Chapter XII

Safety and Health in the Virtual Office

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ABSTRACT

Safety and health issues in virtual offices are part of progressive telecommuting programs. Telecommuting agreements between employers and employees typically include clauses related to keeping the workspace free from hazards, conditions to clarify employer liability for injuries and illnesses and mechanisms for the employee to report them. In practice, employers are not providing all of the tools, training and follow-up needed to offer complete programs. This chapter provides a set of tools and implementation strategies to help employers reduce safety and health risks in the virtual office.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual office use is increasing for many reasons. Telework can benefit society by decreasing traffic congestion and vehicle emissions, thus reducing the number of traffic accidents and the amount of air pollution (Johnson, 1998). Employees may benefit through improved morale, reduced stress, and help in balancing work and personal life. Employers may benefit through increased productivity, reduced costs and improved recruitment and retention of valuable employees (Nilles, 1998). Statistics point to a rising trend of telecommuting as a work option in the United States. According to Cyber Dialogue/FINDsvp’s American Internet Users’ Survey (Telework America,
1999), the number of US teleworkers rose from 4 million in 1990 to 9.1 million in 1994 and to 15.7 million in 1998. Today’s technology and communication services have made it easier for individuals to communicate and work from anywhere.

Along with the benefits of telecommuting, there are safety and health risks associated with virtual offices that must be understood and addressed in a complete telecommuting program. The initial emphasis in teleworking, as with other new work methods, is on its benefits to the employer, specifically production and efficiency gains. In many cases, safety and health are considered in the program development however, follow-through in training, workstations design, and inspection is less likely. Often, identification, evaluation, and control of safety and health risks are part of a second wave of process improvements, which incorporate initially unaccounted costs. Human costs, such as chronic or delayed effects associated with repetitive stress injuries (RSIs), are not included in the initial evaluations of telework.

This chapter concentrates on the at-home office, but many of the observations and recommendations apply to other virtual office environments. The first objective is to identify safety and health issues in the virtual office environment. The risk of RSIs due to poor ergonomic tools, physical arrangements and work practices of the workstation in the at-home office are emphasized, but other physical hazards in the virtual office also are discussed. Next, an approach to reducing the hazards to employees and costs to employers through the development of a set of intellectual tools, physical tools, and an implementation strategy is presented. Finally, suggestions for safety and health improvements for the increasing number of virtual office workers are provided. Concerns center on the following three issues:

1. Inclusion of less-than-ideal employee candidates, as the number of telecommuters increases.
2. Inadequate follow-ups by employees to ensure tools are being properly used.
3. Inadequate ergonomic features for at-home office furniture.

BACKGROUND

Facts about Repetitive Stress Injuries and the Office Worker¹

OSHA states that work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) are now a leading cause of lost-workday injuries and workers’ compensation costs. Carpal tunnel syndrome, one form of WMSDs, leads on average to
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