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## Reducing Ergonomic Injuries by Automating Injury Prevention Processes

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Aspect #1 in  
Workforce  
Management

Today's uncertain economic conditions require businesses to manage costs and productivity more aggressively than ever. Every day an employee becomes injured or continues to work while injured negatively impacts the company's bottom line. According to a U.S. Department of Labor study titled "The Workers Compensation Crisis," in 2002 employers spent nearly \$350 billion in work-related injuries, and employees who got hurt on the job missed more than 41 million days of work.

Service companies with large contact centers experience unique challenges related to managing ergonomic injuries. The repetitive nature of the work, as well as environmental and cultural considerations, have resulted in injury rates and severity levels that lead to higher costs. In addition, most companies don't have a process for systematically collecting, analyzing and responding to their employees' work practices within the contact center. Why? Because they have not yet made the connection between increased injuries and higher workers' compensation benefits. Since companies don't realize they have a problem, they are less prone to implement ergonomic solutions for their contact centers. Fortunately, there are methods available that allow companies to implement preventive ergonomic programs without requiring substantial training and out-of-pocket costs.

### Business Process Automation – Ergonomics Made Simple

A new breed of business process automation tools provide new ways for call centers to implement existing ergonomic injury prevention practices more effectively, without requiring additional staff to collect and analyze data. What do business process automation tools actually do for ergonomics programs? They leverage technology to automate tasks currently performed—often inconsistently and at sub-optimal efficiency levels—by existing staff. Automating ergonomic management in a contact center includes: automatic collection of data from employees about their work habits; delivery of analyses and reports describing the ergonomic challenges exposed through the data collection; communication of risks, remediation techniques and training to key players; and integration of these analyses and communications into existing business processes. In this way, business process automation allows contact centers to direct their staff to perform more value-added services where they are needed most.

### The Power of Web-based Business Processes Automation Tools

From a technological perspective, the business process automation tools that require the least investment and intervention by the company's information technology staff are web-based ones. Web-based tools are hosted by a vendor, who provides fee-based access to the online tools. In addition, the hosting vendor is responsible for scaling the infrastructure as more users are added, and for taking care of security and maintenance.

A number of financial, telecommunications and other mission-critical service organizations are using web-based business process automation tools today to regulate the ergonomics programs in their contact centers. Typically, these tools automate the following processes:

- Employees receive an email communication, offering them the opportunity to participate in the program by logging on to the tool's web site (with an appropriately framed message, this communication can create goodwill among employees).
- Employees who log into the program provide answers to a self-assessment survey that has them describe their work habits, discomfort levels, workstation setup and typical working posture. The tools will use this data to rank employees by likelihood of injury. It is important that the self-assessment and ranking be medically sound and validated.
- Employees at varying risk levels can receive automated online training communications and downloadable risk remediation tools that teach and empower the employees to take care of themselves. The right tool for a contact center will allow for the delivery of these messages in ways that are consistent with contact center mandates. For example, if online training is delivered, the company should be able to customize it to be as short or long as is appropriate, depending on the amount of time that an employee or end-user can be away from the job.
- Employees will be asked to update their profiles periodically. This process should be quick and easy, with the primary goal of optimizing efficiency.
- Reports are made available to managers. These reports should be integrated with the company's human resources systems to ensure that the results and analyses can be communicated with other managers consistent with reports that management already sees.

Long-term success requires that the analyses from this data collection answer these critical questions: Where are my risks? What are the root causes of my risks? To what degree do remediation tools and communications reduce risk? What progress has been made over time to reduce risk? The answers give companies the ability to efficiently allocate injury prevention resources where they're needed most and to plan for ongoing risk remediation, using data rather than conjecture.

#### Choosing the Right BPA Tools

Whether a company chooses desktop software tools or web-based software tools to automate its ergonomic program management, the technology's critical capabilities should include:

- Enterprise interoperability: The system should operate with existing critical enterprise software systems such as authentication systems and HR data systems
- Security and access controls: Controls ensure the data collected and used is secure from sources who should not have privileged access
- Scalability: The implementation can grow exponentially as the company's contact center grows
- Flexibility: Existing processes can be accommodated in all degrees
- Ability to measure results: Services are provided that allow you to prove the value of the automation
- Service and support: The system ensures all individuals who touch the business process automation software receive tactical or strategic help when needed

#### Four Steps to Automating Ergonomic Injury Prevention

Before implementing business process automation technology, companies should

pay attention to these four primary steps to ensure success:

- Design of the program: The business process automation system should be flexible enough to ensure that you can automate your existing processes
- Customizing the program: The system should be configured such that rollout and implementation recognizes the unique productivity requirements of contact center employees
- Monitoring success and progress: Reports should include meaningful analyses that describe risk and cost reduction as well as employee satisfaction with the tool
- Response and evaluation: Again, flexibility in the system is necessary to ensure that changes can be made as needed to ensure maximum return on your investment

Using technology to automate processes does more than just optimize efficiencies around injury prevention. Implementing the right tools helps facilitate compliance with federal and state communication and training requirements and provides companies with critical information that enables them to allocate resources where needed most. Most importantly, these tools empower employees to make changes to their own work habits and workstation design—minimizing their discomfort levels, increasing their job satisfaction, and ultimately decreasing workers' compensation costs for the contact center. It is a win-win outcome for employee and employer.

#### Sidebar 1:

Remedy Interactive ([www.remedyint.com](http://www.remedyint.com)) develops and delivers software that reduces workers' compensation costs through the automation of corporate injury prevention processes. The company is a recognized leader in ergonomics and won the 2002 National Ergonomics Conference Attendees Choice award for "Product Most Likely to Improve Productivity and Profitability."

The firm combines business, medical and technological expertise to deliver software that fosters a proactive approach to injury prevention management. Remedy Interactive backs up its software products with strategic consulting to ensure the software is configured to match the existing or desired client unique processes.

#### Sidebar 2: AT&T Ensures Compliance with Ergonomic Safety Regs

AT&T Wireless Services recently determined that business process automation technology could help reduce risks and ensure compliance with ergonomic safety regulations at its contact centers across the country.

The automated rollout of the technology, which will be implemented in a staged fashion, began recently. To date, almost 1,000 employees have entered the system. These employees have completed the initial self-assessment, which provides safety managers at AT&T Wireless with information about who the highest risk employees are. Teaching and communication tools are then used to empower the employees to help themselves. The teaching begins with a brief online training, which describes some of the basic physiological principles behind good ergonomics. The training also offers simple tips and hints on how to improve one's ergonomic health, without the need to invest in additional expensive equipment. Depending on the employee's risk level, up to two follow-up emails are sent to users. These emails are personalized for each employee, offering content unique to each one's risk-elevating issues. They provide each employee with information about how risk can be lowered.

Safety managers and other stakeholders at AT&T Wireless now have data—data that has never before been easily available. The reports give them an understanding of the risk levels and causes of increased risk among the user population. Analyses of the risk data allow AT&T Wireless to develop impactful strategies and tactics to reduce risk and injury.

The data also tracks information that AT&T Wireless needs for compliance, including all communications, identified problems, remediation efforts, training completion and more. All of these records exist in one centralized database and can be easily viewed, updated and shared.

Users are also invited to complete an anonymous satisfaction and results survey. Results to date are impressive:

- 89 percent of users believe they are working more comfortably now as a result of using the system
- 92 percent of users would recommend the system to a colleague.

AT&T Wireless plans to roll out this technology to more than 4,500 employees.

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