

Customizing a Stretch Program



In ergonomics, it is often the simplest and easiest solutions which are the most effective in combatting risk. We see this is the case of repetitive motion and awkward postures, the two most common ergonomic hazards in the workplace. Oftentimes employers want to combat the problem of injury, but are not able to eliminate an important component of the job. A stretch program, customized for your workforce, might do the trick.

Here are some tips to consider when looking to customize a stretch program for your organization:

Step 1: Identify the Specific Job Demands

Anyone can hand out a stretch card and tell employees to begin stretching to relieve discomfort. But is this effective? Many experts have weighed in on the pros and cons of stretching in the workplace and have come to different conclusions. However, one thing is certain – if you tailor a program specifically for the job, employees are more likely to embrace the concept because they see its relevance. To do this, one must begin by identifying the demands of the job. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do my employees fall into a variety of job classifications?
- Should I approach a stretch program for the whole organization or a particular group to start?
- What are the job tasks and physical demands associated with them?

Identifying the type of job tasks that are being conducted by your employees and then tailoring specific stretches to those tasks will offer the most effective remediation against muscle fatigue and overuse. It is important to take a close look at the physical demands of the tasks to better understand their impact on the body and how to approach reducing risk of repetitive motion, strains, sprains and other types of injuries.

Step 2: Identify the Existing Ergonomic Risk

Before engaging developing your stretch program, you must identify the existing ergonomic risk that is present in the job. Once you have documented the job tasks and physical demands, it is important to identify the risk in terms of repetition, forceful exertion, exposure to vibration, etc. Having a process to analyze the data collected will enable you to look at the details with a more objective eye and better categorize the ergonomic risks.



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There are many data capture tools used in the world of ergonomics. Should you use one of these methods, make sure that you fully understand the method of data collection as well as the process analysis of this data. If a tool is too complex, you may not get the desired outcome for your project.

Step 3: Correlate the Identified Risk to the Remediation – Stretching!

Not all ergonomic risk can or should be remediated with a stretching program. It is important to look carefully at the ergonomic risks present in your workplace and determine which could most benefit from stretches. It will be these job tasks for which stretches should be designed. Once again, employees will see the value in a stretch program if they see its correlation to the job they perform. When looking at whether stretches would be beneficial for certain ergonomic risks, ask yourself such questions as:

- Will the implementation of a stretch break help to decrease the ergonomic risk?
- What are industry best practices?
- Will such things as cycle times be affected by implementing a stretch break?

These are all extremely important details to review when it comes to implementing a stretch program. You want to make sure that the implementation of such a program makes sense and is effective in achieving the goal, which is ***reducing risk in the workplace.***

Step 4: Identify the Stretches

The final piece of the program should be identification and selection of appropriate stretches. For office workers, stretches may focus more on the upper extremities whereas a field technician might benefit from full body stretches. Correlating the stretches to the job tasks will add extra “punch” to the program and show the employees clearly when a stretch break would benefit them. Utilizing photos of individuals engaged in stretching that are taken at your facility or utilizing your workspaces can also add extra value as employees can better relate to the images. And providing a variety of materials for employees to reference as well as a training course on the benefit of stretch programs are other ways to bring education and awareness to your workforce.



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Summary

All in all, a customized stretch program can assist in reducing ergonomic risk, minimize injuries in the workplace and help to create more productive employees!

Pelletier & Associates specializes in assisting organizations in the delivery of ergonomics services. We provide ergonomics training and consulting services, as well as ergonomics policy and program development. Our experience spans 20+ years in disability management, workers' compensation and return-to-work environments. From office settings to manufacturing, Pelletier & Associates has the experience to help guide your organization to becoming a safer, more productive workplace.