



The Potential Downside of Quiet Productivity

by Peter Scala

Having great employees has an unrecognized downside. Every organization wants to have hard-working, highly motivated employees who want to keep working and making money. But workers who “suck it up,” may not be paying attention to what their bodies are telling them. They may compensate for their discomfort in one part of their body by straining another part of their body. Worse, they may intentionally ignore their problems in order to keep the work and money flowing.

Stoic employees who do not complain do not provide valuable feedback. You might not find out until years later, when serious cases of repetitive-motion injuries like carpal-tunnel syndrome and other musculoskeletal injuries start to crop up, that the workplace was ergonomically unsound. You may not know about dangerous noise levels until workers start losing their hearing. It may take years of exposure to toxic chemicals, dusts, etc. before a worker is diagnosed with silicosis, emphysema or other pulmonary disorders.

Do not take a lack of complaints to mean a lack of hidden problems. Become a workplace detective.

Do employees have to shout to hear one another? Are they coughing frequently? Is there fine dust in the air? Are there contaminants settling on equipment? Observe workers' stations. Are they struggling to hold pieces? Are they showing any signs of discomfort such as squinting or wringing hands?

Talk to employees. Are they taking aspirin and ibuprofen to kill nagging minor pains?

Further investigation and evaluation from a professional loss control consultant may be warranted. Consider using an outsider for this. Someone promising confidentiality is more likely to elicit candid comments because good workers do not want their boss to think they are complainers.

A loss-control professional can spot potential problems fairly readily. Next, conduct industrial-hygiene testing and employ an ergonomics specialist to see if those suspicions are truly problems.

An ergonomic expert can measure and evaluate employees' workstations and observe them working. A certified industrial hygienist should measure ambient and impact noise levels using equipment such as

noise-level meters and dosimeters. Standard testing equipment such as pumps and filters should be used to take air samples for airborne contaminants. The samples should be evaluated by a certified lab and the final analysis presented in an official report comparing your exposures to standards. Recommendations can then be developed to control your exposures.

There are two ways to attack the problems: redesign the workplace to eliminate hazards, or give workers personal protective equipment like respirators and hearing protection. The former is always the better solution whenever feasible. While personal protection works, it usually creates other hazards, like slips and falls and limited vision. The gear can be cumbersome and is often hot and uncomfortable. In addition, management cannot always be there to supervise the employee who may decide not to wear it at all.

“Engineering out” problems can involve putting up noise barriers to reduce noise and installing ventilation systems to bring air quality up to OSHA standards.

Poor ergonomic design can be a bit subtler to detect than air contamination, pollution or noise. One of the most common problems is that one size does not fit all. A workstation that is well designed for an average male can be agonizing for a short woman or a tall man.

Equipment should be made as adjustable as possible to fit each worker individually. Chairs should be fully adjustable, with adjustable seat height and back height. Employees should be able to raise or lower worktables to a comfortable height. Footrests and ergonomic keyboards can greatly reduce physical stress.

It may be impossible to completely remove the risk of repetitive injury for workers doing repetitive tasks, but good ergonomic design can greatly reduce it. Furthermore, employees should be encouraged to report physical problems. Early intervention can prevent a sore wrist from turning into carpal-tunnel syndrome or a backache from becoming a debilitating injury and could lead to major savings down the road. ■

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