

# Don't let office work become a pain



Ian Fletcher-Price,  
Managing Director,  
Posturite (UK) Ltd

You don't have to wear a hard hat and steel-capped boots to face health hazards at work. People who spend all their time behind a desk can also be at risk.

Take the case of the 41-year-old home-based computer programmer who suffered deep vein thrombosis after spending too long sitting at his desk. Although he is now fully recovered, his narrow escape recently made headline news in the national press.

It provided a salutary reminder that white collar staff need to be protected in the workplace every bit as much as blue collar workers.

Fortunately cases of 'e-thrombosis' are still rare among office workers. But other health problems – most notably back pain and work-related upper limb disorders – are all too common. They account for millions of lost working days each year and a massive amount of personal suffering.

So serious has the problem become that the European Commission is looking into the possibility of drafting new EU rules to tackle it. The EC calculates that up to two per cent of economic output across the member states is being lost annually to back pain and WRULDs.

Commission official Jaume Costa believes that existing EU health and safety legislation is inadequate to deal with the growing number of workers being hit by back problems - the biggest single cause of worker absences. That would seem to indicate a preparedness to do something about it unless companies themselves take more steps to protect their staff.

Mr Costa has also been quoted as saying that, if people have back pain, "part of the problem is information and awareness, adopting a good posture. But to have a good posture, you need a good chair and desk." I couldn't have put it better myself!



Sit/stand desking, ergonomic seating and accessories such as a two-in-one document holder/writing slope, vertical mouse and screen height adjusters can help protect against back problems and work-related upper limb disorders

Fortunately there are some signs that businesses are beginning to heed his advice and recognise the economic sense of taking preventative action to stop back problems arising in the first place rather than dealing with the after-effects.

At Posturite, we have noticed an upturn in orders from companies prepared to invest proactively in equipment designed to give desk-bound staff greater protection against the causes of back pain and work related upper limb disorders – sit/stand desking, ergonomic seating, writing slopes/document holders, vertical mouse, monitor raisers, laptop solutions and so on.

Even so, they still represent the tip of the commercial iceberg. The vast majority of organisations still wait until there is a problem before taking remedial action. The trouble is that while the cost of sickness absence is generally borne by the company as a whole, the cost of workstation provision is all-too-often done on a departmental basis.

Managers with one eye on their departmental budgets fall into the trap of purchasing to meet minimum levels of health and safety compliance instead of being allowed to buy on the basis of best practice. Were they to consult the health and safety professionals in their organisation, they would realise that a properly designed, adjustable, ergonomic workstation is one of today's soundest business investments, cutting levels of absenteeism and increasing productivity.

I hope the European Commission's decision to highlight the economic cost of back pain will open a few pairs of corporate eyes to the benefits of adjustability in the workplace. It's time that organisations started to take this subject a lot more seriously. Instead of worrying about how they are going to pay for an improved office environment, they should be asking themselves whether they can afford to keep paying for a poor environment.

If the situation has become chronic while the vast majority of desk-based workers are located at permanent work stations in office

buildings – where, presumably, proper health and safety risk assessments have been carried out – how much greater is the potential for the situation to deteriorate once increasing numbers of staff become detached from the umbilical cord of the office?

The inexorable rise in the numbers of remote workers, brought about by massive improvements in information and communications technology, is presenting facilities managers and health and safety professionals with a new and even tougher set of challenges.

In the eyes of the law – in this case, the 1974 Health & Safety at Work Act and its subsequent various regulations – there is no distinction to be drawn between the responsibilities employers have to protect the health and well-being of their office-based staff and those associated with people working at home or nomadically.

Compliance is not optional. It's an essential. If methodically planned and implemented, remote working can have big benefits for the employer, employee and society at large. If in doubt, consult the experts. It'll save you time, money... and potential embarrassment.

Ian Fletcher-Price is managing director of Posturite (UK) Ltd, whose consulting division works with companies to ensure they comply with health and safety legislation. For more information visit [www.posturite.co.uk](http://www.posturite.co.uk), or phone 0845 345 0010.



The AssessRite e-learning program can help ensure companies and their employees meet their display screen equipment health and safety obligations