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Non-ergonomic workplaces pose long-term health risks

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Non-ergonomic work environments are considered key contributors to stress and a range of health issues among workers, especially those affecting the spine, muscles and joints.

These problems often lead to increased sick leave and reduced productivity, ultimately impacting the overall performance of an organisation.

According to Malaysian Society for Occupational Safety and Health (MSOSH) president Ahmad Fakhrul Anuar Ismail, workers frequently raise health issues during programmes organised by the association, with many of them concerned about their longterm well-being.

“One of the most common issues raised is the increase in sick leave due to muscle and joint discomfort, as well as work-related stress, all stemming from a non-ergonomic workplace environment,” he told Bernama.

Ergonomics

Ergonomics in the workplace refers to the science of designing and arranging workplaces, tools and equipment to fit the needs of the people who use them, with the goal of creating a safe, comfortable and efficient work environment.

Universiti Teknologi Mara assistant vice-chancellor Prof Dr Amer Shakir Zainol said an ergonomic environment can be achieved by reducing the physical and mental strain workers experience throughout their day at work.

He said without proper ergonomic adaptation, workers are at risk of developing various long-term health problems, with back and neck pain being the most common.

“Ergonomics pertains to the relationship between humans and their environment. In Western countries, this concept has long been applied in various areas, including equipment and vehicle design. For example, automotive brands like Mercedes-Benz prioritise ergonomic factors in seat design to ensure driver comfort and safety,” he told Bernama.

He pointed to companies like Google and local institutions such as the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) as examples where ergonomic concepts are applied in office furniture design.

He explained that elements such as flexible workspace design play an important role in preventing workers from spending excessive time at their desks or sitting in static positions, which contributes to back and neck strain.

“In these companies, they no longer practice the concept of one desk per worker. Instead, employees can choose to work in different areas including cafés, or sit in more comfortable chairs depending on their needs,” added Amer Shakir.

Non-ergonomic environment

Meanwhile, Ahmad Fakhrul Anuar said in general, workplace environments in Malaysia have yet to reach an optimal ergonomic level, especially among small and medium enterprises, although the situation is still considered manageable.

“Statistics related to musculoskeletal disorders in Malaysia show trends consistent with other countries, including developed nations, indicating that ergonomic issues are a global challenge, not limited to Malaysia,” he said.

He added Malaysia has shown positive progress in the field of ergonomics, particularly through government and Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) initiatives.
Several guidelines have been published to help industries implement proper ergonomic interventions, such as the Manual Handling Guidelines 2018, Ergonomic Risk Assessment Guidelines 2017, Seating at Work Guidelines 2024, Standing at Work Guidelines 2024, and Working with Display Screen Equipment Guidelines 2024.
Ahmad Fakhrul Anuar said DOSH is currently in the process of upgrading some of these guidelines into Codes of Practice to improve compliance as well as control over ergonomic issues in the workplace.
Long-term effects
Ahmad Fakhrul Anuar said the long-term effects of a nonergonomic work environment can be serious and affect the quality of life of workers. In many cases, it not only leads to physical disabilities but also contributes to mental health issues such as stress and depression caused by chronic pain.
“Workers experiencing these health problems may need to take frequent sick leave, which eventually affects their productivity.
“Companies that fail to provide an ergonomic work environment also risk facing reduced productivity and higher medical costs. Unhealthy employees will struggle to concentrate and work efficiently, ultimately impacting the overall performance of the company,” he said.
Agreeing that non-ergonomic environments can jeopardise employee health, Malaysian Public Health Medicine Specialists
Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said inappropriate chairs and desks or extended working hours without sufficient breaks are among the contributing factors to workers’ health problems.
“Inadequate lighting and userunfriendly work equipment also increase the risk of fatigue and discomfort. Beyond physical effects, workers also face mental stress from uncomfortable work environments, which can affect their focus and productivity,” he explained.
Measures
Ahmad Fakhrul Anuar said among the steps employers need to take to safeguard the well-being of their employees is to ensure that the workplace design meets the needs of their staff.
“One of the basic things they can do is to make sure their chairs and tables are adjustable. The same goes for the position of computer monitors. This is crucial to reduce physical strain on the body. — Bernama