

Risk Manager

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Ergonomic considerations

As a business owner, did you know you can take the lead in cutting costs by establishing an ergonomics program? Ergonomics is the science of fitting job tasks, equipment, tools, and the work environment to workers' needs.



Why wait until you have a major **workers compensation** claim on your hands before implementing an ergonomics program? Work-related injuries and illnesses cost employers billions of dollars each year. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, 2003) estimates that as many as one-third of these claims are linked to **musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)**—such as carpal tunnel syndrome—caused by repetitive stress or sustained physical exertion. MSDs are known collectively as **cumulative trauma disorders**.

Where to Begin

To start tackling ergonomic concerns, appoint a committee represent-

ing management, as well as relevant departments such as human relations, engineering, and health and safety. Be sure to include employees from various work areas that perform repetitive or hazardous tasks. One of the committee's main tasks should be to draft a policy outlining the program's objectives. They should also require progress reports for ergonomics projects, and review them once the projects are underway.

Identifying potential hazards is not difficult. Records of injuries, accidents, absenteeism, and workers compensation claims can shed light on problem areas. Also, solicit input from employees—a lot can be learned from workers' complaints. Another approach is simply to observe employees at work. Many workplace conditions that lead to musculoskeletal disorders are easily spotted. For instance, check that workstations have proper height, depth, and clearances. In addition, note jobs that involve repetitive operations, or require excessive force or awkward body positions.

Safe Work Procedures

Teach employees to recognize the early signs and symptoms of cumulative trauma disorders. Train them to be aware of ergonomic principles and to follow safe work procedures. Review workstation setups and redesign them with safer, more comfortable equipment, if necessary, to reduce the amount of physical strain they cause. Allow workers who perform repetitive tasks to rotate duties or take periodic breaks.

If you witness signs of hazardous conditions, or receive employee complaints, obtain medical assistance immediately. Untreated symptoms may progress to more serious conditions. The sooner a problem is detected, the better it can be managed.

Implementing a program of sound ergonomic practices *before* problems occur can save thousands of dollars in workplace-related disorders and workers compensation premiums. And, it can improve productivity, as well. For more information, feel free to give us a call.



Did You Know

Indoor air quality and your business

Indoor air quality (IAQ) is a growing concern for many companies. Whether you're a business owner or building owner, you should take potential IAQ problems seriously. If *your* workers or occupants have complained about air quality, they could be among the tens of millions of individuals the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, 2003) estimates are at risk for IAQ-related illnesses.



If left uncorrected, these problems could prove costly for your business. This could result in lost productivity, increased absenteeism, and decreased employee morale. In addition, you should be aware that if a serious problem arises, employees might turn to litigation.

Even New Buildings can be at Risk

The major causes of unhealthy indoor air are: 1) poorly designed, operated, and maintained air conditioning and ventilation systems; 2) unintended or poorly-planned building uses; and 3) air pollutants, which may arise from building materials, pressed wood products, furnishings, cleaning supplies, paints, adhesives, copy machines, photography and print shop chemicals, and pesticides. As such, even clean,

attractive, new, or remodeled buildings can still be at risk.

With the potential for poor air quality so pervasive, what can you do to make *your* workplace environment safe? Here are some steps you can take:

- Keep a record of all reported health complaints.
- Be alert for clusters of similar health problems. Contact your state or local health authorities to discuss the symptoms and possible causes.

- For help in identifying, correcting, and preventing IAQ problems, and to obtain free, printable copies of *Building Air Quality:*

A Guide for Building Owners and Facility Managers and *Building Air Quality Action Plan* visit the Environmental Protection Agency's website, www.epa.gov.

- For a health hazard evaluation, contact the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) at www.cdc.gov/niosh.
- If you hire a professional company to conduct a building investigation, make sure they have experience identifying and solving air quality problems in situations similar to yours.

By meeting IAQ problems head-on, you'll be taking action that will not only help control potential health hazards, but will also contribute to a safer and more productive work environment.

Considering Coverage? Call Us

Safeguarding your business from loss is a primary reason for business insurance. But, do you ever wonder if there are incidents that your basic **business owner's policy** won't cover? For example, if your business is in a flood zone and, therefore, becomes flooded, chances are you will not be covered. For information on additional coverage, give us a call. One of our qualified insurance professionals would be glad to assess your coverage needs.

Workplace Injury Facts

Protecting employees from on-the-job injuries may be a difficult task, but it is extremely important. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, 2002) reported that workplace injuries are responsible for more than 6,000 deaths each year. Over eight times as many workers die from "illnesses caused by exposure to workplace hazards." Non-fatal workplace injuries affect over 6 million workers each year.

Computers on the Job

Computers have become a part of our daily lives, at home and especially at work. According to recent information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001), almost 73 million people—over half of all people employed—use a computer at work. Of those employees who use computers daily, approximately 40% either use e-mail, or are connected to the Internet.

For Your Information



Dealing with Disaster

Whether or not you are prepared in the event of a disaster may mean the difference between a smooth return to “business as usual,” or a chaotic and frustrating hiatus. The Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) has developed the *Open for Business—Disaster Recovery Plan* to help small business owners prepare for a disastrous event. To obtain your copy of the *IBHS Open for Business—Disaster Recovery Plan* contact the IBHS at 1-866-657-IBHS (4247).

Sun Safety

If you work outside, the warm sunshine may even make a tough day at the “office” seem more bearable. However, if you are not careful, overexposure to the sun—particularly in the summer months—can be more of a work hazard than a relief. For details on how you and your employees can stay protected from the dangers of the sun check out the National Safety Council online at www.nsc.org.

Sick Building Syndrome

According to the American Lung Association, “sick building syndrome” is a condition, “in which occupants of large buildings experience acute health and comfort effects that appear to be linked to time spent in a building, but no specific illness or cause can be identified.” To learn more about sick building syndrome and how it can affect your employees and your business, visit the American Lung Association’s website at www.lungusa.org. You can also refer to the article “Indoor air quality and your business” on page 2.

Using life insurance to solve business problems

Life insurance is an important feature of many business arrangements. While most business owners are familiar with providing life insurance as an employee benefit, many may not fully appreciate the variety of other business uses that are available. Here are some of the more common ways you can use life insurance to help benefit and solidify your business:

Funding Buy-Sell Agreements. Under a typical buy-sell agreement, business partners agree to purchase each other’s interest if one of them dies. Life insurance can be a cost-effective method of funding this type of agreement provided you and your partner are insurable. And, if you purchase **cash value insurance**, you can use the accumulated cash value to buy out your partner’s share if he or she retires or becomes disabled.

Providing an Employee Benefit. Life insurance is a basic component of many employee benefit packages. A good example is a traditional **employee group term plan**, which generally covers most employees. You can also use life insurance to enhance the benefits of select employees who are vital to the success of your business. In many instances, this death benefit coverage can be provided at little cost to the select employee.

Insuring Key Employees. The death of a key employee can create a number of financial pressures for a business: revenues may be affected; customers must be assured business operations will continue; and a replacement must be recruited and trained. **Key person life**

insurance can provide funds to help meet all these needs without jeopardizing your business operations or cash flow.

Insurance in Qualified Retirement Plans. Life insurance can generally be acquired within a company’s qualified retirement plan. Legal limits apply in general, and some may be specific to whether the plan is a **defined contribution plan** or a **defined benefit plan**.

Guaranteeing Business Loans. Owners of new or growing businesses may face difficulty in obtaining business loans. Lenders want to be assured that loans

will be repaid, even if you die unexpectedly. **Business credit life insurance** may make it easier to obtain financing by guaranteeing repayment with a life insurance policy. As with all life insurance purchases, it is a good idea to check the ratings of the carrier as published by an independent rating agency.

Tax Benefits and Consequences

Life insurance presents business owners with many opportunities for tax savings, but has the potential for negative tax consequences as well. It is important to understand the issues upfront. Careful planning is essential to maximize the tax benefits, and minimize—or eliminate—any tax consequences. For more information give us a call. One of our qualified insurance professionals would be glad to discuss your business options.





Commercial umbrella for when it pours!

What would you do if you arrived at work one day and were told that your business will be the defendant in an upcoming lawsuit? Suddenly, there could be large legal fees looming in the future, as well as a possible jury award for medical expenses, pain and suffering, or any of a number of grievances. On top of that, you might have to overcome negative publicity and lost time from work while you and your employees appear in court.

Sometimes, when it rains, it pours. That's why a **commercial umbrella liability policy** is essential for so many businesses. A commercial umbrella provides protection in million dollar increments above the required liability

limits of your **commercial general liability, auto liability, and workers compensation** policies.

How the Umbrella Works

Umbrella coverage takes effect when the limits of your underlying policies have been exhausted. You may be required to carry certain minimum amounts of insurance in these underlying policies before qualifying for an umbrella. However, the cost for your umbrella coverage will be lower if your primary deductibles or limits are higher.

Regular Reviews are Important

Things can happen over time that may influence the amount of umbrella

coverage you need. For instance, changes in your underlying policies, such as new **exclusions** or **limitations**, may leave gaps in your umbrella coverage. Also, inflation and ever increasing legal awards often necessitate an increase in coverage. Fortunately, any additional million dollar increments in coverage will cost less than the first million.

Your primary insurance may not always provide the protection you need—especially when an expensive court settlement is involved. Please contact us for more information on how a commercial umbrella can help protect your business from lawsuits and other catastrophic losses.

“Keys” to easing keyboard strain

Many employees sit in one position in front of a computer screen and make repetitive motions for prolonged periods of time. As a result, over 300,000 **cumulative trauma disorders**—injuries caused by repetitive motion—are reported each year. This is

according to the most recent data by the National Safety Council (NSC, 1999).

Such injuries can have detrimental effects on productivity as a worker may slow down or become

incapacitated for some length of time and even require medical attention and therapy to alleviate the pain. Between loss of productivity and higher insur-

ance premiums, it is well worth it for management *and* employees to look for solutions to computer keyboard strain.

Awareness is Step One

Paying attention to how employees sit and arrange their work areas can be a vital first step in alleviating physical stress. Here are some tips to help *increase* comfort and *decrease* strain for employees who work at a computer keyboard:

- Keep feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.
- Position the trunk and head vertically, thighs parallel to the floor and bend knees to approximately a 90 degree angle.

- Maintain elbows at keyboard height, also bent to a 90 degree angle and with forearms parallel to the floor.
- Keep wrists almost straight; rest fingers comfortably on the keyboard.
- Take breaks. Maintaining a fixed position for an excessively long duration may result in aches or discomfort. It's important to frequently get up and stretch or vary work duties so the employee has a chance to step away from the keyboard.

Smart management knows the value of encouraging employees at computer stations to vary their tasks and take short breaks every few hours. Taking the right steps to avoid keyboard stress can be “key” to a more productive workplace, one in which both management and employees will benefit.

