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## How to Manage Ergonomics Champions at the Grassroots Level

*For ergonomics to become "the way we do things around here," individuals who are asked to spend time on ergonomic tasks must see them as personally relevant.*

By Arnold Neustaetter, Stephanie Albert Oct 01, 2011

Grassroots ergonomics programs, in which employees contribute to safety program administration as a secondary job responsibility, are common in organizations that maintain a strong culture of safety. There are numerous benefits to this style of program, notably: 1) cost containment by staffing fewer safety personnel, which is especially appealing as more safety managers are being asked to achieve results with fewer resources; and 2) increasing safety ownership and engagement at all levels, to moving safety from a mindset of "required" to "the way we do things around here."

Without the right processes in place to manage grassroots ergonomics efforts, however, there is a greater risk of failure due to confusion, lack of motivation, or unmonitored tasks slipping through the cracks. In order to avoid the pitfalls associated with executing ergonomics at this level, a number of management best practices must be followed.

Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) has employed a successful grassroots ergonomics program for both industrial and office employees since 2006. PG&E's program consists of "internal consultants," who are employees selected to be responsible for ergonomics within their department, in addition to their regular jobs. These employees are trained to implement all ergonomics efforts across their work groups. These efforts vary by department (allowing for the "grassroots" feel) but include responsibilities such as conducting in-person evaluations and job task analyses.

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Since the program's implementation in 2006, the company's office ergonomic injury rates have decreased by 33 percent and industrial ergonomic injury rates have dropped by 79 percent. How did PG&E achieve these results? Below are the five keys to the success of its grassroots ergonomics program.

#### 1. Train in Both Ergonomics and Leadership

It is critical to train internal consultants up front. At PG&E, industrial consultants complete a three-day training class focusing on job task analysis. For those working in the office, there is a two-day training focusing on workstation ergonomics and safe computing principles.

A strong internal consultant requires training not only in ergonomics fundamentals, but also in basic leadership skills. For example, let's say she needs to present a mid-year ergonomics report to her supervisors. If she lacks the ability to present clearly or compellingly, the supervisors might overlook the critical achievements gained from ergonomic programs and apply their attention, buy-in, and budget to other safety areas. At PG&E, leadership training includes running a goal-oriented meeting, using the computer to document work, delegating work to team members whom they don't directly supervise, and keeping team

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members engaged in the ergonomics process.

**2. Define Ergonomics "Must's" and "Don't Have To's"**

Initial training should clearly set expectations for what the role of the internal consultant entails, as well as a clear communication of the processes and resources in place for ergonomics. At PG&E, internal consultants are responsible for acting as ergonomics champions, maintaining familiarity with available resources, and advising supervisors and employees on their use. Industrial consultants are also responsible for using task analysis results and moving proposed changes into the organization.

The importance of clearly defining required processes is intuitive. However, an important step unique to the grassroots program is communicating the areas of *flexibility* to the internal consultants. In order to achieve the grassroots "feel" and associated cultural benefits, the consultants must be encouraged to create processes and communications personalized to the culture of their department.

At PG&E, every internal office consultant knows that they are required to 1) ensure all employees are trained and assessed (online) biannually, 2) conduct an in-person evaluation for any employee at a new workstation, and 3) escalate employees reporting discomfort to external consultants. One internal consultant in a department with a more proactive culture has taken the initiative to implement "ergo buddies," a system whereby employees are paired to monitor each other's ergonomics every other week and point out any problems with workstation setup or posture. This system helps keep ergonomics on the front burner for those employees while allowing ergonomics processes to reflect the interactive culture of the department.

**Table 1. Sliding scale used to evaluate ergonomic grassroots team effectiveness**

Level	No activity
0	
Level	Team in formative stage
1	
Level	Team has formed; low output, struggles with completing task analyses/evaluations and documenting work
2	
Level	Team functioning at a moderate level; taking on task analyses/evaluations and other related projects in a timely fashion
3	
Level	Team performs at a high level; good leadership, good line of business participation, clear sense of purpose; accomplishes task analyses/evaluations and documents work
4	

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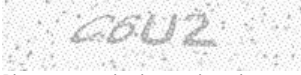
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