



**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

# WORK MATTERS

**COLUMN**

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# CHAIRS TO SAFETY

Let's not raise our glasses just yet! The comfort of employees at the workplace appears to come low on the list of priorities in some organizations. We took the opportunity to look around different workspaces with a focus on the seating available to employees. We were certainly struck by the inadequacies noted when it came to something seemingly "simple" as chairs. Some of them were not adjustable, some were in a dilapidated state and some just needed to be thrown out! Employees' comfort is just as important as the products and services being offered by a company. As a matter of fact, employees' comfort can have a direct impact on the profits or services offered by an organization. Additionally, we reflected on the long hours sitting during our educational journey thus far and wondered if the benefit of a comfortable chair in a classroom can increase levels of concentration and subsequently produce better grades. Both scenarios require special attention to the procurement of suitable chairs to enhance health, safety and maximize the potential of employees and students. The hustle and bustle of the workplace and the high academic demands of educational institutions can easily diminish or underestimate the significance of comfort, as it relates to the use of chairs to complete tasks. The comfort of chairs is important and shouldn't be undervalued when it comes to maintaining safety and productivity in the workplace and at educational institutions.

First and foremost, an appropriate chair can considerably lower the chance of developing musculoskeletal problems (MSDs) and costs associated with them. Long periods spent sitting on uncomfortable seats can cause neck strain, back pain, and other discomforts. For example, working as a security guard where he/she must work long hours could result in discomfort in many parts of the body, especially if the chair provided is not adjustable to suit their height or build. Both productivity and employee well-being are impacted by this. Employers can help alleviate these problems by providing a more comfortable work environment by investing in chairs with sufficient lumbar support and adjustable features which is cognizance of a good ergo-

nomie design.

Ergonomics is described as "anything relating to the design of furniture or equipment which makes it comfortable and effective for people who use it." Interestingly, the adherence to good ergonomic design is part of a policy for Office Outfitting in ministries for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The following is also acknowledged in Section 8.3.1 of the policy. "Selected furniture shall be ergonomically suitable for the task and the person performing the task. Substantial degrees of adjustability will generally be required to suit the widest range of users, e.g., workers should be able to adjust the height of office chairs. The requirements of persons with special needs must be met and this might require furniture customization and/or acquisition of special equipment.

"Having observed employees sitting on cushions to account for the height needed to perform a task causes one to imagine if such a policy was taken into consideration in procuring furniture for the organization. It appears that a one size fits all approach is in situ. Probing for an answer as to the reason for lack of ergonomic practices resulted in a hypothesis of ergonomics versus economics. Whilst the cost of procuring furniture that will best suit the needs of employees is an important factor, one must consider the cost to an organization when employees experience ill health due to health conditions emanating from the use of poorly designed furniture. Section 6.1 of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH) of Trinidad and Tobago speaks to employers ensuring the safety, health, and welfare of all employees in their purview. Ensuring that ergonomic furniture is procured for workers certainly plays a part in adherence to the OSH Act.

The benefits of having chairs in any organization that are ergonomically sound can have a positive impact on productivity, creativity, retention, profits and most importantly, the well-being of the users. Educational institutions should also pay patronage to these bene-

fits of having ergonomically sound furniture for staff and students. It will allow for inclusivity of all students who may have disabilities and prevent students from experiencing the onset of musculoskeletal conditions as they prepare to go out into the workforce. Furthermore, recommendations by ergonomic specialists should be taken into consideration. This may include trials to ensure specifications of adjustable mechanisms that allow for effortless mobility and simple access to various sections of a workstation. Even the greatest chair should not replace the advantages of regular breaks to alleviate the ills of sitting for long periods. However, paying special attention to the practice of ergonomics in the workplace can get us all invited to the celebration where we can now raise our glasses and say, “Chairs to Safety!”

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