

## Participatory Ergonomics

*This Fast Fact is intended to help workers, managers, employers and joint health and safety committee (JHSC) members become more aware of the importance of worker participation in musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) prevention.*

The importance of participation in health and safety is not a new idea. After all, it is considered one of the three basic rights of workers. Often, when it comes to ergonomics, organizations look for a specialist in the field such as an Ergonomist to solve the problem, leaving worker participation out of the equation. However, the success of an ergonomic intervention often relies on worker involvement.

### What is Participatory Ergonomics?

Participatory ergonomics is defined as “involving people in planning and controlling a significant amount of their own work activities, with sufficient knowledge and power to influence both processes and outcomes in order to achieve desired goals” (Wilson 1995).

### Benefits of Participatory Ergonomics

Participatory ergonomics interventions have the ability to improve health outcomes and to reduce the number of lost-work days, the costs associated with workplace injuries and the incidence of MSDs (Rivlis et al. 2008). Participatory ergonomics is a strategy that can also have benefits beyond physical or health outcomes, to improve psychosocial factors in the workplace as well. Additional benefits may include:

- Solution ownership
- Enhances worker and client safety
- Enhances job satisfaction
- Improves design effectiveness
- Enhances worker performance
- Enhances confidence and competency
- Employs a worker-centered approach

- Assists with the return-to-work process
- Increases acceptance of control implementations
- Enhances culture of safety for employees, patients and public

Research identifies that co-operation between management and employees can be improved, and perceptions held by employees concerning their jobs and work can become more positive (Laitinen et al. 1998). Changes such as these can help to facilitate or further develop a sense of community at the workplace. Once embedded into the core of business operations, participation becomes a “way of working life” (Haims & Carayon 1998), creating a greater opportunity to shift the organizational safety culture.

### Barriers to Participatory Process

Although Participatory Ergonomics offers many benefits, there are notable barriers that can undermine a participatory intervention. These may include:

- Lack of a clear mandate
- Budget and time constraints
- Lack of management support
- Finding time to participate
- Perception of extra work for participants
- Conflicts with job duties
- Uninvolved workers becoming envious
- Lack of worker participation or interest
- Resistance to change
- Ineffective internal responsibility system

It is believed “*dysfunctional consequences*” can result for any “*participatory initiative which is in reality a sham*” or employed using a “*half-hearted or cynical application*” (Wilson 1995). A genuine commitment to a Participatory Ergonomic process must be made. When senior management is committed to a participatory process, outcomes prove more successful (St-Vincent et al. 2006).

## The Participatory Ergonomic Approach

Direct representation from various organizational members is necessary for the development and implementation of a successful participatory intervention. An approach that is generally implemented is one that is layered (St-Vincent et al. 2006), involving an upper (Multidisciplinary Steering Committee) and lower (Change Team) layer that work collaboratively.



The Multidisciplinary Steering Committee is seen as an interface between upper management and the Change Team. The Steering Committee, in conjunction with senior management, is responsible for determining the purpose, goals and objectives of the Change Team. The Change Team is a group of four to eight people, composed primarily of workers, that function to identify and analyze ergonomic concerns and propose solutions in their unit or department – **front-line problem solving**. This ensures that workers are actively involved in the ergonomic process. The fundamental concept of participatory ergonomics recognizes the value of worker experiences and the importance of collaborative teamwork.

For further information on participatory ergonomics, contact your PSHSA consultant.