

Diverse comfort

A changing workforce highlights the importance of choosing ergonomic furniture

There are myriad benefits to choosing ergonomically sound office furniture and equipment. Disorders associated with unsuitable furniture include muscle tightness, risk of herniated disks and elbow and wrist tendonitis, among others. Such injuries can lead to costly downtime from sick days, turnover and lowered productivity.

Canada's shifting demographics are an added factor purchasers must consider when buying office furniture. Through factors like immigration, offices host more body sizes, proportions and dimensions than ever, says Margo Fraser, executive director of the Association of Canadian Ergonomists. As well, employees working longer means an aging workforce that may need special consideration, she notes.

"It's (about) adjustability and knowing that even if you choose a good adjustable chair, you're still going to have a certain percentage of the population that still won't fit it and you're going to have to bring in something different for them," Fraser says.

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Ergonomics involves ensuring equipment suits the worker, says Terry Cassaday, president and founder of ergonomic chair manufacturer, ErgoCentric Seating Systems. Calling office equipment "ergonomic" is a misnomer, he says, as a chair suitable for one worker may be incorrect for another. Sometimes, offices get outfitted with new furniture and employees get the same chairs.

ErgoCentric makes seats in six sizes, sev-

eral chair backs and a number of chair series, all of which interconnect to form variations. "We can make thousands of variations of our chairs, which allows us to fit 100 percent of our customers' employees," Cassaday says.

Know your workforce

Shifting demographics or no, it's useful to assess the workforce that will be using it before buying office furniture, says Dhananjai Borwankar, technical specialist at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). That helps match the workstation with the worker and type of work performed, he says.

"You want to look at what the individual is doing, what equipment they need and what positions do they need to be in to do that work," he says. "That's the whole assessment process for ergonomics—you're always trying to match the work to the worker."

Several standards focus on ergonomic factors like seating position, work surface height, line-of-sight, leg clearance and arm reach, says Borwankar. The CSA standard CSA-Z412, for example, gives guidelines for measurements based on type of work. A standard from the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturer's Association (BIFMA) called G1-2002 also provides ergonomic information for office furniture, while ISO standards (ISO 9241-3 and ISO 9241-5) focus on visual display requirements, workstation layouts and posture.

Test-driving office furniture helps ensure products suit a workforce's needs, Borwankar adds. "When you're looking at vendors, you want to ensure you can try before you buy," he notes. "Get your joint health and safety committee, managers and people in the workforce to do a two- or four-week trial. That'll give you an idea of whether it meets your requirements and whether the employees actually like it."

Getting help

Organizations can also consider hiring a consultant, he says. If you contact a consultant, ensure the person has experience with the type of work for which you're buying office furniture or equipment. As well, don't be afraid to ask for references, Borwankar stresses.

While hiring a consultant helps, suppliers are also knowledgeable regarding their product, says Mark Iliopoulos, marketing manager, interiors & technology, Grand & Toy. Suppliers can assess organizations' challenges and explain how products meet those challenges. "They'll assess what it is you're after, fit it in with your cost goals, the nature of your business, the demographic of your business, the type of industry and provide a customized solution that assesses your needs," he says.

Staples Advantage also provides ergonomic products including chairs, adjustable keyboard trays, mice and wrist rests. Business Interiors by Staples employs furniture specialists to help design and equip an ergonomic office to fit employees' needs. And choosing ergonomic office furniture isn't necessarily more expensive, says Iliopoulos. "It doesn't mean you're going to break the bank to make it a comfortable work station," he says.

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