**Ergonomics as a holistic consideration**

**How companies can boost motivation, performance and productivity**

**Ergonomics in the workplace boosts productivity. It is now a well-known fact that the ergonomic design of work benches primarily has positive effects on the health of employees, but it also increases efficiency. Up to now, however, it has mostly been left to companies to decide whether or not they engage with the subject of ergonomics. The new Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) directive could change this, as reporting on sustainability issues – including occupational health and safety – will be compulsory in the future.**

It is good for employers to invest in the performance capability of their employees. After all, the numbers speak for themselves. According to the German Federal Statistical Office, in 2022, Germany had already reached the stage where half its population was over the age of 45, while a fifth was even over 66. It is estimated that older employees will make up 27 percent of the workforce in 2050. Yet older employees are prone to need longer off work when they are ill than younger ones do. Musculoskeletal disorders are still the primary cause of sick days. Measures therefore need to be implemented at an early stage to protect the health of employees in the long term. Many companies have already put in place occupational health programmes. One particularly effective measure is ergonomics in the workplace. Making more extensive use of this approach to optimise the working environment also helps in the “war on talent”. After all, the skills shortage is one of the most important business risks of our times. Companies that facilitate a comfortable work-life balance by offering flexible working time models score bonus points with applicants. If ergonomically designed work benches come on top of that, this can tip the balance and prompt young workers to choose one company over another.

**CSR has consequences for work bench design**

The draft directive from the EU Commission to regulate corporate due diligence in the supply chain (EU supply chain law) is increasing the prominence of corporate social responsibility. The draft directive obliges companies to examine carefully the social and ecological effects along their entire supply chain. Major, capital market-oriented companies have had to report on non-financial aspects since 2017. These aspects include environmental, social and employee issues, compliance with human rights and measures to prevent bribery and corruption. This is because these companies have a social, ecological and economic responsibility. In terms of employee affairs, they are required to report on occupational health protection and safety in the workplace. The ergonomic design of work benches is becoming increasingly important in this context. Employers must conduct regular, long-term analyses and implement improvements in the working environment. As a result, CSR is raising the profile of environmental, social and worker issues. Companies that anchor these issues in their philosophy and invest in appropriate measures derive economic benefit from this and are successful. After all, effective occupational health management means there are fewer accidents and days lost due to illness. What’s more, companies have a better chance of winning the “war for talent”, because they are seen as attractive employers.

**More and more companies are obliged to report on non-financial aspects**

While CSR was initially based on voluntary measures for integrating environmental and social issues into corporate activities, the EU Commission introduced new reporting obligations in April 2021 in the form of a proposed change to the CSR directive. If the proposal passes and is adopted into national law by the end of 2022, these reporting obligations will apply from as early as 1 January 2024, meaning they will cover the 2023 financial year. Companies that fail to publish a CSR report face fines of up to ten million euros. Companies with more than 250 employees are now subject to reporting obligations, and these obligations are set to be extended to SMEs that are listed on the stock exchange from 1 January 2026. New binding standards aim to enable a higher level of comparability between companies in the future.

**Designing ergonomic workplaces**

The basic equipment of industrial workplaces includes height-adjustable work benches and individually adjustable chairs. Employees can thus adopt the working position that is right for them and comfortable, and adjust it at any time to suit the task at hand. Height-adjustable work benches make it possible to change position constantly from seated to standing. What’s more, working environments can always be adapted to the height of different employees and their varying needs. At the same time, the design of the work bench should be suitable for process requirements. That applies to its size, load-bearing capacity and other features. For example, surfaces should not be reflective and should not be too hot or cold to the touch. It should be possible to arrange materials perfectly within the employee’s handling area to create the best possible conditions for ergonomic working practices. The chair should support frequent changes in sitting position. The seat and backrest must move in sync. Ideally, the seat should tilt slightly forwards and rotate. The height, angle and resistance of the backrest should also be adjustable.

**Win-win situation for companies and staff**

Respondents to a survey conducted by item indicated that optimum lighting was the most important requirement for a work bench system. After all, employees tire more quickly if the lighting in their working area is not ideal, due to flickering light or multiple shadows, for example. Other details, such as unfavourable colour temperatures, have a negative effect on performance in the long term. Companies should therefore use high-quality, cutting-edge solutions to ensure the working area is perfectly lit. Numerous standards and laws offer guidance on what ideal lighting looks like in various situations. However, the strength of lighting should be customised specifically to employees, who frequently find that the minimum requirements are not ideal for their needs. Other factors besides lighting that are important when improving the ergonomics of a work bench include the design of the handling area, options for providing information and the consideration of intralogistics processes and aspects of lean production. A modular system of components offers maximum flexibility in this regard, making it simple and straightforward to expand, modify and adjust industrial work benches to different requirements – to tailor them to the process and the employees. Many employers have long since recognised that the success and value of a company rely on healthy, motivated, qualified staff who are focused on performance. It is therefore essential to offer workers the best possible support in the form of ergonomic work bench design and thus create a win-win situation that benefits the people and the company alike.

If you are interested in finding out more, take a look at our “Ergonomics always pays” guide (in German) and the landing page <https://welcome.item24.de/ergonomie-am-arbeitsplatz-industrie-whitepaper>.

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**Caption 1:** Older employees tend to experience longer absences than younger employees. According to the 2020 and 2022 health reports from Techniker Krankenkasse (a German statutory health insurance provider), 60 to 64-year-olds were off sick for around three times longer than 30 to 34-year-olds between 2018 and 2021. (Source: item)

**Caption 2:** Switching between seated and standing working positions reduces physical strain. (Source: item)

**Caption 3:** It should be possible to arrange materials perfectly within the employee’s handling area to create the best possible conditions for ergonomic working practices. (Source: item)

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