



Ergo Tip of the Month - March 2007

Managers and Ergonomists: Can't we all just get along?

Businesses can only exist if they break even or generate a profit. Businesses that consistently lose money eventually go broke and close. Because of this basic fact, businesses do the things they do for one of three reasons. The first reason is "It's the right thing to do." Few business decisions are driven by this reasoning. The second reason is, "There is a cost benefit to doing it." This is the reasoning behind most of the actions taken by a business. The third reason businesses do something is, "There is a penalty for not doing it."

This situation often results in conflict when ergonomic professionals are managed by a non-ergonomist. Ergonomists by definition have an interest in the well being of other people. They are educated and trained to mitigate risks associated with human interface with their environment. Protecting people is the ergonomist's passion. The cost of making things safe is a lesser part of the equation to them because they just know that it is the "right thing to do." The non-ergonomist manager, on the other hand, needs to understand the business case that supports the proposed action.

An ergonomist measures success by reducing injuries and discomfort in the workplace. The manager is interested in reducing costs associated with injuries, lost time, reduced productivity or compromised quality. Although these goals may initially seem in conflict, closer examination may reveal that they are, in fact, perfectly aligned.

To better understand this phenomenon, we need to see things from each others' perspective. Managers have a set of measures. Costs, budgets, and productivity drive decisions. If an ergonomist wants to implement a change to prevent an injury that can't be seen, and has varying probabilities of occurring, it may seem counter to anything the manager may be measured on. The manager may be facing financial and/or political risks for allocating resources to a solution for an issue that may not surface for years to come.

One way of putting mitigating ergonomic risk in perspective for both groups is to look at it like this: Approximately 30% of all workplace injuries can be attributed to ergonomic related issues. Let's think about 30% for a minute. The average person pays 30% of their income in taxes. Everyone pays taxes, the ergonomist, the manager, the engineer; it is common ground. What would you spend to not pay any taxes? Would you spend half of that amount to not pay the full amount? Sure you would. Would you spend more than that to not pay it? You probably wouldn't. When thought about it in this way, everyone wins by lowering the "injury tax." By the way, putting a value on the quality of life for someone who has incurred an injury that will last them the rest of their



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life may be difficult, but retaining skilled employees can reduce training costs, recruiting costs, lost productivity costs, etc.

In summary, a business is managed by the numbers. That is the reality of it. Managers must understand that 30% of their injury costs aren't being addressed if they don't consider ergonomic risks. Trust your ergonomists: sometimes you have to accept that the right thing to do is the right thing to do. Ergonomists, respect your managers and understand that managers have limited resources and have to live another day to keep the business viable. For both, it has to be accepted that making something a little better is still better, and that tomorrow you will have the chance to make it even better yet! Continuous improvements result in improved profits and better working conditions.

Come see us at Booth 408 at the Applied Ergo Conference March 12 - 15, 2007
Intercontinental Dallas Hotel Addison, Texas, Booth 408.

Catch our presentations on **Managing Ergonomists for the Non-Ergonomist Manager**: 3:30 p.m. Wednesday March 14th Ergonomic Program Track. Also our Vendor Track Presentation: **Digital Human Models for Ergonomics and Beyond** on March 13th, 8:30 a.m.

Sandalwood Enterprises is a consulting firm that specializes in Ergonomics, Process Optimization, and Information Management. The Ergo Tip of the Month is offered to our customers and friends for the benefit of the Ergonomics community.

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