



Workplace ergonomics improves productivity among obese employees

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For many obese employees, being productive in the workplace can be difficult. With the health issues these employees often face, they tend to miss more work or take disability leave, but employers can help improve productivity among these employees by providing ergonomic options, says Brian Kost, program manager for workplace possibilities at The Standard.

"It all goes back to productivity," Kost says. "Giving obese employees ergonomic options can decrease absences, and when they are given special ergonomic options or equipment, they tend to be more engaged with their employer because they feel like that their employer cares about them."

One effective option, though it sounds simple, is to bring in more ergonomic chairs, Kost says. Just in the past five or six years, office chairs have been designed to carry weight up to 600 lbs., an increase from 250 lbs., and this can significantly improve the employee's comfort level, allowing that employee to be more productive. These chairs also offer more adjustability options that account for an employee's weight as well as height for a more comfortable fit, which is important when it comes to stability.

Kost finds it's helpful to give employees the option to stand during periods of the day, as well. To provide this, an employer can install a moving work station that rises for when the employee wants to stand and stretch while working. The worker doesn't necessarily have to stand all day, but simply alternating between sitting and standing can help.

If a manager notices an employee is struggling with productivity in a nonconductive work station, it is important that he or she is proactive with the employee, Kost says. Kost recommends bringing in some of these ergonomic options in order for the employee to try them. Employers should remember to do so discreetly in order to protect the employee's privacy.

"Look at the functionality of the employee and what their job tasks are and ask them in what areas are they struggling," Kost says. "You don't need to get involved in all of their medical conditions. As an employer, you don't want to know that information. What you want to know is what is their current functionality and what are the effects on their specific job tasks."

Besides ergonomic options, employers can create an atmosphere of group well-being that helps obese employees make positive, healthful choices, Kost says. Some successful programs include initiating stair climbing contests, only bringing in healthful food options during meetings and taking group walks.

No matter how the employer chooses to create this atmosphere, it is important that it is performed in a group setting, Kost says. An employee moving from a sedentary lifestyle to a more active one typically does better in a small group setting, which provides extra encouragement.

"You want to participate in groups so that it doesn't single out one person; it's a team," Kost says.