an Ergonomics Team?

Workers' and managers' time spent working on the team should be paid at their regular rate. New tools may have to be ordered or built. Reduced costs because of decreased injuries should outweigh these short-term costs.

Where Can I Get More Information About Setting Up an Ergonomics Team?

See the Resources section for a video, *Ergonomic Programs That Work*, and a pamphlet, *Elements of Ergonomics Programs*.

Where Can I Find a Consultant on Ergonomics?

Look in the Resources section for a list of free OSHA consultation services (there is one in each state).

Contact Information

This Tip Sheet was produced from material developed by the Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program, Washington State Department of Labor and Industries.

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