



## Setting a higher ergonomic standard at an Ontario university

A lack of resources is often cited as a major barrier to workplace ergonomic interventions. Faculty at an Ontario university overcame this by negotiating contract language and an annual budget dedicated to purchasing well-designed office equipment.

### Negotiating a healthy working environment

University faculty often spend a large part of each workday sitting. The health risks associated with occupational sitting are well-documented. Along with various musculoskeletal disorders, prolonged sitting is now found to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and even death.

To seriously address these issues, the faculty association and the university administration collectively bargained language on their working environment. Under the contract, the employer agrees to provide “ergonomically appropriate” office furniture, lighting and ventilation. More importantly, the parties agreed to establish an annual budget for these improvements.

### Developing a collaborative approach

Gaining this contract language and a committed budget was a significant victory, but the contract also acknowledges the importance of “members playing a substantive role in decisions affecting their working environment.” For faculty the process would be equally important in determining how the monies would be spent to best serve the needs of its members. They wanted to clarify an overall vision and process for the new language and budget to help them set priorities.

To help accomplish this, the faculty association and the university administration also negotiated a joint Working Space Committee comprised of two representatives from each group. Together the committee coordinates the process to identify, assess and recommend the purchase of new chairs, keyboard trays and other components of the university work setting.

The committee established goals and objectives and a blueprint for action. An important first step was to survey faculty to identify individual needs. Before moving ahead though the committee sought outside ergonomics expertise and approached the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) for assistance including the development of appropriate survey questions.

### Making sustainable recommendations

Following the survey and analysis, the committee again went to OHCOW seeking specific advice before purchasing new equipment to ensure they selected appropriate equipment that staff most needed and which would make best use of limited resources. Prior to this process chairs and equipment were replaced on a one-off basis in a reactive manner. Armed with a new and informed process and a greater understanding of ergonomics, the committee could identify staff with the most pressing needs in an objective and fair manner.

Since its inception more than 10 years ago, the annual budget for this program has now grown to \$40,000. Through this fund the committee can remediate the concerns of existing faculty and ensure new faculty starting their careers have the appropriate equipment to carry out their work safely and comfortably. The types of ergonomic interventions have also evolved with the science. Now, instead of asking for replacement keyboard trays, faculty are more likely to request stand-up desks and ergonomic lap-top docking stations.

To recognize the university’s proactive approach to health and safety, OHCOW awarded them a Certificate of Achievement and added them to the clinic’s honour roll. Clearly, this educational institution has well-learned the value of a properly designed workplace.

