

# Workplace design key to safety

**Design is key to health and safety on the job – two workplace issues that are often overlooked, a Toronto-based design consulting group says.**

Canadians spend more time at work each week than they do at home. Yet while home safety is a priority, issues that impact on health and safety in the workplace are often overlooked, according to the McGregor Design Group said in a recently released statement.

The statement coincided with NAOSH Week (North American Occupational Safety and Health), which runs from May 4-10.

"Too often safety in an office environment is taken for granted or looked over," said Lynn McGregor, principal of McGregor Design Group.

"While risks in the workplace are sometimes associated with factory conditions or construction sites, working in an office situation can also present significant hazards."

Potential health hazards can be as simple as filing cabinets in walkways narrowing down escape routes or lack of workstation lighting, leading to eye strain and headaches, the group added.

"Prevention is the cure" is the theme of this year's

NAOSH week, and the following are some preventative office health and safety guidelines from McGregor Design Group.

## Workstation design

The workstation is where employees spend the majority of their day. Therefore, it is important to consider flexibility in the design.

Flexible workstations reduce employee strain and fatigue. The following are examples of elements within a workstation that should be addressed:

■ **LIGHTING** – A local, moveable light will remove glare from the computer screen which will reduce strain on the eyes and prevent headaches.

■ **COMPUTER** – The monitor should be placed at a height in line with the eye. Keyboard placement should be positioned to prevent wrist injury.

■ **SEATING** – The desk chair should provide proper back and arm support, on a five-prong base to prevent the chair from flipping. Avoid chair mats. These mats cause chairs to skid and can result in back injuries.

## Emergency escape

Work out an emergency es-

cape plan. Emergency preparedness ensures that if the worst happens an evacuation will occur in a safe and efficient manner.

Plan exiting strategies that take into consideration all possible scenarios, including handicapped occupants. As well, consider how to protect important company resources.

## Code compliance

It is important to consult The Building Code even when making small office renovations. Without a proper review of the building code, small office changes can result in a breach of code regulations.

For example, placing furniture in a certain position may extend an occupant's minimum exit distance or restrict the path of a fire hose where it is no longer safe or legal. Remember, the code regulations are only the minimum standard.

## Planning office space

When considering the design of an office space, special attention should be paid to day-to-day safety.

For example, doors between heavily travelled areas should have appropriately fire-rated glazed panels to prevent any injuries from swinging doors.

Another aspect to consider is the flooring – is it

skid-resistant? Choosing a practical, safe material will help prevent injuries that may be caused by wet, slippery floors.

## First aid rooms

The health or first aid room in a facility should be designed to handle specific risks that employees or visitors may face.

The minimum standards are defined within the Labour Code, however it is wise to go beyond the minimum.

Have a section in the emergency plan devoted to situations that involve the use of the first aid room. Examine all possible scenarios and have a plan of execution for each scenario.

## Obligation to staff

Employers have an obligation to their staff to present the safest work environment possible. An employer who displays disregard for the staff's safety runs the risk of having unhappy, disgruntled employees... or worse.

Some examples of past employee-led issues are the smoke-free working environment and ergonomic workstations.

A conscientious attitude toward employee safety let staff know they are cared for.