

Ergo your way to less crabbiness



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Crabby Office Lady

You know that you feel better when your body is in good shape; why do you let it all fall to pieces the minute you step through your office door? It's time to think about staying in shape while working, too.

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I just bought a new bike. My old mountain bike had become too much for me to bear; it hurt my rear end, my shoulders, and my back. And yet I waited ten years to buy a new one. Why? Because I'd gotten used to the pain, the irritation, and the sore buns, that's why. But after a trip to my neighborhood bike shop, I tried a new kind of bike and wow, what a difference it made. Now that I have my new bike, I'm kicking myself for not going for it sooner because now I can ride longer, have more fun, and do little stress to my body. Makes sense, doesn't it?

Now, apply this to your own life: You make sure that you spend time at the gym, take the stairs, and even wake up to Homer's rosy-fingered dawn to jog through the cold morning streets so that your body stays healthy. (In case I lost you, that's Homer, the blind Greek poet, not Homer the bald nuclear power plant employee.) But when you show up at work, does your back slump? Do your shoulders start creeping up toward your earlobes? Does your wrist start to twitch at the sight of that small, cute, and (at first glance) apparently harmless little contraption called the mouse? If so, it's time to make some changes (because now you're starting to resemble that other Homer).

What is ergonomics? Why should I care?

Ergonomics means the study of human work (in Greek, "ergos" means work and "nomos" means of the natural laws). For some of you, that may sound about as fun as watching paint dry. But you'd be wise to pay attention to this word, because it can affect your work and your health. Put simply, ergonomics is a way of figuring out a more comfortable way to do your job, whether you're a desk jockey, a grocery store clerk, a truck driver, or a mechanic.

Luckily for us, some folks have made the study of ergonomics their life's work, which helps the rest of us stay healthy, happy, and productive in OUR work. In fact, to prepare for this column, I had an interesting conversation with someone who knows a lot about ergonomics. Ursula Wright is an ergonomics consultant here at Microsoft, and she makes house calls — that is, if you work at Microsoft, she'll come to your office, observe your style of working (the physical layout of your desk, chair, workstation, etc.), and then make suggestions about how to make you more comfortable and efficient.

And while your company might not have an Ursula on staff (or perhaps you work at home), there are many resources available to help you on your way to becoming a comfier worker bee. (Check the **See also** section of this column in the top right for some of those resources.)

How can I apply it to my work life?

Below are some tips that I got from our own policies as well as from Ursula. You'll be amazed at what a difference these small changes can make to your comfort level while at work. As Ursula told me, "In many instances, small improvements to a person's work environment can result in immediate improvements in comfort levels." (Instant gratification, huh? Sounds okay so far.)

NOTE The tips below are for people who use computers to accomplish most of their work. However, all kinds of guidelines exist for all kinds of industries, from nursing to poultry processing. Check out one of the links I've provided up top to find out how ergonomics can improve your life at work.

The neutral posture

"Neutral posture" refers to the resting position of each joint, i.e., the position in which there is the least amount of tension or pressure on nerves, tendons, muscles, and bones. It's also the position in which muscles are at their resting length, neither contracted nor stretched. Some examples of your body in the neutral posture:

- Your lovely fingers are gently curved, in their natural resting position. They're not spread apart, and they're neither fully straightened out nor tightly curled.
- Your wrist is in line with your forearm. It's neither bent up nor bent down, and it's definitely not bent towards the thumb or towards the little finger. Ouchie!
- The shoulders are in a resting position when they are neither pulled forward, back, or down, nor elevated.
- Your head is balanced on your spinal column. It's not tilted forward, back, or to either side, and it's not rotated to the left or right. Look straight ahead, kid.



Comfort while at your computer

- **Adjust your chair** You want to make sure your thighs are parallel to the floor with your knees bent at about 90 degrees or so. Your feet should be supported by the floor or a footrest. Since your body weight rests on your spine (assuming you do indeed have one), your backrest should be positioned to support your lower back while you're keying and mousing.
- **Adjust your workstation** Your work surface should be approximately one inch below your extended fingers when your elbows are at right angles to your sides (I know this may seem a bit low, but trust me; it works); your keyboard and pointing device are within reach when your elbows are at right angles to your sides; and materials and/or devices that you use frequently are within easy reach.
- **Adjust your monitor and lighting** The top third of the viewable screen should be in line with your eyes when your neck, shoulders, and back are in neutral position, or a bit lower if you wear graduated lenses. You should also be able to read text and graphics easily at a distance of 16-28 inches.

Comfort away from your computer

- **Get up** Take a walk outside, through the halls, or even in circles around your office or cubicle; just get up and move once in a while. Every couple of hours, think of your computer screen as Medusa: looking at it will turn you to stone if you don't take a break and look away.
- **Stretch** When you're exercising, you know how important it is to stretch before and after your workout. When you're at your desk, it's just as important, and you should stretch often, not just once at 9 and again at 5. Stretch your neck, your hand, wrist, and fingers; your arms, shoulders, and upper back. And don't forget your chest: Breathe, baby, breathe.

Special advice for laptop users

Laptop users are everywhere, thanks to the preponderance of "hot spots" (high-speed wireless Internet access in public locations). Watch these wizards of wireless and you might see a majority of them hunched over, their fingers at odd angles to their keyboards, their earrings resting on their shoulders. If this is you (or if you're afraid it might become you), take immediate action to make sure your mobile workstation is as ergonomically correct as your static one.

- **Stick with the neutral posture idea** Just because you're not at your desk, don't let this posture go to you-know-what in a hand basket, or your sweet alternative to the office may end up giving you more pain than it's worth.

Employees: Ignore the warnings and risk your health

So now you know a little about ergonomics. And if you choose to laugh off my warnings? Let's see...

You could incur a work-related musculoskeletal disorder (MSD). MSDs are injuries that can result from repeated strains or overuse and are sometimes referred to as Cumulative Trauma Disorders (CTDs), Repetitive Strain Injuries (RSIs), and Repetitive Motion Injuries (RMIs) among other terms.

Those are big, important sounding injuries (with hard-to-remember acronyms), huh? Well, not once you translate them... I'm sure you've heard of some of the following:

- Writer's cramp
- Tennis elbow
- Pitcher's arm
- Milkmaid's hands (an oldie but a goodie)

Yes, that's right folks; don't you just love to imagine the sprains, strains, inflammation, degeneration, pinching, and tears (both the ripping kind and the crying kind)? Think shooting pain, fatigue, sprain, strain, and/or numbness and tingling of your hands or feet.

All that that sounds like fun, doesn't it? And Ursula noted that while repetitive strain injuries appeared a long time before ergonomics was a common term, people sucked it up and thought it went with the job. But now we know more about soft tissue injury. So basically, you (and your employer) have no excuse! And speaking of employers....

Employers: Ignore the warnings and risk your workforce

Company owners, managers, and even CFOs: It behooves you to put an ergonomics plan into effect for your employees.

It's worth the cost to accommodate your worker rather than pay for medical care, training and retraining, as well as other expenses incurred when an employee is injured on the job. And note that some states already have ergonomics laws or guidelines in place to encourage employers to be proactive in preventing injuries from occurring.

As Ursula said (and what you, as a fine, upstanding, and caring employer already know), "It's less expensive to be proactive in preventing injuries than reactive in accommodating a worker after an injury occurs." If you've already put this plan into action, you get a gold star. If not, get on it, Boss. (Hey, bossing around bosses is kind of fun!)

"Give me where to stand, and I will move the earth." — Archimedes

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Was this information helpful?** tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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