Key questions help choose ergonomics consultant

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IF YOUR COMPANY has been prudent, and you have already implemented an ergonomics program you can surpass any Federal requirements (29 CFR 1910.900) in a more efficient way and conserve valuable resources for your employer.

You cannot avoid the requirements per se, as your program must be equivalent to or surpass OSHA requirements to grandfather. To qualify for grandfathering you will need to meet key requirements (five elements stipulated in the standard). If your company tries to feign an ergonomics program you will likely face serious consequences.

If your company cannot meet the grandfathering requirement, you will likely need to get smart on ergonomics and hire a consultant as the burden is quite heavy when complying with OSHA's requirements.

If you decide to choose a consultant, be aware that the number of people calling themselves ergonomists is sure to rise. When the asbestos standards came out, everyone who could spell asbestos became an asbestos removal and abatement consultant/expert.

These charlatans, without any of the appropriate background and education, cast a negative shadow on the whole asbestos effort. The same is likely to be true for ergonomics. Rest assured, there will be many people calling themselves ergonomics consultants, qualified or not.

ANSWER KEY QUESTIONS

So how are you to identify the right person to provide ergonomics services for your company?

There are many things to consider: education, experience, certification and customer service. When done correctly, many companies today are realizing the benefits obtained through the services of an ergonomist and the implementation of an ergonomic standard in the worksite.

Increased productivity, smaller workers' comp claims, and a decline in the number of lost work days are just a few of these benefits. When considering the services of an ergonomic consultant, try to answer each of the following questions.

1. What are the certifications of the ergonomist you are considering: CPEE, CPE, CSP (Ergonomics), COHN, CIH, Other?

Before addressing certifications, it is important to draw a distinction between certifications and one-, two-, or three-day seminars that issue, "certificates," where attendees are "certificated."

Certifications typically require education, experience and rigorous testing (at least one exam). Certificates typically require the attendee to be there (awake or not) during the seminar and at the end, receive a "certificate." To draw a bright line between the two, I pose the following question: Which airplane would you prefer to be a passenger on, one where the pilot was certified, or one where the pilot was certificated?

Education, experience, certification and customer service are benchmarks to consider during the search for an ergonomics professional.

That being said, let's turn to certifications that address ergonomics.

The Certified Professional Ergonomist (CPE), the CSP (Ergonomics) and the Certified Professional Ergonomic Evaluator (CPEE) are the top three common titles and certifications of professionals you may consider.

Individuals displaying these titles on their business cards are usually people who have passed or completed a combination of work experience and educational standards (by examination).

Looking for these certifications is a good start in the process, but the search does not end with a title.

All of these individuals may or may not be the right choice, and just because someone has a CPE or CPEE title does not mean he is a seasoned professional. Certification is only the beginning of the search.

2. What are the ergonomist's education and experience?

One of the steps involved in selecting consultants is reviewing their educational background. Does the individual have a clinical/medical background? Does the individual have engineering and industrial productivity, or field-related work? Does the individual know what happens on a rig? All of these can be useful, depending on the nature of the analysis or task.

One advantage of a medical background is that often, the individual has direct experience in treating patients who have experienced musculoskeletal disorders (MSD).

Someone with a physical therapy degree who went on to get the CPEE has an excellent education, for example, for understanding the musculoskeletal aspects of ergonomic disorders and their effects on people.

This experience can be quite valuable when it comes to providing ergonomic assessments in the workplace. Many ergonomists possess the necessary credentials but have little experience in treating an MSD injury.

Ergonomists with an engineering and industrial psychology background usually begin the thought process by reviewing productivity of the worksite. How can the task's efficiency or productivity be improved?

These individuals gradually move toward safety issues. The key is an individual who looks at the process.

For example, the 100-lb mud sack dilemma is frequently addressed for both onshore and offshore rigs. There have been discussions regarding the use of 50-lb sacks. But does that address the real problem? No.

The key is to figure out how to get the mud in the hole without lifting it.

Hmmm….How about a 500 or 1,000-sack bin that can be metered and monitored to deliver mud to the hole using a screw-type auger? All it takes is a request from

the vendor to deliver the product in the fashion that you, the customer want it.

The key engineering principle is thinking about the process. How can I do this or that without lifting?

The point is that any of these approaches can be very successful. The combination of an educational background with an ergonomic certification will begin to separate the wheat from the chaff.

3. What do you know about the firm's background or specialty?

Many companies sell themselves as experts in ergonomics. Unfortunately, when you dig deeper you often find the firm really specializes in issues such as indoor air quality, confined space, industrial hygiene, or safety programs.

Ideally, you would seek to match your ergonomic needs with a firm whose specialty is in that area. Are you trying to move or rebuild an assembly line? Then an engineering background would be most beneficial.

Are you concerned with a drilling rig? Then an engineering background with an appreciation for drilling operations would be equally beneficial.

4. What is the firm's track record? What is its project experience?

If you have primarily an office environment, you would not want someone who has performed hundreds of assessments on drilling sites and manufacturing. The converse is also true.

Ask for a list of projects worked on that are similar to yours, then try to match up according to the individual's experience. This allows for a more thorough assessment of your ergonomic needs.

5. Have you checked the references?

References are somewhat overlooked by today's hustle-bustle, need-things-done-yesterday mentality. Still, I strongly recommend taking the time to call two or three former clients to ask about the work that was performed.

Did it meet their expectations? Was the project completed on time, with minimal disturbance in the workplace? How did the individual relate to the various levels of management within the company? Don't be bashful—ask.

If the information you receive is unfavorable, clarify the reason. Was it the individual? Was it the client? Or was it poor communication, resulting in unmet expectations?

6. Are you being realistic in what you expect?

All too often I find a company that has been experiencing numerous MSD injuries but has not put forth any effort to solve the problem. Instead, they are treating the symptoms with Band-Aids and quick-fix strategies.

Ask yourself: What are we trying to accomplish? Why do we want the services of a professional ergonomist? How will we measure the success or failure of the program? Is senior management committed to this endeavor? Will they be working directly with the consultant?

Are labor unions involved, and have they endorsed this project? What types of on-site training and carry over will be initiated? In most cases, the ergonomist will ask you these questions before getting started.

7. What else must you consider?

Another consideration that may be important is the size of the firm.

One advantage of a smaller firm may be its ability to meet your corporate objectives for small and minority business procurement. They may also have less red tape when it comes to price negotiations for services, and often you will be speaking with the senior decision-maker, not a lower-level representative.

A firm with a local presence will generally respond faster to your needs and have nominal travel expenses. Also consider the consultant's promptness in answering your questions or returning your initial phone call.

Any company that does not return this call within 24 hours may be too big, too bureaucratic and too busy to meet your immediate needs. Finally, what follow-up services do they provide? Will the firm come back out to re-evaluate or call to ensure comprehension and implementation? Does it provide ongoing support?

A good ergonomics program, like any health or safety program, will pay for itself. It needs to be part of the company culture and the work place philosophy. Good ergonomics will ultimately improve your company's bottom line.

A FEDERAL PRIORITY

The federal government's enforcement of safe ergonomics practices is sure to keep plenty of "real" ergonomics consultants busy. Courts generally are not siding with the plaintiffs in repetitive stress injury litigation. The injuries haven't disappeared, but there are no signs that we are in an epidemic.

Musculoskeletal disorders of the upper extremities, such as carpal tunnel syndrome and rotator cuff tendonitis, were one of 21 research priorities established by NIOSH in the National Occupational Research Agenda released earlier this year.

And OSHA's National Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, known as NACOSH, was scheduled to meet in early September to discuss forming a NACOSH ergonomics workgroup among other things.

The NORA report said these disorders are responsible for more than $2.1 billion in workers' compensation costs and $90 million in indirect costs (hiring, training, overtime and administrative costs) annually

The report said the workers' comp costs, "undoubtedly underestimate the actual magnitude of these disorders."

Editor's note: *As* Drilling Contractor *went to press, Congress had voted to revoke the OSHA ergonomics rule handed down late last year.* ***President Bush*** *was expected to sign the bill authorizing repeal.*