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Social Security Administration Discomfort Survey

Editor's note: This summary was provided to CTDNews by the AFL-CIO. It was not released by the Social Security Administration or the author, Rani Lueder.

Executive Summary

The following represents a review of the preliminary findings of an ergonomics workplace survey of SSA [Social Security Administration]. SSA collected this survey between July and October 1996. This review of the findings of this survey data was written by Rani Lueder, CPE, Humanics ErgoSystems Inc. for the JCID Committee of the Social Security Administration, under the direction of JCID member Don Clifton.

The joint Committee for Implementation and Design (JCID), a labor/management committee has been conducting in-depth efforts to improve ergonomic conditions at SSA since 1992.

This report was written to conform to the August 1993 Jaffe Award. This award stipulated that one of JCID's efforts was to develop a survey using body part discomforts to create an ergonomic data base following the installation of the ergonomic workstations.

The objective of this ergonomics survey is to determine the extent of discomfort experienced by SSA's employees; the presence of ergonomics risk factors; the relationship between discomfort and workplace factors; and respondent attitudes regarding their workplace and working conditions. A secondary objective of the study is to examine the potential increased risk of work-related cumulative trauma disorders at SSA in light of changing patterns of computer age and to provide a framework for their prevention.

As part of JCID's ergonomics efforts, a two-page ergonomics survey was used to survey SSA's field employees nationwide'. Among approximately 29,000 employees contacted, 47 percent responded.

About respondents: Participants were predominantly female (73 percent). Two-thirds had worked at SSA between 11 and 30 years; two-thirds were also aged 30-49 years. The most common occupation was claims representatives (61 percent) and service representatives (22 percent). Thirteen percent reported that they worked at teleservice centers.

About discomfort rates (agency-wide): The most common source of discomfort was of the neck/shoulder; 54 percent that they experienced moderate or stronger discomfort at the end of the day. This was followed in frequency by discomfort of the eyes (48 percent); low back (42 percent); hands (40 percent); and elbows (12 percent).

Among these respondents, 2,145 (16 percent) reported that they were in extreme pain in one or more body parts (excepting the eyes) at the end of their workday.

It was noteworthy that when comparing discomfort rates at the end of the day and rates of reported increases in discomfort as the day progresses, the pattern of discomforts was essentially the same.

These discomfort rates are substantial and warrant attention. Of particular note, the prevalence of neck/shoulder and hand discomfort is considerably higher than is common with such surveys.

Rates of seeking medical treatment: Almost one-third (31 percent) of respondents reported that they had sought treatment for computer-related symptoms. Females (36 percent) were more likely to seek help than males (21 percent).

Among women, service reps sought treatment for work-related symptoms the most often (37 percent) followed by claims reps (37 percent), technical assistants (32 percent), "other" (31 percent), and claims development clerks (30 percent).

Nineteen percent of supervisors sought treatment. Thirty-four percent of employees working at teleservice centers had sought medical treatment.(Figures I 1-1 2)

Discomfort (by gender): Females experienced considerably more discomfort than males; these differences were consistent

for all body parts.

About discomfort rate (by age): Those aged 45-54 reported the highest rates of discomfort, closely followed by those 35-44. The youngest (under 25) and oldest (55+) respondents reported the least discomfort.

About discomfort rates (by years at SSA): Those who worked at SSA for 6-10 years reported significantly more discomfort in the neck/shoulder, upper back, lower back and hands than other employees.

Discomfort (by job): The highest rates of increased discomfort over the workday were reported by employees at teleservice centers, followed by service reps, claims reps and claims development clerks. Supervisors generally reported the least discomfort.

Employees performing front-end interviewing (FEI) were consistently more uncomfortable for all body parts except for the hands than non-front-end interviewing (non-FEI). Differences were most pronounced for the neck, eyes, and lower back. As the single exception, non-FEI employees reported considerably higher levels of hand/wrist discomfort.

Type of computer: The highest rates of discomfort were generally found with respondents using "other" computers. Those using FOSE 4 computers reported somewhat less discomfort than those using other systems. However, computer usage did not significantly affect rates of seeking medical treatment for symptoms caused by computer work.

Seating: Most users (59 percent) considered their chair "somewhat comfortable" or better. Seventy-one percent indicate that they adjust their chair. Five percent indicate that their chair is broken.

Training increased rates of adjusting chairs. These differences were particularly pronounced at district offices; at these offices, training was associated with a four-fold increase in adjusting their chairs.

Secondary work surfaces: Most users (63 percent) did not know that the second (panel-hung) work surface could be reconfigured. Among those responding, two-thirds (68 percent) reported that the height of their second work surface was comfortable; about one-third considered them uncomfortable.

Computer station: Eighteen percent of SSA respondents adjust their computer table. Those reporting the most discomfort were more likely to perform the adjustments.

Those who received training were more likely to adjust their computer station, and considered it easier to adjust.

Adjustment rates were associated with job type; Service reps and claims development clerks were most likely to adjust their computer tables (22 percent each).

Fifty-one percent of respondents indicated that they sometimes work at the computer while standing. Teleservice employees were more likely to stand at the computer (57 percent) than district office workers (49 percent).

Differences in discomfort rates between users of Herman Miller, FPI Systems, and FPI Modular workstations were not statistically significant.

Headsets: Sixty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they wore headsets. Of these, 68 percent consider them comfortable.

Lighting and glare: Sixty-one percent are aware of glare on the screen. Discomfort was strongly associated with glare, for all body parts. Only three out of four respondents thought they had enough light where they needed it.

Rest Breaks. There was a strong and consistent relationship between discomfort and not taking breaks. Agency-wide, 77 percent of respondents report taking breaks. Claims development clerks, service representatives and employees at teleservice centers were most likely to take breaks (83 - 85 percent).

Ergonomics training: Seventy percent of respondents indicated that they received ergonomics training. The large majority of respondents considered this training helpful. Those who received training reported consistently lower rates of discomfort for all body parts.

Respondents who received training were more likely to adjust their chair, adjust their computer table, and recognize their second worksurface could be reconfigured. They were less likely to see glare on the screen.

Respondents that received training were also more willing to report strong or regular discomfort to their supervisor. When they did report discomfort, those trained were more satisfied with the Supervisor's response (80 percent vs. 66 percent of those not trained).

Organizational issues: Significant organizational (psychosocial) problems are evident at SSA. Seventy percent of SSA respondents were not willing to report their names on the survey form. Further, those not willing to write their names were disproportionately likely to indicate that they would not tell the supervisor if they were experiencing significant discomfort. Twenty-eight percent of respondents would not tell their supervisor if they experienced strong or regular discomfort. Among

those that indicated that they did report strong or regular discomfort, 74 percent maintained they received assistance. Those in severe pain were less likely to believe that their supervisor had responded to their reports of pain than others (59 percent received assistance, compared to 42 percent of those in pain that did not).

- For a more on the survey, see the June issue of CTDNews.

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