Eight cost-free steps to improve workstation ergonomics

By Becky Roberts

One of our many roles as support techs is that of relationship counselor. It's our responsibility to proactively help maintain a healthy relationship between users and their computers—literally. Users need a comfortable workstation setup that isn't going to cause them any pain or physical wear and tear.

I first became aware of this issue when, years ago—before "ergonomic" was in common parlance—I overheard a secretary bemoaning the lack of chiropractic coverage in our health plan. She explained that ever since her promotion to executive secretary she'd been suffering from chronic neck pain. In this particular case, although it would have been easy to look no further than the executive himself as the source of the pain, I decided to check out the sufferer's workstation. The cause of the pain was immediately apparent: Her workstation consisted of an L-shaped desk, with the keyboard and mouse on one leaf and the monitor on the corner. The desk was too shallow to accommodate the monitor and keyboard, so she was spending eight hours a day typing with her head and neck rotated 45 degrees. As a temporary solution, until money could be applied to the problem, we pulled the workstation out a few inches from the wall to make enough space for both the monitor and keyboard. The secretary's neck pain was gone a few days later.

In a perfect world, we would all have ergonomically correct workstations, with soft lighting, a gentle breeze blowing, the scent of fresh rain falling on a spring meadow, and the music of our choice playing discretely in the background. Until that day arrives, however, here are a few cost-free ideas for aiding our users' comfort.

1 Start looking at your users' feet when they're sitting at their desks. Are they able to sit with their *entire* sole on the floor or footrest? If not, help them adjust their chair or find an old phone book or NetWare manual to rest their feet on.

2 Take a look at the arms. The forearms should be parallel to the floor with the wrists and elbows in a neutral position or angled slightly down. It they aren't, the position can be corrected by adjusting the chair height or lowering/raising the keyboard tray.

3 Measure the distance from eyes to monitor. Ideally, this should be in the 18- to 24-inch range. Moving the monitor on the desk and adjusting the position of the keyboard tray and chair are simple ways to achieve this. Sometimes changing the resolution of the display also helps, as people will lean toward their monitor if they have difficulty reading the text. Wearing reading glasses can also help some people.

4 Check the vertical position of the monitor. The topmost line displayed on it should be at eye level. This position can be corrected by raising/lowering the chair or by standing the monitor on appropriate size books. My monitor is currently reposing on an ISO 9001 Universal Software binder.

5 Look at the area around the monitor and keyboard. What items are used on a regular basis? Are they all within a 16-inch radius? Constantly reaching for items outside of this radius can lead to neck and shoulder pain. Help your users rearrange their desk.

6 Observe mouse usage. When mousing, the hand should be relaxed with the wrist in a neutral position and the mouse as close to the body as possible. White-knuckled death grips on the mouse are rarely necessary and tend to promote carpel tunnel syndrome, neck pain, and very unhappy mice.

7 Be wary of wrist rest usage. It's generally not a good idea to support the wrists on anything while typing, especially on a nice squishy support. Wrist rests should be used only to rest between bouts of typing.

8 Advise your users to take frequent breaks from computing. They should stand up, stretch, get coffee, do jumping jacks, water their plants, hunt for chocolate—anything different from sitting and staring at the computer—at *least* once an hour.

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- Cornell University Ergonomics Web
- HealthyComputing.com
- Dr. Charles Daniels, D.C.: Living with computers (chiropractic advice)
- University of Waterloo Office/Computer Ergonomics
- Ask ErgoWorks—the ergonomic consultants

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