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Size Matters: Forensic Ergonomics – A Virtual Solution to Assessing Employee Pain

With little more than a digital photo and a carefully crafted questionnaire, this medical sleuth can evaluate an employee's ergonomic situation and provide real-time assistance over the phone. One part private investigator, one part registered nurse, Barbara Fox, R.N., represents a new breed of nurse case manager.

Fox is an occupational health nurse specialist with additional training in ergonomics and safety. Part of her job includes investigating individual workstations that have led to employee injuries, a practice known as forensic ergonomics. Armed with the ergonomic standards established by Occupational Safety & Health Administration¹ and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health², Fox uses these guidelines to help deploy her unique approach, "virtual assessment," a technique that allows her to examine the scene of an incident and make evaluations remotely. Companies wavering on making a decision to hire an in-house ergonomic specialist might be interested in knowing that in Fox's opinion, size matters. The size of the company, that is.

Ergonomics or "ergo," is the science of work. It is an applied science that is more than 50 years old. The most ergonomically sophisticated companies include large manufacturers in the pharmaceutical, aerospace, computer and defense industries.



Ergo is identified as a crucial part of their injury prevention programs, in contrast to smaller companies that may recognize its value, but consider it merely an added expense. When considering to launch an ergo program, there are two worries that most companies share. First is the potential cost of equipment, even though studies show 40-70 percent of ergo problems can be an inexpensive fix.³ The second fear is that they will start an epidemic - if they make

adjustments for one employee, everyone will follow suit. Fox addresses these fears by demonstrating to employers that the answer is not always new equipment. "Many times it is a simple rearrangement of the workstation or correction of body posture," she says. "Education goes a long way in preventing epidemics."

According to Fox, most companies should have a trained professional available to conduct ergo evaluations versus following the do-it-yourself type of program found on the Internet. The decision to employ an in-house ergo specialist depends on several factors: the size of the company, the nature of the business, and the number of employees. Virtual assessments cost less and the benefits are more immediate. One disadvantage, however, is that pictures do not always show the entire workstation.

The decision to hire an ergo specialist can be daunting. For companies with the right set of circumstances, virtual assessments should be a top-of-mind solution for employers to keep their employees fit and healthy.

¹ OSHA: *Effective Ergonomics: Strategy for Success*. www.osha.gov

² NIOSH: *Ergonomics Standards. Ergonomics Programs and Interventions*. www.cdc.gov

³ Abeln, Susan H. (1999) *CTD problem-solving: There is a low cost creative answer*. *Workers' Comp Cost Control Report*, Vol.8, No.8.