

HS Broadcast 03 – Display Screen Equipment

One of the most common health & safety tasks that I am requested to do is undertaking a risk assessment of an employee's work station where they have display screen equipment. This is a fundamental part of the Health & Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992.

It has been claimed that the use of DSE equipment has been responsible for a wide range of adverse health effects such as; repetitive strain injury, eye and eyesight defects, fatigue and stress, etc.

These are all ergonomic issues, which is the study of the interaction between people and the objects and environment around them. In the workplace this includes; chairs, tables, machines and commonly, workstations.

The Regulations are primarily designed for the protection of office workers using desktop equipment. Nevertheless, portable devices when used for prolonged periods are covered by the legislation and as a result employers must assess the risks and implement practical solutions to reduce the risk of harm.

In past years it was relatively straight forward to set up a workstation for the traditional box computer with a separate screen. This task became much more difficult with the increasing popularity of laptops and with the use now of tablet computers great care must be taken with habitual users of these objects. Habitual would generally mean more than one hour of continual use. One of the first signs of a problem will be neck and wrist pain and therefore in terms of tablets there is a need for practical solutions to this problem.

Tablets are light, versatile and an easy way of accessing the Internet, databases or e-mails, wherever you happen to be. For those reasons they are increasingly used on the move for tasks previously carried out on laptops. They are very useful; however, there is a down side. It is much harder to find a comfortable position to work in because the screen acts as both keyboard and display. Users tend to adopt a hunched posture and the typing position puts more stress on the muscles of the arms, hands and fingers than with a regular keyboard. Ironically, due to their versatility the amount of screen time is also likely to increase relative to a laptop. Therefore, if you are selecting a device for prolonged use a tablet may be a risky choice.

As mentioned in previous Broadcasts employers are responsible for the safety and health of staff wherever they are working. If you provide any type of work equipment, including mobile devices, you must ensure, within reason, that it can be used safely.

Potential Solutions

A tablet without modifications is most suitable for work which involves reading and observing content as opposed to inputting information.

I would recommend that if staff are required to answer e-mails or write documents on a tablet on a frequent basis, purchase a separate keyboard and stand for the screen, or a case which incorporates a stand.

Also, when purchasing mobile devices, it would be wise to weigh up the benefits and risks of the traditional box computer with the laptop and the tablet. With laptops becoming more versatile, it may be a better option to take that route, especially if a lot of typing is required. As mentioned above a laptop is not a perfect solution. If you decide to use laptops make sure that they are set up and used correctly.

Remember, where portable devices including tablets are used for prolonged periods, e.g. an hour or more, at the user's own workplace, there should be additional equipment to create a properly ergonomic workstation. This is usually achieved by plugging the portable device into a full-sized screen and keyboard, and providing a separate mouse. This is exactly what I have at my work station both in the office and at home.

It is also important to ensure that staff are briefed on the hazards of using mobile devices and on how to limit the risks, including the avoidance of awkward postures and taking plenty of screen breaks. Also remind them of the cumulative effect of using such devices in their own time.

If you require further assistance / advice please do not hesitate to contact Andy Tomlinson at Nicholsons.
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