

OR-OSHA ergonomics consultants can help prevent injuries

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

For 20 years, unions have tried to get the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to require employer action to prevent ergonomic injuries — disorders like carpal tunnel and tendonitis that are caused by strain or repetitive motion in poorly designed work stations.

But workers' health is political, and the political system on this issue, as with many others, has been more responsive to big business than organized labor. Congress intervened in the late 1990s to prevent OSHA from implementing ergonomic requirements, and that legislation still stands.

However, that doesn't mean there haven't been incremental improvements. OSHA and its state-level counterparts have tried to make it easy for businesses to voluntarily implement ergonomic prevention — by making information available, and providing free consultations.

The state-run Oregon OSHA employs two staff members who go out

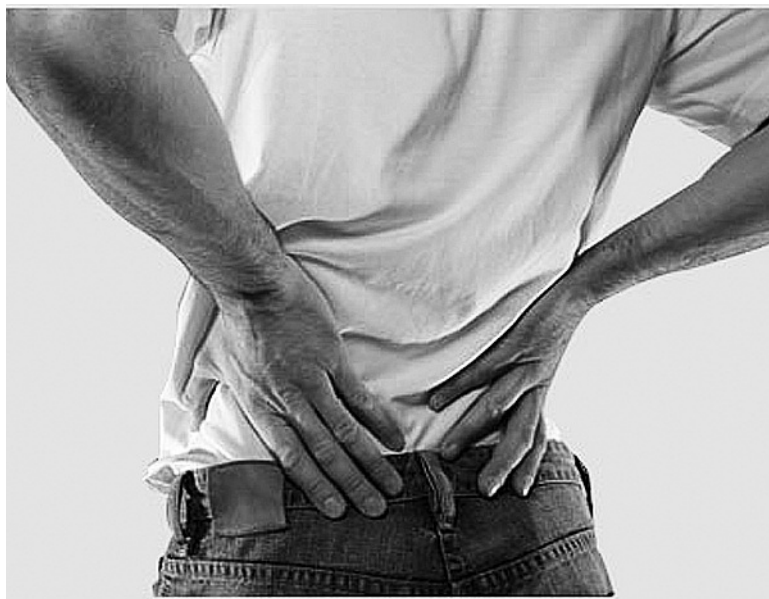
to offices, factories, bus yards, and other workplaces to look at work stations and make recommendations to employers on how to prevent musculoskeletal disorders, as ergonomic injuries are more properly known. [Technically, the term ergonomics is the science of fitting the work to the worker.]

The two, Nathan Sweet and Steve Morrissey, visit both union and non-union workplaces. They're members of Service Employees International Union Local 503. The Labor Press asked them to identify some of the most common ergonomic hazards they find. Unsurprisingly, it varies depending on the kind of workplace.

In jobs that require physical exertion, proper lifting is key. Back problems brought on by improper lifting are among the most common workplace injuries. Injuries happen when workers stoop to lift something heavy, or try to lift an object higher than their shoulders, or lift more than they should try, or twist or turn while they lift. Aging workers, in particular, may not realize the cumulative effect of excessive lifting.

In any lift, good body positioning can be the difference between success and a back injury. Bend your knees, keep your back straight, avoid twisting, and know where you're going, Sweet says.

At construction work sites, Sweet stresses the importance of planning the work, considering where lifts are going to happen, and making sure there's adequate space, enough employees to do the lift safely, and the right tools. In recent years, a multitude of new tools have been developed to eliminate ergonomic hazards — tools that lessen muscle strain, reduce the amount of hand force required, eliminate the need for awkward postures, and expose bodies to fewer sharp edges. Examples include extension poles for overhead work,



easy-hold gloves that attach to dry-wall mud pans, vacuum machines to help with lifting and placing heavy windows, wheeled kneelers to reduce knee and lower back stress for work done close to floors, and reduced-vibration power tools.

For office workers, good office chairs are vital — "good" meaning they are adjustable and in proper operating condition. Adjustable chairs are becoming much more common, but ironically, many office workers don't know how to use them properly.

"Make sure you understand how to adjust your seat," Sweet said. "In an office setting, most of the time, most of the people I speak with don't know how to adjust their office chair."

Washington's OSHA counterpart — the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries — has an on-line tutorial showing proper seat adjustment, at <http://1.usa.gov/e7D6pp>.

For driving occupations, posture makes a big difference, Morrissey says, and it's worth taking the time to properly adjust the seat, steering wheel, headrest, and rearview mirrors. Prolonged driving is associated with low back pain, and neck and shoulder trouble.

Ergonomic improvements aren't just the right thing to do — employers also save money when they prevent injuries, both directly through lower workers' compensation insurance premiums and indirectly through less lost

work time, less need to replace employees, and less productivity loss due to workers being in pain and discomfort. Not only that, but changes to prevent ergonomic injuries may also speed up workflow and increase productivity.

Since ergonomic injuries are often the result of cumulative stress, Sweet says it's important that employees report symptoms as early as possible — so that injuries can be prevented.

"Each workplace culture is unique, but [early reporting] is ideal," Sweet said. "It's a cost saver for everyone."

While Oregon OSHA's ergonomic consultations are free, it's the employer that has to request it. But union workers can give employers a nudge. And for workers or union reps who want to get up to speed on ergonomics, there are good online resources available.

- For construction workers, the Center for Construction Research and Training (formerly known as The Center to Protect Workers' Rights) created by the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department, has lots of information at its web site, www.cpw.com.

- OR-OSHA's ergonomics page has downloadable guides for office, construction, health care, and other workplaces: www.oshwa.org/subjects/ergonomics.html.

- Washington L&I has many ergonomic offerings among its online courses and videos at www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/TrainTools.



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