

# Justifying The Cost Of Height Adjustable Office Work Surfaces



***The traditional justification – the high cost of work-related injuries – is certainly a good reason to act, but this message doesn't work everywhere.***

As a vendor of ergonomic office furniture, I find myself preaching to the choir whenever I'm working with health and safety professionals. They already appreciate the benefits of fully adjustable offices work stations.

If it were up to them, everyone in the office would use "safety" equipment—in this case office furniture—the same way construction workers wear helmets on a construction site or factory workers safety glasses when operating machinery. Why? To reduce the risk of injury.

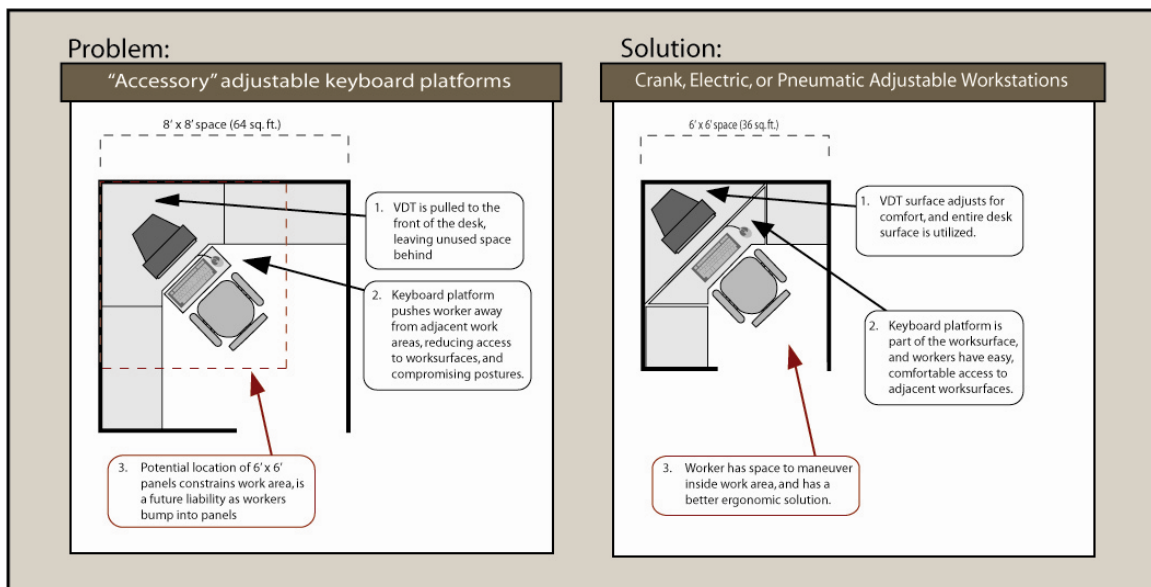
However, health and safety professionals frequently share office furniture decision -making and -shaping responsibilities with others in their organization – professionals in facilities real estate, purchasing, and human resources. All of these individuals have jobs that don't always place health and safety issues at the top of their lists. Whether it is simply a lower priority or it is off their radar screen entirely, this reality can scuttle our efforts to reduce the risk of injuries.

Frequently, ergonomic furniture proposals are rejected out of hand because there's a perception that they "cost too much." The challenge is to persuade these colleagues to support furniture that works. But how?

Historically, health and safety professionals have incited action by pointing to the high cost of work-related injuries. This is certainly a very good reason to act, and successful programs can demonstrate a reduction in reported injuries or faster-return-to-work results. Unfortunately, this messaged doesn't work everywhere. Many organizations either don't collect this kind of data or don't make the connection between healthy employees and corporate productively. And the true cost of a work-related injury isn't always obvious when injury costs are borne by insurance carriers.

To influence furniture decisions in a way that ensures good, long term solutions, savvy health and safety professionals have learned to cast furniture recommendations in language that fellow decisions-makers and –shapers can instantly appreciate. In addition to the usual injury prevention and reduction benefits, think about and promote the positive impacts as your colleagues might view them. Here are some ideas health and safety professionals have shared with me over the years.

For simplicity, each example looks at a fictional organization with 100 computer operators. The organization is considering an adjustable workstation that will increase the cost of a standard, fixed-height panel systems office cube by \$500\*. Each example makes a series of assumptions about employee income, churn rate, recruitment and lease cost, etc.—factors that concern your colleagues. Plug in your organization's information to customize



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the formulas and see the cost savings unique to your organization.

## Increased Time-on-Task

How much does it cost when information workers are "off task"? This view rests on the premise that *comfortable people focus on their work; uncomfortable people don't.*

Think about how much distraction costs; time spent away from the desk, focusing on discomfort instead of work. If comfortable workstations enable employees to work only 2 percent more each day (that's 10 minutes in an eight-hour day), this modest daily gain translates into an annual time-on-task increase of five full workdays per year (2 percent of 250 working days/year), more than enough to offset the higher cost of an adjustable workstation.

Comfortable workstations supporting employees earning \$30,000 annually "save" the organization \$600 (2 percent of \$30,000) per station. The return on investment (ROI) comes in 10 months (\$500/\$600).

## Lower Employee 'Churn' Rate

What does it cost to attract and retain staff, and can a comfortable workstation reduce turnover? The idea here is to *keep employees comfortable, and keep them longer.*

In an effort to attract and retain talented, skilled employees, many organizations promote a comfortable, state-of-the-art work environment. With information workers expected to put in long hours at the computer, comfort becomes a real issue. If it costs \$5,000 to recruit, hire, and train each new employee, and adjustable workstations can slow the churn rate from 20 percent to 15 percent, imagine the savings!

In our example, adjustable workstations save \$25,000 per year in human resource costs (20% - 15% = 5% of 100 = 5 employees x \$5,000 = \$25,000) or \$250 per station. The ROI comes in two years (\$500/\$250).

## Fit More People More Often

How much does it cost the facilities department to make furniture changes? Comfortable furniture won't keep employees forever; there will be employee turnover. On average, employees move over, up, or out every three years.

With the growing popularity of flex time, where several people might use one workstation in shifts, a workstation might have three to six (or more!) occupants during a 10- to 20-year life and be moved or reconfigured as many times. If the health and safety policy requires that work surfaces fit employees, then facilities department efforts to manually adjust work surfaces in order to keep employees comfortable drive up the long-term cost of inflexible workstations. *End-users who make their own adjustments help reduce facilities department costs.*

### **Weighing The Options**

*How much you spend on a height-adjustable workstation depends on your organization's price and performance expectations. For example, if you need to adjust a 48" corner work surface with 24" return edges, a high-speed electric or pneumatic sit-stand desk that covers a true sit-stand range can run you much more than \$500, assuming the furniture dealers adds value to your purchase by offering design, space planning, end-user training, and installations services, and makes a fair profit.*

*The same size crank-height adjustable workstation, suitable for seated range applications, can cost less*

*Because workers with multiple tasks and frequent interruptions may need more space than single-task data entry or customer service operators, it is often necessary for larger work surfaces – corner and returns - to adjust together as one unit.*

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In our example, if each year 33 workstations need to be moved, reconfigured, or have the panel-mounted work surface raised or lowered to suit new employees, and the effort costs \$200 per station, then the total cost is \$6,600 per year (33 x \$200) or \$66 per station. The ROI comes in seven and a half years (\$500/\$66).

## Save Space

How much space can a well-designed workstation save? There's tremendous pressure to make offices smaller. Some low-cost ergonomic solutions make this impossible, while others accommodate it. For example, *workstations that use height-adjustable work surfaces instead of accessory-adjustable solutions (AKPs) can be designed 20 percent smaller without sacrificing functional workspace (see diagram).*

The real estate savings come from converting 8'x 8' cubicles with accessory adjustment to 6' x 6' cubicles with free-standing work surface adjustment, saving 28 square feet (64 -36 = 28). AKP solutions can't make this transition without forcing employees into their doorways, panel walls, and limiting their easy access to the work surface.

If our organization's lease cost-per-foot is \$12 each year and it can trim 28 square feet from each cubicle, the annual cost savings amount to \$33,600 each year (\$12 x 28 x 100) or \$336 per station. The ROI comes in 18 months (\$500/\$336).

## Injury cost reduction

Take an average CTD cost of \$11,000 and assume the organization had four claims per year related to awkward postures and repetitive motions. If adjustable workstations can reduce injuries by 50 percent, then the claims drop from four to two— from an annual cost of \$44,000 to just \$22,000. The savings per station are \$220 per year. ROI comes in two years and a few months (\$500/\$220).

## Going from “Ho Hum” to “Holy Cow!”

Most organizations financially "compartmentalize," so implementing a demonstrable cost-saving measure in one area can't be used to offset costs in another. For example, one department might balk at the acquisition price of a height-adjustable workstation even when it offsets other departments' costs.

But don't let that stop you from showing that a properly designed ergonomic workstation is one of today's soundest business investments. Increasingly, organizations are adopting a more holistic approach. When they do, the ROI becomes quite impressive. Taken alone, each department's savings might generate mild interest or a yawn, but viewed as a whole—in the case of our example organization—the accumulated annual cost savings would amount to \$1,472 per station. The ROI from this holistic view is approximately three months (\$500/\$1,472)!

## Summary

To defeat objections about "expensive" ergonomic product solutions, think like your colleagues do in facilities, real estate, human resources, and IT, and more clearly communicate the broader benefits of adjustable office furniture.

The question shouldn't be "How are we going to pay for an improved office environment?" The better questions are, "Can we identify the ways that we already pay for a poor office environment?" and "Can we afford to keep paying?"

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