

Ergonomics

The International Ergonomics Association defines ergonomics as the “scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of interactions among humans and other elements of a system, and the profession that applies theory, principles, data and methods to design in order to optimize human well-being and overall system performance.” From a facilities viewpoint, Ergonomics is about the design of workplaces and furniture that are comfortable, safe and efficient for people to use.

At its simplest definition ergonomics literally means the science of work. So ergonomists study work, how work is done and how to work better. It is in the attempt to make work better that ergonomics becomes useful to the FM and that is also where making things comfortable and efficient comes into play.

Office workers are exposed to a number of health risks as a result of poor ergonomics. Problems can result from sedentary work, prolonged static postures, and working in awkward positions where workstations have been poorly set-up. These can result in frequent and repetitive hand or wrist movements, high levels of concentration and information overload which can be made worse by demanding work with challenging time pressures, low levels of control over the working day, and inadequate support from managers and colleagues. Really poor workplaces may result in people working at unsuitable temperatures, or with drafts, inadequate lighting, noise, restricted access and obstructions.

The Display Screen Equipment Regulations (DSE) address many of these issues placing obligations on employers to analyse workstations, provide information and training to workers, plan daily work routines, and protect workers' eyes and eyesight. There are also requirements relating to equipment and the working environment.

However good ergonomics can go beyond mere compliance not only addressing stress and physical problems arising from poor design but also optimising performance to deliver a more productive and creative workplace.

The American Society of Interior Designers (ASID, 1999) carried out an independent study and revealed that the physical workplace design is one of the top three factors, which affect performance and job satisfaction. Some studies have shown that investments in ergonomics pay for themselves within one year. However, most studies measure only productivity of the workers and incidence of injury. Only a few measure longevity of employment, absenteeism and morale. When these are factored in, analysts believe the benefits of ergonomics can be even more impressive.

The Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors (IEHF) exists to promote awareness of Ergonomics and has a useful directory of Registered Consultancies
www.ergonomics.org.uk