Remote Ergonomics Assessments: Process and Benefits

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At the beginning of 2020, many employers had only a handful of remote employees. With the COVID-19 pandemic and associated shutdowns, many companies transitioned office staff to working remotely.

An October Gallup poll found a substantial portion of Americans who started working from home in April and May had since returned to their workplaces; 33% were “always” working remotely in October, down from 51% in April,¹ which was the height of business restrictions to that point. The third surge of COVID-19 in November and December may totally reverse that. States are responding to hospitalizations and fatalities that are as high or higher than the first surge in spring 2020. Along with reductions in the percent-of-capacity allowed in stores, churches, and other public buildings, employers are again reducing the number of employees on worksites to reduce infection risks.

Research has shown that remote work can bring many benefits to employees, such as an improved work-life balance, enhanced job performance, and heightened productivity. However, it also comes with risks, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration still holds employers responsible for employee safety even when working from home.
Office staff could potentially sustain musculoskeletal disorders (MSD), such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, or even back pain, if they don’t have appropriate office equipment at home, including adjustable chairs and desks that help achieve healthful neutral postures.

To address these issues, employers may provide ergonomics assessments to remote employees to ensure they have at-home workstations that meet basic ergonomics best practices. These assessments are quite economical, especially when weighed against the duration with which employees may be working from home due to COVID-19 and the savings that could be achieved through injury prevention.

Our organization has been providing remote ergonomic assessments since 2010. If a remote ergonomics assessment does not result in reduction of discomfort, an on-site assessment can be provided. This has only occurred twice in the past five years, demonstrating the effectiveness of the remote ergonomic assessment process. The pandemic has increased work-from-home arrangements and, with it, the need for remote assessments. Based on feedback, employers find the service useful and supervisors believe the assessments reduce discomfort, increase productivity, and help work-from-home employees to stay engaged.

**Setting Up a Remote Ergonomics Assessment**

When an employer needs an ergonomics assessment, gathering and providing the proper information upfront is important for a successful outcome. This typically involves filling out a request form and submitting it to the ergonomics service provider. At that time, it’s also helpful if the employee can submit photos of his or her workstation. These photos will enable the ergonomics specialist to get a preview of any ergonomic issues.

Some helpful workstation photos include:

- profile shots of the workstation from both the right and left sides showing the seated posture with the chair and monitor in the photo;
- a photo of the employee’s hands and wrists while using the keyboard and mouse; and
- if the employee is experiencing any discomfort, pictures should be taken to capture activity resulting in that discomfort.

**During the Remote Ergonomics Assessment**

The ergonomics request is typically accompanied with photos and, according to the employee’s needs and preference, a phone call or web-based video conference can be used for the assessment.

Many ergonomics specialists utilize the Rapid Office Strain Assessment (ROSA) to conduct these evaluations. ROSA helps quantify risks associated with computer work and establish a plan to minimize employee discomfort. During an assessment, the ergonomics specialist should ask questions to understand the employee’s work habits, postures, and any related discomfort. The
specialist can also educate about neutral posture, equipment adjustment, and work habits to avoid discomfort and injury.

After the assessment, a report will identify the risk factors, recommendations to reduce risks, and equipment that may assist. Ergonomics specialists advise employees on proper use of available equipment. If needed, they can provide unbiased equipment recommendations to promote a proper neutral posture.

**Common Ergonomics Issues**

Through pictures or videoconferencing with employees, ergonomics specialists get a view of the employee’s workstation to detect ergonomic issues. For example, an employee’s monitor is situated too far from where the employee is seated. They may ask, “Do you find yourself leaning forward throughout the day to see things on your screen?”

They may detect when a workstation lends itself to inappropriate seated posture, especially for a particular body type. Ergonomics specialists might say, “I notice your chair is high and your feet are dangling; do you find yourself scooting forward, so your feet touch the floor?” In this case, a footrest or box could support the person’s feet.

If the employee is using a kitchen table for a workstation, the table may be too high depending on the employee’s height. Ergonomics specialists might ask, “Do you have a chair that raises and a footrest to use?” Otherwise, a clamp-on articulating keyboard and mouse tray could be installed beneath the table to lower the keyboard and mouse to an appropriate height for the person’s body dimensions.

These days many remote employees use laptops. However, using a laptop is not conducive to good seated posture. Ergonomics specialists often recommend a separate keyboard and mouse and to raise the laptop, so the screen is aligned with the employees’ eyes when seated with their back against the chair.

Currently, sit-to-stand desks are highly touted as ergonomics solutions — if used properly. Employees might think if they feel discomfort when sitting, they need a sit-to-stand desk. However, while changing from sitting to standing during the day has benefits, if employees return to a bad seated posture, they will likely continue to have the same discomfort. Even before suggesting a sit-stand desk solution, an ergonomics specialist will ensure the employee has a well-aligned seated posture.

No matter what type of workstation is used, movement is key. Employees should switch from sitting to standing one to two times per hour totaling up to 16 times per day.

Remote ergonomics assessments can benefit employers and employees alike in four ways.
1) Prevent Injuries from Inappropriate Workstation Setup.

Ergonomics provide the best outcomes when used as a preventive measure. Ideally, perform an ergonomics assessment upfront to ensure employees have well-configured workstations that support proper neutral posture. The second best option is to perform an assessment when an employee experiences some discomfort but has not yet sustained an injury.

If companies have transitioned staff to work remotely during COVID-19 but haven’t provided assessments, they may still want to consider doing so. This is true especially if they anticipate extending COVID-19 shutdowns, or plan to use remote work as a long-term solution beyond the pandemic.

Another injury reduction strategy for employers: work with an ergonomics specialist to develop a list of suggested equipment and ergonomic best practices for remote workers. This list would address common ergonomic issues found in a home office, as well as include solutions for laptop use, input devices (e.g. keyboard and mouse), sit-to-stand best practices, proper seating, along with stand-alone desks. Make arrangements to avoid employees carrying or installing heavy items to prevent additional hazards in a home office.

2) Make an ADAAA Accommodation.

For an employee with an impairment, an employer can use ergonomics to support the ADAAA accommodation interactive process. Perhaps the employee needs a certain type of technology, such as voice-to-text software, to reduce or eliminate typing or other movements that are difficult for the employee. Or an employee might need magnifier software to help them better see things on their computer monitor.

If employees have mobility issues — maybe they’re wheelchair-dependent — they might need a different type of desk, so they aren’t forced into bad posture while typing or using the mouse. In some cases a height-adjustable desk may be needed to accommodate the wheelchair.

3) For Injured Workers, Facilitate Stay at Work or a Safer, Faster Return to Work

It’s a common scenario: employees sustain work-related MSDs, take time off for treatment and recovery, but then they return to work (RTW) with no changes made to their workstations. Multiple factors cause MSDs, but if job duties or work environment are contributing factors — including at-home workstations — then employers should assess workstations to ensure employees aren’t coming back to the same scenario. Easy fixes, such as adjusting the height of a keyboard or using a different mouse, may enable a safe stay-at-work option or rapid RTW outcome.
4) Reduce COVID-19 Risks from an In-Person Ergonomics Assessment

In the past, large companies might have had a high number of onsite office employees in one location. An ergonomics specialist would come in and work with many employees in one day. However, this would require the specialist to go from desk to desk, helping employees adjust chairs and keyboard trays, often operating well inside six feet of distance.

Even when employers do bring office staff back, they are adopting COVID-19 safety measures, including employees working onsite fewer days per week to reduce the office population and prohibiting non-essential office visits. These companies can provide remote ergonomics assessments to employees — whether they’re at the office or still working remotely.

Ergonomics Beyond COVID-19

Stanford University economist Nicholas Bloom has said COVID-19 has become the catalyst for companies to enter a new “working-from-home economy,” which is likely to continue beyond the pandemic. Remote ergonomics assessments are a tool to help reduce employee discomfort, prevent injuries, increase productivity, and maintain a safe work environment whether employees are remote or onsite.