

THE HINDU Business Line

Turning the tables on bad posture

Our Bureau



Work ergonomics is not just to reduce back aches or strain on the eyes.

Companies are looking to make office spaces comfortable and efficient; this can boost employee morale — and productivity.

At Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL), there are teams on the prowl observing employees silently. They're not checking if employees are doing their job. They're checking whether they are seated right. After all, a lot of time and effort has gone into educating employees on the right posture to adopt at their work stations, among other things, for their own benefit. And healthy and happy employees will deliver better.

The right posture on the right chair, the desk at the right height, the position of the screen, the position of the mouse and the keyboard, the temperature, the right kind and amount of light... all factors are critical to Dr T Rajagopal, Vice-President, Global Medical and Occupational Health, Unilever, and his team. His team in India alone comprises three full-time doctors, five executives and 40 part-time medical officers.

Increasingly, companies are spending time and engaging specialists in planning every little detail of the work place, with the twin and related objectives of making employees comfortable, and improving their productivity. Work ergonomics is not just to reduce back aches or strain on the eyes. There are practitioners who contend that comfortable and efficient work places can lead to a more positive state of mind, boosting employee morale.

On the evolution of ergonomics in the work place, Dr Rajagopal says, "Ergonomics is still an evolving discipline in India. There are very few institutions that offer an advanced course in ergonomics. Traditionally it is the industrial hygienist who looks after ergonomic aspects, and these are also very few in number across the country. However, trained occupational health specialists have, over the past decade, undertaken ergonomic assessments at the workplace."

HUL claims that office and factory ergonomics have always been a priority for Hindustan Unilever. The company has been conducting ergonomic assessments since the early 1990s.

Are investments in ergonomics measurable? HUL says they are. In the erstwhile tea factories, a modified tea plucking instrument significantly enhanced tea plucking while minimising repetitive strain injuries, according to the company.

Pro View

Prof Venkatesh Balasubramanian, Associate Professor of Engineering Design at IIT Madras, and a member of the Indian Society of Ergonomics (ISE), observes that ergonomics at work needs to go beyond the aesthetics.

“The three aspects that need to be looked at are the physical dimensional requirements, the operability requirements and the aesthetics. Unfortunately, aesthetics takes precedence sometimes, and then companies look at post facto remedies rather than pre-emptive ergonomics,” he says.

He also contends that processes that enable ergonomics at work to work, need to be in place. Prof Balasubramanian adds, “I have seen companies buying the latest beautifully adjustable chairs (a BPO) but none of the employees knew how to adjust them. This is just to show that you also need the processes in place beyond the design elements and the physical infrastructure.”

The need for ergonomics to focus on usability is evident, and is explained by the ISE choosing the topic ‘Innovation and usability in product development’ for its 2011 conference. The Humanising Work and Work Environment conference will be held at IIT Chennai this December. From Apple’s iPods to cars, usability will add value to every product, notes the ISE member.

In the work place, there is acknowledgement of the need to intensify holistic ergonomics thinking.

Prof Balasubramanian sums it up: “Given the sedentary lifestyle and nature of work a lot of corporate employees are in, they end up with a physiotherapist at some point. Good ergonomics can help, but it needs to go beyond the obvious chairs and tables.”

gokul.k@thehindu.co.in

(This article was published on August 1, 2011)

Keywords: [ergonomics at work](#), [Prof Balasubramanian](#), [Humanising Work and Work Environment conference](#), [Ergonomics](#)

Printable version | Nov 6, 2013 6:10:39 PM |

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/companies/turning-the-tables-on-bad-posture/article2313959.ece> © The Hindu Business Line