

EDGE @ WORK

Strain of 24/7 work culture taking toll on our health

Ten years ago, for those who can remember that far back, the office was a kinder, gentler environment. That's the assessment of Diane Stinson, A Calgary ergonomics consultant who says the strain of today's 24/7 world is taking a terrible toll on the human body.

"A decade ago, we went home tired after a day's work," says Stinson. "Today, we are leaving the office with neck and shoulder pain, sore hands and wrists, and strained vision."

The reasons for these problems are diverse, a combination of factors that begin with the office cubicle, but extend far beyond the office. Some issues, an ill-fitting chair, for example, can be quickly adjusted. Others, such as a crack-the-whip corporate culture, may require a serious overhaul.

During the past 13 years, Stinson has visited hundreds of offices and job sites in her role as the president of HealthWorks, an ergonomics and injury prevention consulting company.

A major trend leading to injuries is the relentless push for productivity, she says. Workers today face numerous deadlines, skip their lunch breaks, and often sit glued to computer screens for three and four hours without moving. "That's just too long," says Stinson. "The research shows that for the discs and ligaments in our back, we shouldn't sit any longer than 50 minutes."

Adding to the mix is the office boss who works 14-hour days, and consciously, or subconsciously, makes employees feel guilty for taking breaks. This occurs, says Stinson, despite research evidence that shows regular breaks can increase productivity and reduce mistakes.

Our workstations are another problem. In the '90s, workers were more likely to move about the office, she says. We'd get up to use the fax machine, fetch printouts and paper supplies. Now that the cubicle is self-contained, there is no need to move about.

While our workstations may be more technically efficient, office furniture in many companies hasn't kept pace. Or, workers haven't been taught the proper way to adjust



Dave Lazarowych, Business Edge

Diane Stinson says workspace improvements are badly needed.

their chairs, how to sit in a neutral position, and, most importantly, how to use their mouse and other pointing devices.

Stinson guesses that 90 per cent of the people she has helped previously worked in chairs that were not properly adjusted to their bodies.

Also, in some occupations, people use computers for 90 per cent of their working day, and 90 per cent of that time they may be operating a mouse improperly.

"Someone doing an accounting function for example, who is right-hand dominant, will use a calculator, their mouse, and numeric keypad all with their right hand," says Stinson.

If the person isn't in the correct position, or they are gripping the mouse too firmly, the repetitive movements can cause great stress and damage.

But it's not just the office causing grief. Stinson suggests that people scrutinize their behavior at home and on the road.

For example, she says, more women than men work on computers - mostly for word-processing tasks. In their non-work time, many of these same women enjoy hobbies such as knitting and crafts, or do household chores that require the use of their hands and arms.

"Tissues people have used all day aren't getting a chance to be repaired at home," says Stinson, who holds a B.Sc. in kinesiology, an M.Sc. in physical education and is a member of the Association of Canadian Ergonomists.

Even the car is a concern.

"In Calgary, we now have the problem of people sitting longer in traffic, under stress. Or I have clients going to the oil fields who are sitting in a car for five to seven hours straight."

Mini "muscle breaks" during the day go a long way to providing relief. And some trends in technology are helping, including:

- Equipment that gives people the option to sit or stand while working. (Studies show workers will choose two 30-minute segments each day to stand when they have the option, which eases strain on the back);
- Voice-recognition software is being developed to reduce the reliance on pointing devices;
- Flat panel screens are proving to be much easier on the eyes and reduce glare.

Stinson's interest in the field began in the late 1980s when she was the western regional director for ParticipAction, helping companies with their fitness, health and safety needs.

In 1988, she started her own business, developing programs for multi-national companies and small businesses alike.

"The goal of ergonomics is to look at how to minimize the stresses on the individual. Maximize productivity and minimize stresses."

The two goals are compatible, she says. We just have to be smarter about the way we work.

Web watch: www.ace-ergocanada.ca
(Mike Dempster can be reached at miked@businessedge.ca)



MIKE DEMPSTER
Business Edge