

Ergonomics—who really cares?

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Years after ergonomists began to make a connection between the discomfort computer terminal operators can experience and the workstation they're made to utilize, the debate rages on: Do people really need adjustable furniture? If so, how much adjustability do they actually need?

Those arguing against the need for fully-adjustable workstations are clearly winning the war. Installation after installation continues to be made with completely fixed-height furniture or with only the keyboard adjustable. Individuals responsible for choosing such workstations would appear to have a lot of evidence supporting their decision. Studies show less than 5% of employees actually utilize the adjustments in their workstation, even when they are provided. Besides, if non-adjustable furniture really caused employee discomfort, why aren't more people complaining? Some are, but most are not; so is it a problem requiring an investment in fully adjustable workstations?

Bothered

Certainly most companies spend time trying to find the answer to those questions, even those that eventually purchase non or minimally-adjustable workstations. But did they make a mistake? Could there be an answer to their questions they failed to see? What if a lot of employees are experiencing discomfort but they're not complaining for another reason? Is there another explanation for why adjustments are not utilized when they are provided?

It took us ten years to find the answer to those questions! Our first introduction to adjustable workstations came in

Europe in 1977. Touring offices in Denmark and Sweden, we were amazed to see all office employees sitting at height-adjustable desks, whether they had a computer terminal at their workstation or not. (Back then, most didn't.) Their desks were adjusted in a wide range of heights that appeared to accommodate everyone in a proper sitting position.

Bewitched

We were told the use of height-adjustable furniture had been common for 25 years. The rationale we were given seemed so logical we flew back to Canada with a dream of saving North Americans from the discomfort we now knew they must be experiencing. To that end, we arranged to import a completely adjustable line of Swedish office furniture in 1978, and fully expected both the product and concept to be quickly embraced. What a surprise we were in for!

What if a lot of employees are experiencing discomfort but they're not complaining?

With some difficulty, we finally managed to land our first project with an insurance firm in Toronto. We attributed the slow start to an insensitivity on management's part to employees needs. The insurance company clearly had a problem, however, with computers just introduced in their claims department. Immediately after the installation, we went in to explain to everyone how to use their new worksta-

tion and have each adjusted to suit the occupant, based on the instructions we received in Europe.

Bewildered

We were absolutely shocked and bewildered to find at least half the people firmly stating that they did not want their workstation adjusted! This pattern repeated itself in installation after installation. Each time, all we could think of to say was, "Let us adjust your workstation and if you don't like it, we'll change it back again." We never changed any back, and, in fact, individuals usually reported an instant sense of improvement in their comfort and well-being. Still, it didn't explain the initial resistance, in some form, from almost everyone.

Almost no one started out wanting an adjustable workstation.

The mystery deepened. We started conducting seminars for managers on why employees needed independent adjustability for their keyboard, screen and desk surface and the discomforts many would be experiencing without such features.

Within weeks we would follow up the seminar with phone calls to the manager who'd attended, to see what next step we might take for them. Time and again, we were told that they'd really enjoyed our seminar—but on returning to their office had failed to establish any employee dissatisfaction with existing, non-adjustable furniture.

What was going on? We had already established a clear link between the often substantial discomfort many individuals experience and the way they're made to sit and work—but almost no one started out wanting an adjustable workstation.

Believers

The answer came from an unexpected source. A designer, who'd embraced our ideas and concepts, had an opportunity to do a project in Montreal, if he could demonstrate to a manager who'd had no complaints, that there was a problem in his department. The designer prepared and distributed a questionnaire. It didn't say, "How do you like your workstation?" It said, with specifics, "Do you ever experience physical discomfort during your working day?" To varying degrees, most said 'yes'. Some discomfort was quite severe. The last question asked was, "To what do you attribute your discomfort?" Most employees blamed it on a weakness within themselves, or simply accept discomfort as part of the job. Almost no one attributed the discomfort to the way they're made to sit and work. That's why people don't start out wanting adjustable workstations or properly utilize them when they are just installed. That's why adjustable workstations must be properly implemented to actually improve comfort.

Of course it also means if you're a specifier or buyer of office furniture, you can continue to ignore adjustable workstations—at least as long as employees continue not knowing any discomfort they may experience can probably be attributed to how they're made to sit and work.

But you'll know...