

Ergonomics



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In January of 1996, USPS notified NALC that it had awarded a contract to the University of Louisville to conduct an ergonomic study associated with the handling of mail in a DPS environment. This decision was brought on by concerns relating to increased repetitive-motion injuries.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ergonomics as “an applied science concerned with designing and arranging things people use so that the people and things interact most efficiently and safely—called also biotechnology, human engineering, human factors.”

The 1997 report issued by the University of Louisville includes the following observation:

Overall the main strategy of the USPS for reducing and/or controlling the musculoskeletal stresses associated with the new work methods should be to minimize the amount of mail the carriers have to hold and carry in their hands at one time.

This observation ties in well with the term “hierarchy of controls” as publicized by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to control what we do and how we do it so that we minimize injury caused by the work we do. (See my July 2015 safety and health column.)

In March of 2003, USPS and NALC agreed to place inverted trays in the bottom of 1046-P hampers as a way to address local bending and lifting concerns (see M-01477).

Once we dove in to the world of ergonomics, we observed that there was much more to learn. In the 2005 Comprehensive Statement on Postal Operations, USPS shared that it had:

...expanded participation in joint initiatives with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and employee unions to improve workplace safety...The Ergonomic Risk Reduction Program (ERRP) is designed to reduce both the number and severity of musculoskeletal disorders, build labor/management teams with ergonomic skill, and cultivate partnerships to identify and control ergonomic risk...Customer Service employees have also requested an ergonomic process to assist in the identification and reduction of musculoskeletal disorders. The organization of ERRP for Customer Service differs from the plants since CS ERRP is not confined to a single building. A model for CS ERRP was developed and successfully tested in 2005.

The testing began in upstate New York, then was expanded to the Pacific Area in a number of districts. When it first started, there was enthusiasm coming from the letter carrier craft, which appreciated something being done to make their working conditions safer, as well as from managers, who observed and benefitted from a reduction in injuries. This was a win-win for all.

In April of 2008, USPS and NALC agreed on tools to reduce injuries, including utility hooks for loading and unloading vehicles, hamper inserts as referenced above and a method to elevate mail off the floor to reduce bending and lifting (see M-01773).

Somewhere between 2008 and 2010, the newness wore off and the enthusiasm wore off. The ERRP specialists who had been trained and were training others moved on to new things or back to their routes. This was very disappointing for our union and our craft.

In 2010, on my arrival to DC, we began to push for permanent expansion of ergonomics so it wasn't that thing that others did.

In November of 2013, USPS issued revisions (USPS 3574) to the EL-809 (Guidelines for Area/Local Joint Labor Management Safety and Health Committees) to include ergonomics as a duty and responsibility of the local safety committees. USPS explained that the change made ergonomics a permanent agenda item for each local safety committee meeting. Local parties were tasked with reviewing ergonomics needs and resources so as to provide possible solutions at their local site.

During a recent state convention, we were asked about management's decision to remove attachments from our cases that previously elevated mail off the ground. The result again placed mail on the floor, undoing the effects of the good choices mentioned above.

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It is clear that many managers do not care about safety and have not learned about ergonomics enough to weigh the pros and cons in the operational decisions they make. They need to be enlightened before they hurt someone. If local management has reverted to old systems and taken away the good ideas that were agreed to in 2008, then it is time to address this in our safety committee meetings.

Keep an eye on each other.