



The Pain of Remote Work

By Alyssa Abkowitz

● As the months of working at home mount, so do the complaints about injuries from poor home-office setups. Can leaders afford to ignore this—or any—wellness issue?

From afar, it looked a bit like a war of the wounded: the manager had one employee out with carpal tunnel, another stressed from taking care of young children while trying to complete work, and a third who wasn't sleeping despite efforts not to answer work emails in bed.

Such employee well-being issues are today's norm, making it difficult for company leaders to meet each employee's needs. According to a Gallup workplace study, remote workers are experiencing everything from ergonomic issues to mental health concerns; nearly half the employees surveyed say they feel worried, and 24 percent feel lonely. Since the pandemic first hit, well-being has arguably

become one of the largest—but least prioritized—issues for many organizations, which spend about \$878 annually per employee on wellness programs if they have more than 20,000 employees.

Ergonomics, in particular, has become a growing concern among human resources executives, many of whom know the toll that poor chairs and desk arrangements can take on the human body—and on the corporate budget. One in two individuals in the United States has a musculoskeletal condition

The Takeaway
Solutions to many ergonomic issues are not always expensive but require buy-in from employees.

that may be caused by poor ergonomics, which cost \$213 billion each year in healthcare and lost productivity, according to one study. “Initially, everyone was scrambling to find a place in their house to work and maintain job responsibilities,” says Julie Dorsey, chair of Ithaca College’s department of occupational therapy and a specialist in ergonomics and environmental design. “But it doesn’t take long for discomfort to set in when you’re on a wooden dining room chair at a table at a bad height or not getting up as often.”

While there are no related stats on injuries spurred from working at home since the pandemic began, many HR departments are finding that individual requests for keyboards, laptop stands, and other solutions for achy necks, shoulders, and backs are on the rise. “Oftentimes, you don’t realize you’re putting yourself into repetitive-motion risks,” says Ron Porter, a Korn Ferry senior client partner and member of the firm’s Human Resources Center of Expertise. “It’s only after the fact that you realize that you have an injury.” For his part, Brian Bloom, Korn Ferry’s vice president of global benefits, is tackling the ergonomic challenge by allowing employees to take home any ergonomic equipment they have in their office, from their swivel chairs to standing desk mats. If an employee didn’t have certain equipment in the office and now has an injury that’s cropped up, a doctor’s order is needed to furnish new equipment.

Such requests are still relatively new for employers, of course. Twenty years ago, it would’ve been unheard of to purchase adjustable-height desks for employees or hire ergonomics consultants to perform an office assessment. But the level of sophistication of corporate health programs means that now, over 80 percent of companies with more than 50 employees offer some sort of wellness benefits, making a request for a footrest or an ergonomic keyboard completely in line with finding fresh apples instead of doughnuts in the break room.

But with tight budgets, wellness executives are finding it difficult to take on so many issues at once. After all, how does one decide whether to put forth money for a mental health initiative instead of throwing it into the ergonomics pool when mental and physical health go hand in hand? “We’re trying to meet people where they’re

Mental Wellness

Some steps firms have taken during the pandemic to help support workers’ mental health:

- **Increased counseling sessions**
Free access to therapy, from half a dozen to 20 sessions.
- **Lower co-pays**
Therapy-visit co-pays reduced by more than 50 percent.
- **Flextime**
More opportunities to change work hours or to be off the computer during the workday.
- **Apps**
Free use of wellness apps, offering everything from exercise classes to meditation/sleep programs.

at versus having corporate tell them what they’re going to do,” Bloom says.

Research shows that the more control professionals have over their environment, the less stressed they are. To that end, ergonomics experts say workers can often make significant adjustments for next to nothing. Dorsey recommends starting with your chair; if you’re in a hard plastic seat, add some padding with towels and blankets, or try rolling up a towel or using a lumbar pillow to support your lower back. Play with throw pillows of various sizes to see what works best, and don’t get discouraged if it takes more than one attempt to find the right setup. “The nice thing about being at home is no one can see if you’re sitting on a pile of towels,” she says.

Once you’ve found a comfortable seat, focus on your monitor and its relation to where you’re sitting. Ideally you want your monitor to be at eye level so you aren’t craning your neck to view your work. This could mean raising your laptop with a cardboard box and then using an external keyboard and mouse so you aren’t bending your wrists when you type. Or you can ask your firm for a docking station or an external monitor, which are relatively inexpensive. The number one thing you can do to help your body, though, is to ensure you’re getting up and moving. Says Dorsey: “Truly the worst offender is just staying in the same position for long periods of time.”