

Sore at Social Security

By Lisa Daniel
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Work is literally a pain in the neck for many Social Security employees.

At least one-fourth of Social Security field office employees say they endure moderate or strong discomfort because of their work. Neck and shoulder pain were cited most often.

That's the result of the first comprehensive survey of the Social Security Administration's increasingly computerized work force and one of the largest ergonomic studies in government, an employee group said.

The survey was done by an outside specialist under contract to the agency. It was restricted to the agency's 29,000 field office employees -- claims and service representatives and telephone service representatives. Forty-seven percent responded, according to the report.

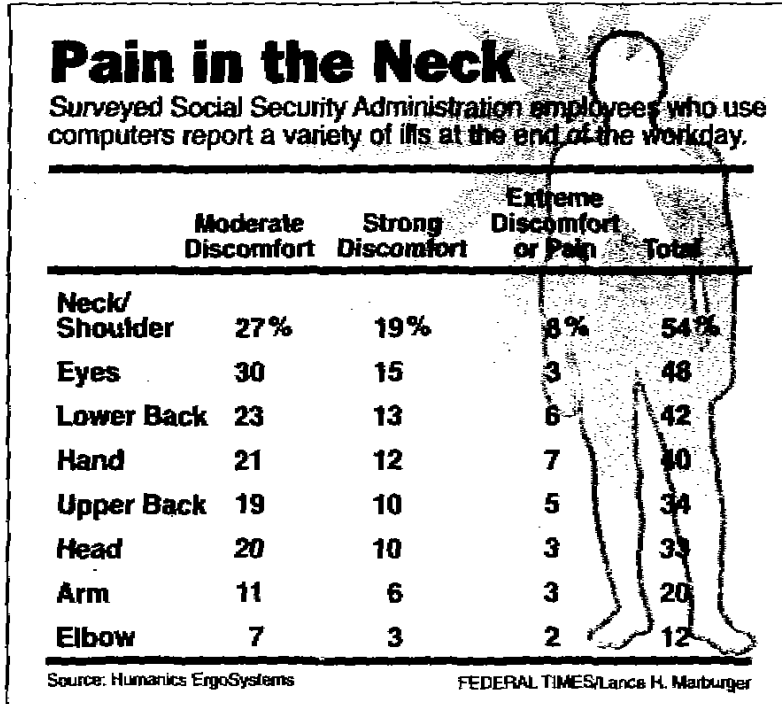
Seventy-three percent of those who answered are women. Two-thirds have worked at Social Security 11 to 30 years and are 30 to 49 years old.

Of those reporting pain, 16 percent of respondents, or 2,145 employees, said they were in extreme pain in one or more areas.

The rate of reporting neck, shoulder, hand, wrist and arm discomfort was the highest the specialist had found in a large organization.

Social Security contracted the study last year to Rani Lueder, a certified professional ergonomist with the Humanics ErgoSystems of Encino, Calif.

The agency commissioned the survey following arbitration with the American Federation of Government Employees over a lack of ergonomic



furniture, union officials said.

Social Security spokesman Rich Hensley said the agency had already committed to giving every field employee who uses a computer new ergonomic furniture. The survey was used as a "baseline" for judging the furniture, he said.

"The survey was a necessary precursor to making this investment," Hensley said.

The agency began installing the furniture last fall and expects the project to take 12 to 18 months, he said.

Lueder commended Social Security's union-management team in charge of the ergonomic project.

The new stations "eliminate many of SSA's work-related occupational hazards," Lueder said.

But, she added, work injuries will continue if the agency doesn't address other areas such as lighting and glare, rest breaks, training, seating and organizational factors.

Lueder found that about one-third of those reporting pain consulted a doctor.

DOD NEWS

Army Speeds Up Closure

The Army is hastening its post closures and alignments.

The service is "accelerating" all base-closing or mission actions "to obtain savings and return sets to the private sector as quickly as possible the Army announced in April.

When the base-closing process began, shutting Army post typically required about six years, maximum permitted by law. Today, the Army mothball a facility in half that time.

"We've gotten better," said John Nerger, chief of the Army's base realignment and closure office. "We have capitalized on lessons learned."

The Army has closed 91 of 112 U.S. facilities selected by four base-closing commissions in 1991, 1993 and 1995. Of 27 installations designated for realignment, the Army has completed 15.

Later this year, the Army will close Vint Farms Station, Va., the only Army facility recommended for closure by the 1993 commission.

Nine of 29 facilities recommended for closure the 1995 commission already have shut their doors. Several more will close later this year.

Air Force Merging Labs

Some jobs will be eliminated when the Air Force completes the merger of four laboratories into one.

In April, the Air Force Materiel Command merged the Air Force Research Laboratory by combining the office of scientific research at Bolling Field, Washington, D.C., and four labs:

- Armstrong Laboratory at Brooks AFB, TX
- Phillips Laboratory, Kirtland AFB, N.M.
- Rome Laboratory, Rome, N.Y.
- Wright Laboratory, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH

Though the consolidation will slim the command's laboratory system, it is too soon to judge the magnitude of job reductions or where they will occur, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard L. ... commander of the new lab.

The command's science and technology Wright-Patterson will serve as the nucleus of the new combined laboratory, but the four labs