



SIM 2013

Ergo-policing. Improving safety and ergonomic requirements of human resources involved in police duties

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Abstract

An occupational health and safety management standard must be designed to ensure a planned and coordinated approach to managing health and safety risks in the workplace. It should include procedures for preventing injuries and illness, and for managing the quick return to work of injured police employees. In law enforcement organisations, ergonomic aspects and safety issues must be tackled with three priorities that are essential for that occupation: officer safety, public safety and avoidance of litigation. Therefore, police officers provide their own safety, protect the citizens and try to make sure that their actions do not create litigation against themselves or their organisation. The equipment and workstations designed for the law enforcement personnel to support these priorities has to be effective, safe and reliable.

After implementing an effective ergonomic standard, the Romanian Police should significantly reduce work related injury rates, along with their severity and associated costs. While we do not know exactly how many police organisations offer occupational health and safety programs or what programs they offer, we do know that, in general, the law enforcement field could significantly benefit from adopting a comprehensive health and safety standard.

This paper suggests the implementation of a comprehensive health and safety design standard in police organisations in order to manage properly some ergonomic stressors in police activity and some possible solutions have been proposed. A questionnaire survey was performed on a population of 50 police officers to assess levels of strain associated with a series of potential home and work related stressors. Participants were split into two scoring groups, operative and non-operative officers, on the basis of a general ergonomic checklist in order to identify those stressors.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of SIM 2013 / 12th International Symposium in Management.

Keywords: Ergonomics; human resources; occupational health and safety; risk management; reliability

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1. Ergonomics in police duties - synthesis of some relevant research results in the literature

The idea of organisations which promote health at work means that organisational and personal wellbeing are interconnected and there is an effective management practice to combine those two. Such practice emphasizes efficiency by creating a supportive organisational climate for performance, effective use of human resources and minimizes barriers. A study was conducted by ergonomists with the objective of identifying a list of organisational practices involved in setting up an organisation that promotes health at work in association with both organisational efficiency, ergonomic design and reducing occupational stress (Sauter et al., 1996). This type of organisation focuses on quality, investing in employee development, engages in strategic planning activities, provide fair pay and rewards. Many of these activities are aspects of effective management emphasizing quality and innovation. Many countries have laws that specify the maximum level allowed for health risk on a job. Although many of these laws relate specifically to exposure to hazardous working conditions, the chemicals or toxic substances, few of them make reference to ergonomic design or stressful working conditions.

There are many definitions of ergonomics in the literature. The following is from Helander (2006):

- Consider environmental and organisational constraints;
- Uses knowledge of human abilities and limitations;
- Design the system, organisation, job, machine, tool, or consumer products;
- Safety, efficient, and comfortable to use.

Romanian ergonomists formulated more precise and, at the same time, more comprehensive definitions of the new science. Thus, professor Miron Constantinescu shows that ergonomics is not a unilateral science, but a confluence of sciences and a convergence of multiple disciplines. Specifically, ergonomics create, combine and integrate issues of technology, biology, work sociology, labor psychology, anthropometry, economics and medicine.

At the same time, to characterize the relationship between ergonomics and science involved in its establishment, professor Petre Burloiu borrowed a term from the administrative law “federation”, showing that ergonomics is a science with federal character, which, based on interdisciplinary sciences, integrates the contribution of various sciences, having as its objective the creation of contemporary techniques related to the possibilities of human normal and rational use of these possibilities in the most favorable environmental conditions, in order to achieve reproductive labor from day to day.

Occupational health and safety management is the missing link in development and implementation of integrated management systems.

Romanian literature does not contain discoveries concerning ergonomics in the law enforcement field. Romanian police organisations are spending more time, energy and resources in promoting health and safety in the workplace, not only because of the alarming costs of inadequate occupational health and safety measures, but also because safe conditions are legally required, and represents sound management practice.

Police officers face a range of risks at work and have a high level risk occupation compared to many others.

Statistics on work accidents are difficult to interpret. Rates are calculated differently from one study to the next, perspectives are often narrow, and comparisons with other types of occupations or the general population become close to impossible as relevant information is often lacking because of the absence of data in this environment. Studies often focus that injuries at police officers occur most frequently to the back, the hands and fingers, the knees and the legs (Mayhew, 2001).

As indicated by medical statistics and empirical research data (Heliovaara, 1988) back pain is the most significant ergonomic risk requiring attention.

There are two approaches to the prevention of back pain: individual and organisational (Arsenault et al., 1987).

The first and more conventional one is directed at improving physical condition. Physical exercise leads to stronger and more flexible back muscles and results in fewer injuries.

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