

Office Ergonomics – in plain language



Under Health and Safety regulations brought into force in the early and mid nineties, employers have to carry out assessments of all their workstations on installation or and when there is any significant change, identify and rectify any problems, and train the users in the correct use of their workstations.

The reality is that UK office environments still range from excellent to diabolical. As regulations alone have not transformed the office, the following Office Workers Guerrilla Guide may help...

- Make sure you move. If you sit down all day, or stay in the same posture for long periods, you **will** get aches and pains. The best tool to help you is a chair that actively encourages unconscious movement whilst you are sitting. If you haven't got one, whinge to your employer. Argue that you will be more productive if you are truly well seated. The latest office seating standards now formally stress the importance of movement and variation, so use this as a cudgel if necessary!
- Take responsibility for moving yourself. Stand up to take some telephone calls. Position reference materials so that you have to get up from time to time. Go for a walk at lunchtime.
- Check your posture when you are using your keyboard. If you are hunched forwards, your neck and shoulder muscles will be working constantly to support the weight of your head. If you don't want neck and shoulder pain, keep upright or slightly reclined. A chair which allows the seat to tilt forward will help: pulling your chair right up to your desk and reclining so your back is firmly supported is another option.
- Try and keep your wrists straight when you are keying. Whatever you do, don't rest your wrists on the edge of your desk and key with your wrists angled up. Doing this may inflame the tendons that run through the carpal tunnel of your wrist, they in turn may swell and put pressure on the nerve that runs through the same tunnel and Bingo – you become another RSI statistic (more correctly albeit less snappily, a WRULDS statistic – Work Related Upper Limb DisorderS)
- If you suffer from reflections on your VDU screen, try moving or angling your screen. If you are next to a window, try and work parallel to it: if you face the window you will suffer from glare: if you have the window behind you it is likely to cause reflections. Push if necessary to get your workstation moved or rearranged. Don't be fobbed off with a 'screen filter' if the reflections are really bad. Make sure you keep your screen clean. If your screen is coated in dust and gunge you have little right to complain if your eyes feel tired from the effort of peering through the grime!
- Make sure your keyboard is in front of your screen. If your screen is offset to one side, and you are working with your neck twisted, you risk neck and shoulder problems. Either press for a Corner Desk which provides you with separate keying and writing areas, or if you are still using one of the large old CRT screens, campaign for an LCD flat screen – which will be shallow enough to enable you to position it comfortably on most shapes of desk. LCD screens have so dropped in price that cost really is no longer a barrier.
- If your screen seems to flicker, camp in the doorway of your IT Manager until he/she fixes it. Some people are more sensitive to flicker than others, and many screens are set at a lower 'refresh' rate than they can provide. Simply changing the setting can eliminate flicker at zero cost (N.B. LCD screens don't suffer from flicker – only CRTs).

A good chair is very important. A desk of an appropriate shape and size for the work you carry out is important. A good monitor is important. But how you use the tools you have is just as important as the tools themselves.