Call Center Ergonomics – I Can’t Stand to Sit

Who hasn’t thought, “I can’t stand to sit at my desk any longer”? Call center employees spend the majority of the day sitting at their computer. A fresh look at Sit-to-Stand workstations provides a unique twist on the benefits of call center ergonomics for employees. This white paper discusses how frequent position changes can help to prevent work-related repetitive stress injuries and how to incorporate ergonomics into workstations.

To back up a little, what does ergonomics really mean? Essentially, ergonomics is designing the workplace to maximize productivity by reducing user fatigue and discomfort. Relative to a call center, ergonomics means designing computer workstations that allow employees to be comfortable, and thus productive, while spending the majority of the day at their computer. Since people vary greatly in size, and spend most of their day in a stationary sitting position, incorporating ergonomics into workstations that accommodate various sizes of employees can be a difficult task.

Previous thought on proper ergonomic positioning was that a static sitting position with the body in 90° angles was best. New studies show that any fixed position will increase muscle fatigue, and that one key component of proper ergonomics is movement. Some examples of healthy movements are adjusting a chair or backrest, stretching fingers, hands, arms, and torso, looking away from the monitor, periodically standing up to walk around for a few minutes, and switching between a sitting and standing position. Movements such as these promote circulation and reduce muscle fatigue. Frequent position changes can help to prevent work-related, repetitive stress injuries. The most ergonomically correct workstations are easy to adjust, and encourage individuals to change positions frequently.

So what is the easiest way to provide an ergonomic workstation solution? The best way to provide the most varied amount of position changes is with an adjustable height workstation that includes a monitor arm and keyboard mechanism. There is some misconception that the only way to provide an adjustable height workstation is to have the entire workstation move up and down with either a crank or push button power mechanism.

However, with the correct tools, standing is as simple as sitting. The easiest way to create workstations that transition from standing to sitting is to use a keyboard tray and monitor arm with enough adjustment to be used while in a sitting or standing position. This set-up, such as the one shown in this white paper, can accommodate 95% of the population.

It is important to note that although movement is an important facet of ergonomics, if one part of the ergonomic equation is missing, it can render other ergonomic components of the station useless. For example, if a workstation design utilizes a keyboard mechanism, but fails to include a monitor arm, the user may need to move closer or farther away from the workstation in order to see the monitor. This negates the ergonomic benefits of the keyboard mechanism, as now users may need to bend their wrists or sit forward in their
chair to properly view the monitor, placing themselves in an incorrect ergonomic position.

If an ergonomic station is easy for people to use, then they will be more likely to use it to adjust their position, reducing the stress on their body. As reported in the November 2003 Journal of the American Medical Association, common pain conditions are having an adverse impact on productivity. Researchers found that lost productivity due to back pain, headache, neck pain and other musculoskeletal discomfort is costing U.S. companies an estimated $61.2 billion per year.

In addition, according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, musculoskeletal disorders now account for one-third of all occupational illnesses and injuries and compose the largest job-related illness and injury problem in the U.S. today. In 1997, employers reported a total of 626,000 lost workdays due to work-related MSDs. They pay approximately $20 billion annually in direct worker’s compensation costs and another $60 billion in indirect costs.

An ergonomic call center can help reduce loss of productivity due to injury, and create a better working environment, simply by providing ergonomic tools in the workstations. Along with an adjustable height monitor and keyboard, a complete ergonomic package also includes an adjustable chair, task light, and footrest, as well as training on how to properly adjust the equipment. While purchasing an adjustable chair is relatively simple, other components of the ergonomic equation can be more difficult. Look for a furniture manufacturer that packages ergonomic solutions. Packaged solutions will provide a comprehensive ergonomic solution depending on the call center’s needs.

In conjunction with the ergonomic tools, proper training is key for keeping untrained users from putting themselves at risk. One site with free up to date ergonomic information is OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration). OSHA has an entire section of Ergonomic E-Tools for Computer Workstations, which demonstrates proper ergonomic positions while in both a sitting and standing computer workstation position.

Incorporating sit-to-stand workstations in the call center will provide flexible ergonomic solutions that give employees numerous options for comfortable working positions. Ergonomic workstations can have a positive impact on the health, morale, and productivity of employees.
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