

‘People Know What Needs to Be Done about Ergonomics’

Creating the Climate for Making Ergonomic Changes in Construction

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Overview

Researchers interviewed 50 key informants representing construction contractors and labor union representatives, and held focus groups with 48 construction trade workers to identify perceptions and attitudes about **work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs)** in the building industry. The participants, drawn from a wide variety of trades, identified many of the major barriers and challenges to introducing ergonomic safety and health interventions in the industry as well as some possible paths forward.

Key Findings

- **Knowledge and Awareness:** Whether or not they correctly understood the term “ergonomics,” most participants were familiar with the problem of WMSDs.
- **Attitudes:** Contractors were uninterested in trying any solution that would negatively impact production. Their primary concern was about cost, but they could be motivated by a good “return on investment” argument. Workers are also concerned about being good producers and often prided themselves on working through pain, assuming this is inevitable in the industry.
- **Obstacles:** Contractors needed to be convinced that there was a financial and/or production benefit to adopting any ergonomic innovation. However, they understood that the cost of worker injuries, losing skilled workers, and workers’ compensation premiums must be factored in to any cost-benefit analysis. The repetitive nature of many construction tasks, and a lack of awareness of the hazards and of available solutions, constituted another obstacle to adoption of improved work practices.
- **Messaging:** Contractors were motivated best by messages about productivity and saving money, but trade employees and their unions responded to messages concerning the impact of WMSDs on workers’ health and ability to work and support their families. For a campaign for improved ergonomic practices to succeed, it would need to address the very different concerns held by contractors and workers.

Conclusions:

The barriers to implementing ergonomic change in the industry, while not insurmountable, will require the participation and cooperation of all levels of the industry: contractors, unions and workers. For each major obstacle that was outlined in this study, the construction professionals we interviewed offered a variety of solutions. This study shows that people know what needs to be done, but they need help in overcoming inertia and facing the juggernaut that is the construction industry.

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See full report:

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