

How to Establish an Ergonomics Policy

Proactive ergonomics efforts begin with having a solid written ergonomics policy. An ergonomics policy will help you to guide your program; it acts as your roadmap and helps you to address specific needs within your organization. Just as with an injury and illness prevention program, an ergonomics program will help to identify specifically what steps to take to deal with repetitive motion injuries in the workplace. Here are some starting points for creating your company's own ergonomics policy.



Step 1: Evaluate Your Organization's "Pain Points"

It is important to understand what is driving the need for ergonomics intervention in your work environment. This is valuable information to gather as it will help you garner upper management support for your policy and subsequent program. Take a moment and **evaluate** your company's source of "pain" in this area. Some areas to consider include:

- Are there a significant number of workers' compensation claims?
- Does your company want to focus on proactive intervention efforts before workers' compensation claims become a real source of problems? Often, companies spend so much time dealing with "fires" that they don't have time to really initiate prevention efforts.
- Is your organization changing? Whether moving locations, hiring new personnel, or even downsizing, change, whether positive or negative, may drive the need to look at employee workstations and behavior. Don't overlook the issues that may arise from these events.

On occasion, someone in upper management might state that ergonomics is a priority and leave the responsibility of addressing the particulars to someone else (like you). Again, identify the motivation behind the edict to help you gain valuable insight into how to structure your company's policy. If you understand the reasons why certain management decisions are made, you will be able to tap into those concerns and gain more support for your program!

Step 2: Review Your Company's Resources

Before establishing an ergonomics policy, you need to recognize all the resources you have at your disposal and how they can be utilized. Often, people mistakenly think that the only resource they have to rely on is themselves. As part of an organization, you may have more resources and assistance available than you realize. Especially when it comes to ergonomics, there is a certain amount of personal responsibility that goes along with maintaining proper working postures in the workplace. Because ergonomics is unique in this way, you can rely on external efforts and resources to help your program progress.



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Do you have administrative assistants? These individuals can be extremely valuable in helping you manage your program. Identify that individual's role and see how they could be a part of your company's ergonomics policy.

Can you rely on department managers to be the first line of defense in relation to ergonomics efforts? Being a manager or supervisor implies responsibility for employees; these are the individuals that are responsible for overseeing production and quality, but they are also the individuals who can spot safety issues. By identifying and training them as resources, you will have a team of people who can assist you in your efforts to manage ergonomic concerns.

Do you have vendors who can assist you? Often, ergonomic product and service vendors can assist your efforts to create a comprehensive program. Ask for demo equipment, ergonomics resources and use their expertise to create a solid plan.

Step 3: Lay Out a Communication Plan for Ergonomics Services

Once you've identified pain points and reviewed your resources, create a communication plan for ergonomics. It's great to have all of this information gathered, but if you have not clearly laid out a plan to communicate responsibilities and accomplish tasks, you will have a policy that sits in a drawer. **Make your policy action-oriented**; focus on whom does what and how information is disseminated. People will rely on that policy to guide them.

For example, how does an employee report an ergonomic issue? Does everyone just send an email to you? How can you get employees to take responsibility for their body and work environment and apply general ergonomics concepts? **Training employees** in basic ergonomic awareness is extremely valuable to enable them to learn what they need to do for themselves. Having employees attend training first can help cut down the "fix it for me" syndrome we see in many employees these days.

Once an ergonomic issue is reported, can a manager get involved as a second line of defense? In large organizations, it is difficult for one person (you) to attend to every ergonomic issue that arises; yet with no concrete policy outlined, others will not understand their role or responsibilities. Identifying managers and supervisors as the eyes and ears in the field who can provide guidance to employees and problem solve, can assist you in reaching as many people as possible. **Training managers and supervisors** in ergonomics is an excellent way to use the resources you have at your disposal and expand the reach of your program.



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Step 4: Write It Down

Once you have completed your research, it's important to begin the process of writing up your policy. Having a clear outline of what to document helps lay the policy out in an easy-to-read, usable format.

Remember to include such components as:

- Program Responsibilities
- Worksite Evaluation
- Process and Responsibilities
- RMI Prevention and Control
- Training and Education

Outlining these areas will help those unfamiliar with ergonomics (and safety in general) to understand how to follow an ergonomics policy. Also including **workstation surveys and checklists** can go a long way to helping your employees - ergonomic champions - in the process of identifying and mitigating risk in the workplace.

Summary

In order to have an effective, well supported ergonomics program, you must first begin with an ergonomics policy that provides you and your organization with a road map to guide employees through the maze of issues and solutions. By clearly identifying your organization's needs, identifying your resources, creating a communication plan and having it all clearly documented, you are well on your way to establishing a proactive ergonomics program.

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.