



Less pain, more gain

The height of your desk, the design of your chair and the angle of your monitor may seem trivial compared with the day-to-day pressures of running a business – but they could be keys to your success, says Domini Stuart

“Long hours spent in front of a computer can cause headaches, backache, eyestrain and overuse injuries,” says ergonomist Mark Dohrmann of Mark Dohrmann and Partners Pty Ltd. “These are all serious drains on your productivity. They slow you down, affect your concentration – sometimes even stop you from working altogether.”

In Australia, headaches are responsible for more lost working days than any other problem. Backache comes in third, just behind the common cold. Backache also has the distinction of being the most frequent cause of inactivity for people under 45 years of age. 80% of the population will experience from back pain at some point in their lives – and sedentary workers are just as likely to suffer as people engaged in manual labour.

Creating the right environment

If sitting down is a serious occupational hazard, it is also one of the easiest to manage. “All you need to do is fit your work to your body rather than strain your body to fit whatever happens to be around,” says Dohrmann. He suggests starting with six basic steps.

- 1. Get a decent chair** Choose a standard clerical-type office chair rather than the large, high-backed reclining variety. It should be adjustable, with a well-padded seat and adjustable backrest.
- 2. Adjust it properly** The backrest should fit snugly into the small of your back. If there's any pressure under your thighs, use a footrest.
- 3. Check your lighting** Your whole working surface should be evenly illuminated, without shadows near your hand.
- 4. Position your monitor correctly** – ideally it should be about an arm's length from your face, the top of the screen level with your forehead. An articulated stand makes the adjustment easy.

5. Choose the right desk. Most desks are way too high – 700mm is a good for most people. They should be at least 900 mm deep for comfortable screen viewing, and long enough to keep the things you use frequently within easy reach.

6. However comfortable you feel, take regular breaks. Muscles need movement – take time at least once an hour to stretch, stand up, walk about.

Finding a balance

Ergonomics encompasses your total environment - what you see, hear, feel and breathe as well as what you touch. There are Australian Standards for everything from humidity, ventilation and temperature to lighting and the colour of the walls.

“The problem is that, if we followed the guidelines to the letter, every office would look exactly the same,” says Louis de Silva of de Silva Starr Pty Ltd, a company specialising in corporate office design & planning and office fitouts.

“Architects and designers have a responsibility to balance Building Codes and Standards with the image a client wants to project,” he continues. “There’s also the budget to consider. For instance, when money is tight, bright colours can make an office feel a lot more cheerful than if you stick to the recommended pale grey, pale pink and pale green.”

Easy adjustments

When copywriter Mary Elliott decided to run her own business, she moved out of a busy advertising agency into a spare bedroom. “I started out with a trestle table and dining room chair, partly because they were there, partly because I wanted to get right away from the look and feel of a traditional office,” she says.

Within a few months, she needed physiotherapy and acupuncture to ease pain in her back and shoulder. “I thought I’d pulled a muscle at the gym. Then the physio started asking questions about how I worked, and I realised I’d been asking for trouble.”

Putting the problem right was surprisingly easy.

“My only expense was a decent chair,” says Elliott. “Apart from that, I sawed a few centimetres off the legs of my table and, most importantly, started moving around.

“When I was working in the agency, I was up and down like a yo-yo, popping into other offices, getting briefed, having a chat. At home, communicating almost completely by email, I didn’t need to move for hours at a time. Now I do little things like stand up every time I use the phone just to stop myself from freezing into one position!”

Dohrmann would approve. “Work in comfort and you’ll be repaid with many extra hours of productive work,” he says. “Space, reach, lighting, movement...get them right and you can go on forever!”

Where does it hurt? <i>Before reaching for the painkillers, try a quick ergonomic fix</i>	
Back of neck	Are you looking down at your documents or keyboard? Try a document holder; improving your keyboard skills; adjusting the height of your monitor.
Side of neck	Rather than looking to one side, position your documents and screen directly in front of you.
Top of shoulders, outside or front of shoulders	Try raising your chair; using a footrest; reducing the height of your desk (if it's adjustable)
Lower back	Adjust your chair's backrest to give firm lumbar support. If your chair has arms, remove them. Remove any obstructions like drawers from under your desk.
Upper back	Don't twist as you sit – make sure your documents, monitor and keyboard are directly in front of you.
Mouse arm or shoulder	If your arm is stretched out and unsupported, move your mouse closer. Try a single surface desk
Phone arm, shoulder or neck	Position the phone so it's close to hand. Use a headset rather than clamp the phone between your ear and your shoulder.
Sore legs, aching feet	If the undersides of your thighs are compressed against your seat, use a footrest or reduce the height of your desk and chair.
Headaches, eye fatigue	Things to check are posture, visual problems, noise, stress and glare Try using a screen filter; closing the blinds; shutting the door; varying your tasks; taking micropauses. Just to be sure, have an eye test.