

The ergonomic route

Ergonomics could help improve employee productivity, reduce the amount of sick days staff take and improve customer service, says Sara Edlington

Sick days are always a concern for retailers. A 2007 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development put the annual cost of employee absence at £659 per employee. Legislation is also never far from retailers' minds either. As Mike Inderrieden, solution engineer in the human factors engineering team at NCR's Retail Solutions department, explains: "To ensure that they comply with the relevant Health and Safety at Work regulations, retailers need to choose an appropriate checkstand, PoS system and seating."

Inderrieden adds that retailers also need to carry out risk assessments on how staff are using their workstations and train and supervise them appropriately to prevent the onset or reoccurrence of aches, pains or discomfort. The equipment needs to be properly maintained and serviced. In addition, there should be a clear and well understood process for employees to report any potential problems.

Good design

So what is ergonomic equipment? Tom Stewart, joint managing director at retail ergonomics consultants, System Concepts, explains: "Ergonomics aims to ensure that products, services and systems work for their users." He goes on to give a few examples: "Good ergonomic design of chill cabinets for customers ensures that they can see and reach merchandise, which is being kept in perfect condition. Good checkout design for operators ensures that they can scan merchandise and process payments quickly and comfortably."

It is not just retail staff who are affected by ergonomics. With the increase in self-service checkouts, customers have to be happy and comfortable using the equipment. In the new world of Web 2.0, with its user reviews and blogs, customers can tell others how easy, or not, equipment is to use if they choose to do so. And equally, there is no point having self-service checkouts if customers find

them hard to use and go and find a manned checkout instead.

Nigel Stephenson, marketing manager at K3, emphasises how important ergonomics are to the retailer's customers: "As far as self-service checkouts and indeed kiosks and any equipment you are asking a customer to interact with in-store, ergonomics is at the centre of the whole consideration behind implementing that technology."

So does going the ergonomic route really make a difference? It is a difficult question to answer as it might be a part of the reason for an increase, in say, productivity, because ergonomic equipment is often installed as part of an overall change in a store. But there is some evidence.

NCR's Inderrieden says: "Every second improvement to the checkout process adds \$475,000 (£237,054) to the bottom line of a typical grocery store, according to research undertaken by the analyst group IHL in the US." NCR has also worked with a major DIY retailer and, through a combination of productivity analysis, ergonomic assessments and new checkstand design, was able to reduce transaction time by 14 per cent. Keeping customers loyal and staff happy and comfortable is even more important in an increasingly tight economy.

With the Confederation of British Industry predicting slower GDP growth this year of 1.8 per cent, deciding whether to go ergonomic is a big deal. But it can be fitted in to existing plans for the future, as K3's Stephenson explains: "I would argue that if you are doing a store refresh, in terms of your design format or you are doing a technology refresh, why not go ergonomic?" If you have decided to try ergonomic equipment, getting everything right from the start is important.

Stewart of System Concepts says that retailers should consider two key points: involve ergonomics experts early in the design process and make sure that staff are involved. For example, with supermarkets increasingly selling bulky

items, hand-held scanners are easier to use than trying to manoeuvre the goods through a normal barcode scanner. NCR has noticed that supermarkets are upgrading their scanners to include both hand-held and fixed versions. And it has also introduced a new scanner, the NCR RealScan 780 FX, which can read the barcode quicker. The company has combined this with specialist image recognition software so it can decode damaged barcodes. The checkout is one area where ergonomics can help your business.

There are several areas of checkout design the Health and Safety Executive look at in their *Supermarket Checkouts and Musculoskeletal Disorders*

circular, aimed at local authorities.

It says: "Of particular note are height mismatches, scanning technology/scanner location, reach distances, cashier position and space provision.

Cashiers are very conscious of design-imposed restrictions."

This detailed circular is available on the Health and Safety Executive's website and is recommended reading.

Waitrose developed a new range of checkouts as part of a major EPoS programme. System Concepts were commissioned by the retailer to carry out an ergonomic evaluation of these new checkouts which were trailed at the Woodley store, near Reading. Stewart explains the results: "Overall, the new checkout worked well for customers and operators, giving them more usable space within a similar footprint and better eye contact between the operator and the customer. The back-to-back design is at a height which allows seated or standing operation and the operators have a choice

of scanning direction which should reduce musculoskeletal discomfort.”

Another approach is to go mobile. K3 has introduced the OrderPad – a mobile, hand-held terminal that takes and tracks customer orders. So instead of moving the customer away from what they are interested in buying, you bring the terminal to them. Stephenson explains how it works: “The terminal is designed so the sales person and the customer can look at the screen together and choose different options for the item they have chosen. The display presents those options along with related items in a highly visual way that engages the customer in the ordering process, giving you the opportunity to sell more. From an ergonomic point of view, there is a lot more consideration of the customer’s experience.”

There is ultimately a strong case for retailers going the ergonomic route when they next re-design their counters and checkouts. After all, happy staff and customers are more important than ever in a tightening economy.

