

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM: HOW TO KEEP EVERYONE INTERESTED IN ERGONOMICS

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Abstract

Many companies have experienced the initial excitement of an ergonomics program launch, only to find that after a period of months, the energy levels abate and ergonomics is seen as “the flavour of the month”. This session highlights, based on our experience with programs that have been active for four years or more, successful methods of maintaining that initial momentum. In particular, we will share what we've learned about using contests, bulletin boards, progress reports, success stories, awareness presentations, and other communication tools. Innovative ways of distributing the message will be shared in this paper. An annual program audit provides a periodic check on the success of the program, and identifies opportunities for improvement. With some effort, an ergonomics program can be energized, and maintained at that same level of interest, over the long term.

Key words: ergonomics program, momentum, awareness

CONTINUER SUR SA LANCÉE : COMMENT MAINTENIR L'INTÉRÊT DE TOUS LES TRAVAILLEURS À L'ÉGARD DE L'ERGONOMIE

Résumé

Bon nombre d'entreprises ont connu l'exaltation initiale du lancement d'un programme d'ergonomie, seulement pour découvrir qu'après quelques mois, les niveaux d'énergie diminuent et l'ergonomie est perçue comme « la saveur du mois ». La présente communication présente les points saillants des méthodes utilisées avec succès pour continuer sur cette lancée initiale, d'après notre expérience de programmes actifs depuis quatre ans ou plus. En particulier, nous partagerons ce que nous avons appris au sujet de l'utilisation de concours, de tableaux d'affichage, de rapports d'étape, d'exemples de réussites, de présentations de sensibilisation et d'autres outils de communication. Des façons novatrices de diffuser le message seront partagées dans cet article. Une vérification annuelle de programme permet de vérifier périodiquement la réussite de celui-ci et de déterminer les possibilités d'amélioration. Grâce à certains efforts déployés, il est possible d'énergiser un programme d'ergonomie et de maintenir le même niveau d'intérêt à long terme.

Mots clés : programme d'ergonomie, lancée, sensibilisation

INTRODUCTION

The ergonomics program has been launched and excitement is in the air. Everyone in the organisation views their surroundings from an “ergo” perspective. Ergonomics is no longer called “economics”, “ergonomics” or “agronomics”. Workers are eager to make changes to better “fit the workplace to the worker”. This excitement needs to be maintained as the program progresses into and beyond its launch. However energy levels often abate, and ergonomics is viewed, in hindsight, as “the flavour of the month”. With no legislation to make “maintenance” of an ergonomics program a priority, many companies find that other programs take priority over time. What can be done to prevent declining interest in the ergonomics program? What can be done to repeatedly boost interest in ergonomics? In 2003, our company launched an “ergonomics program” for many of our existing, ongoing clients. Since then, we have supported 9-13 client facilities at any given time, by providing program support on a regular ongoing basis. An ergonomist visits the client site on a regular basis (ranging from one day every second week to two days per week, depending on client needs and the maturity of the program). Awareness materials are developed in our office and distributed to all clients on a weekly basis. This paper will focus on methods that we have successfully implemented to maintain the initial momentum and commitment, as the program progresses into its second year and beyond.

KEY PARAMETERS

Management support

Initial and sustained management support is the cornerstone of a successful ergonomics program (OHSCO, 2007). “Management support” should not be limited to providing a signature on the policy that is posted in the lobby; *real* management commitment involves the provision of time, money and resources for the program, and active participation of managers. True management commitment will encourage employees at all levels of the organisation to participate in the ergonomics program. Mechanisms for management to support the program include:

- a) Supporting (and signing) the ergonomics policy – a formal policy will support the allocation of time and resources to ergonomics concerns, as well as hold people accountable for their actions and responsibilities. The policy should be supported by a procedure, and goals and objectives. The role of each stakeholder must be clearly defined, and all employees within the organisation must be given the resources and held accountable for performing their assigned roles (OHSCO, 2007).
- b) Regularly reviewing objectives, goals, progress and accomplishments pertaining to ergonomics. If these parameters are included as measurable performance metrics for supervisors, management and employees, they will get the attention they deserve.
- c) Participating in training and ergonomics awareness initiatives (OHSCO, 2007). A specific session should be provided to management to allow them to fully comprehend the costs of the program, and what they can reasonably expect in return for their commitment to the program. Management attendance and participation in other stakeholder training will demonstrate that they truly believe in the program. Further, if they attend supervisor, engineering, and employee training as participants, they will have a better understanding of the responsibilities that are being assigned to others. One unique way to involve management in developing attention-grabbing awareness material is to use them as models for awareness posters. For example, a poster showing office employees how to adjust their chairs might feature their own manager, demonstrating the process step-by-step on the office chair that is used in their office. Management’s support for the program in this manner quickly captures the curiosity and interest of all other employees.

Communication

Communication with all key stakeholders is a second key to successfully maintaining momentum. Regular contact maintains visibility of the ergonomics program, and allows a feedback loop to

ensure that the program continues to progress. Key messages that need to be transferred include:

- Project status updates should be provided for management and employees to follow the progress of specific projects; employees are less likely to become frustrated with a perceived lack of progress if they are frequently updated on the status of their project.
- Posting or otherwise communicating current project priorities also helps manage employee expectations; when an employee can see that his/her concern is next on the ergonomist's list, s/he will be more patient.
- Providing regular, current ergonomics awareness material and resources will keep employees continuously thinking about how ergonomics fits into their lives.
- Communicating employees' roles in the ergonomics program establishes their rights and responsibilities under the program.
- Contact information regarding those who can assist with ergonomics concerns must also be communicated.
- Feedback from employees also needs to be sought at key points in any ergonomics project. A referral process for entering new concerns also needs to be established.

Distributing these messages in multiple media helps to maintain interest. Several creative methods to keep ergonomics fresh, interesting, educational and unforgettable include:

- a) Bulletin boards can be highly effective, when placed in areas with high traffic such as cafeterias or employee entrances. Developing noticeable and visually appealing bulletin boards captures workers' attention. Bulletin boards should contain three key pieces of information.
 - i. How to link into the program – Contact information for the ergonomist and other resources, and where events are occurring are at the top of the board
 - ii. Awareness material – Frequently changing the awareness material is important. Workers notice the change and are drawn to read the new material. Boards can include an “ergo thought of the week” and monthly theme panels on a topic that is relevant. For example, the April theme might focus on “ergonomic” tools for gardening. Some topics are deemed critical to the program; for example, heat stress prevention should always be covered prior to summer, and early recognition of the signs and symptoms of musculoskeletal disorders should be covered once each year.
 - iii. Ergonomics program information – Provide project status logs, and success stories with before and after pictures and descriptions.
- b) Posters and signs – Use signs and posters as awareness material, and instructional aids. For example, stretching posters encourage employees to stretch before and during work. An instructional poster might provide guidance on how to adjust your computer workstation. Posters and signs can be placed in areas of high employee traffic, or within each individual workstation.
- c) Television monitors – Some companies use television monitors to broadcast messages to employees in the cafeteria or other common areas. These allow employees to view information that might otherwise be communicated on a bulletin board. However, with electronic media, we can also include videos, pop ups and animations, and prominent headlines to draw attention to important information.
- d) Company newsletters – Provide ergonomics awareness material for use in the client's company newsletter. The content can include contests, articles, and ergonomic tips and trivia. (In fact, we continually add to a binder of awareness material on various topics, which clients are encouraged to use in newsletters, pay stub inserts, bulletin boards, etc.) Consider timely material that can facilitate expansion of ergonomics from the workplace into the home. For example, winter topics can include awareness information on shovelling snow.
- e) Contests – Contests are a creative and engaging way to increase ergonomics awareness. Contests should vary in format and theme and occur regularly throughout

the year for maximum effect. Examples of contests that have worked well for us include word puzzles, picture puzzles, and scavenger hunts. Contest “winners” should be rewarded with prizes. In work environments with language or literacy barriers, try to avoid contests that rely on English comprehension; photo matching contests, or contests that can be translated easily, work well. Contests that can be taken home can often be translated by a child or friend.

- f) Surveys and follow ups – Employee surveys can be used to gather information regarding a specific project, typically before the project begins. Employees are asked to provide ratings of discomfort; they are also asked to describe any concerns they have, and any ideas that they have to improve their job. Follow ups involve evaluating the effectiveness of ergonomic changes, and making corrections where needed. The follow up should involve a second survey (allowing a comparison of discomfort scores with the baseline obtained earlier). Follow up should also involve informal interviews with employees, and a re-assessment of the job demands.
- g) Success stories – Sharing success stories regarding ergonomic changes maintains momentum in the ergonomics program. Success stories should include before and after pictures and descriptions of the ergonomic change. Post and distribute these summaries, so that employees at all levels of the organization take note and begin to “buy in” to the program.
- h) Awareness presentations – Ongoing awareness sessions help to boost and maintain ergonomics awareness. For example, a lifting tips program that consists of 15 coaching plans can be rolled out one at a time, or in shorter sessions over the course of a year or so. The short session duration allows management to easily fit sessions into regular “pre-shift” meetings. Again, sessions that are timely (e.g., backpack awareness in September) will encourage workers to think about ergonomics in everyday life. Awareness sessions can also be conducted as “Lunch n’ learns”, conducted during the lunch break; this approach is particularly effective for salaried groups with different interests. Most companies focus primarily on production employees when providing employee awareness initiatives. However, targeting other key stakeholder groups such as engineering, purchasing, quality, and management, in awareness initiatives is important (Chengalur et al., 2004). Occasionally scheduling an “office ergo” or “ergo design” session to generate interest from these groups is worthwhile.
- d) Status/progress reports – Progress reports summarize the past month’s ergonomics efforts, effectiveness in achieving previously established goals, any obstacles that have been encountered, and the plan for the subsequent month’s ergonomic activities. Monthly reports allow management to track ergonomics initiatives, and to take action to address any obstacles.

Ergonomics Program Audits

Audits enable us to quantify the success of the ergonomics program, and to identify areas which need improvement. The annual audit scores are compared to the previous year’s scores to gauge success. The audit reviews many criteria which evaluate the ergonomics program infrastructure, assessment process, intervention process, proactive process and training programs. Even within an established program, effort is needed to maintain high scores. For example, training is often provided for each key stakeholder group (engineers, supervisors, employees, purchasing, Joint Health and Safety, and management) at the launch of the program. However, even within groups that might require minimal “refresher” training, staff turnover can cause a lower score, year-over-year, if the appropriate training is not provided to new staff.

A scoring system helps to track progress and identify areas that need to be improved. (Note that the audit is an optional component for this program; some clients evaluate their program internally. Therefore, the results presented below represent all of the clients who have conducted repeated audits under an ergonomics program.)

Overall Audit Scores		
	Audit score (Year)	Audit score (Year)
Client A	46% (2003)	82% (2008)
Client B	75% (2006)	86% (2009)
Client C	74% (2006)	71% (2008)

Table 1. Overall audit scores

The audit specifically includes one criterion which evaluates the level of awareness amongst production employees. Employees are asked to provide a description of what ergonomics is, and who they should go to if they have an “ergonomics concern”. The auditor (typically the ergonomist) scores the employees’ responses according to specific guidelines.

Awareness Scores		
	Audit score (Year)	Audit score (Year)
Client A	33% (2003)	100% (2008)
Client B	67% (2006)	83% (2009)
Client C	67% (2006)	67% (2008)

Table 2. Ergonomics awareness scores

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Clients who do audit their programs can quantify the success of their programs. However, even amongst those who do not conduct a formal audit can find other indicators of success. For example, many clients have launched a program with a specific, focussed goal of completing one type of assessment. Over time, as management and other stakeholders begin to buy-in, the ergonomist is invited to participate in more diverse projects. In a plant where the original goal was to complete physical demands descriptions, the ergonomist eventually becomes integrated into return-to-work, injury prevention, and, perhaps most importantly, the design process. Another key indicator is the willingness of employees from various stakeholder groups to approach the ergonomist. Ergonomists in established programs are easily recognised and approachable. A purchasing employee is more likely to ask the ergonomist to check out an order for a cost-saving measure that could have a potentially negative impact. Office employees ask for help in making adjustments to their workstations, even when the primary focus is on the production area.

Obviously, a program is truly successful if the musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) incidence rates decrease over time. Many of our clients have experienced increased and decreased production demands, layoffs or massive hires, any of which can confound the injury trends. The MSD incidence rate was not included as a specific parameter in the audit until recently. Two of our clients did review their injury records and the results were promising as shown in Table 3.

MSD Statistics		
	# of Injuries (Year)	# of Injuries (Year)
Client D	19 (2007-2008)	13 (2008-2009)
Client E	82 (2005)	67 (2007)

Table 3. MSD incidence rates

CONCLUSIONS

Launching an ergonomics program is often considered a significant effort, involving much fanfare and investment into employee awareness at the launch phase. However, without a plan to maintain that momentum after the initial launch, ergonomics programs typically fizzle away. Maintaining interest in ergonomics involves true management support on an ongoing, visible basis, continuous efforts to communicate with key stakeholders regarding projects, roles, and general awareness, and an annual review of how the program is doing. Our company has an

advantage in that we are able to develop and distribute awareness materials for many companies at one time. One to two days per month are typically dedicated to developing new awareness materials. A site ergonomist, or ergonomics coordinator, should be prepared to invest time to achieve these same goals.

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