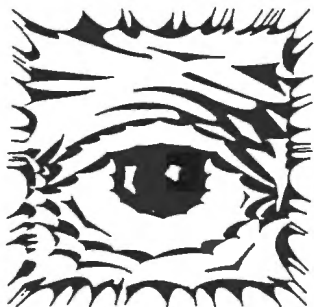


ERGONOMICS...

A New Approach To Health, Safety and Productivity in the Workplace

(Editor's Note: Ergonomics, the effort to make work less difficult, has become an important "science" in the area of health and safety on the job. The following article has been prepared by The Center to Protect Workers' Rights (the research arm of the Building and Construction Trades Department) and is designed to inform union members of on-going research and programs in this important field.)



Introduction

Ergonomics is becoming a popular word now. Cars are sold because of ergonomic features. Secretaries are suffering from wrist injuries because of ergonomic problems with their workstations. But what does it mean for construction workers?

Ergonomics generally means trying to change the workplace to fit the worker and prevent injuries. Ergonomists, however, often focus on the prevention of musculoskeletal injuries—that is, back injuries, wrist problems, knee and shoulder injuries. This is where most of the injuries lie and most of the costs for workers compensation.

About one-quarter to one-third of workplace injuries are ergonomic injuries and they represent about one-half of worker compensation costs.

Each back injury, for example, is estimated to cost contractors about \$9,000 in compensation and medical costs. Many workers also are being forced to retire early because they are injured or their bodies are worn out. Some construction workers can't remain on the job beyond their fifties due to the strenuous nature of their work.

So, if we think of ergonomics in construction as the prevention of back injuries and other sprains and strains, it is clearly an important area for contractors and workers on which to focus.

What Causes Ergonomic Injuries?

Ergonomic injuries are associated with several well-known risk factors. These include highly repetitive

tasks; large amounts of lifting, lowering or force; awkward postures; vibrating tools or equipment; cold stress; and uncomfortable tool grips.

These, of course, are common problems in construction work. Some people might argue that these are just part of the job and that nothing can be done about the problem. But some contractors have been able to reduce injury rates successfully through attention to ergonomics.

What Can Be Done To Prevent Ergonomic Injuries?

Prevention of ergonomic injuries involves identifying those jobs or tasks that place workers at higher risk of injury and then designing interventions or solutions that will reduce the risk.

High-risk jobs can be identified by looking at injury records such as OSHA logs and workers' comp reports; talking with insurance carriers; and by talking with workers about which jobs they find particularly difficult to do. Workers often can tell which jobs need to be looked at and they have the best ideas as to how jobs can be modified. The goal, of course, is to work smarter, not harder.

Checklists can be used to identify and keep track of ergonomic hazards in the

construction industry. Currently, the Center to Protect Workers Rights is working to develop a standardized checklist for use in identifying and tracking these hazards.

4 Tools and equipment also can be a source for ergonomic injuries. Vibrating pneumatic pavement breakers can cause injury to the hands, wrists and shoulders. Poor seating on construction vehicles can cause injury to workers from whole-body vibration. Using poorly designed tools in awkward positions or repetitively is another possible problem. Recently, tool manufacturers have begun paying attention to ergonomics in the design of tools to make them more comfortable to hold and use.

5 On-site exercise programs can help workers stretch their muscles before work and periodically during breaks. Such programs are believed to help prevent injury.

6 Worker training is another important element in injury prevention. Workers should be taught about the ways work can result in ergonomic injuries and how injuries can be prevented by redesigning jobs and work methods.

7 Preplanning of job tasks also can significantly reduce the possibility of injury. Each job should include a discussion of ergonomic considerations, including the delivery, handling and installation of materials.

8 Work methods and organization also can be an important factor in preventing injury. Often, injuries can occur when workers are rushed by production schedules that are unrealistic or by not having enough available help.

9 Return-to-work programs can help reduce injury problems as well. Statistics show that the longer workers are away from work—due to injury, sickness, vacation or other time off—the harder it is for them to return to work and safe work practices.

In Conclusion.

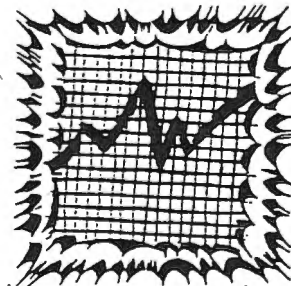
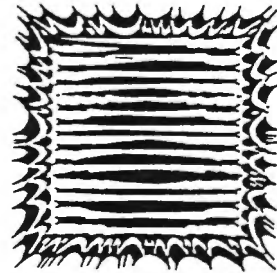
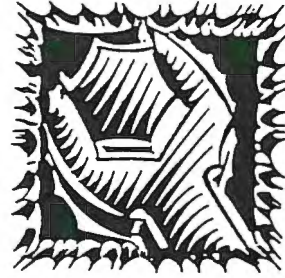
The Occupational Safety and Health Administration will be proposing new regulations to prevent ergonomic injuries later this year. Many of the elements discussed in this article are expected to be included.

Also, The Center to Protect Workers' Rights is engaged in an on-going research project, funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, to help identify high-risk tasks in construction and to figure out what can be done to further reduce the risk of injury on the job.

Several publications and a short video are available from the Center. For more information or publications, contact the:

*Center To Protect
Workers' Rights
(202) 962-8490.*

The Center also has funded a resource center at the University of Iowa to collect information about ergonomic problems and solutions in construction. A bibliography of available information may be obtained by contacting Mike Olson at (319) 335-4617.

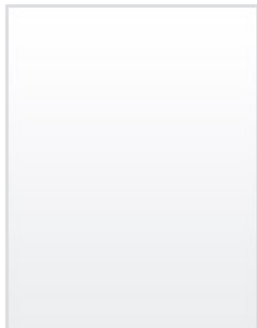




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