

## Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

### Episode 33: Creating an ergonomic workspace for those returning to the office

Speakers: Hannah Collis and Antony Hylton

[00:00:00] **Hannah:**

Hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. I'm Hannah Collis. I'm a researcher in occupational and organizational psychology at Leeds University Business School. I'm currently working on the "Adapting offices for the future of work" research project, which is exploring the adaptations made to offices during the pandemic to facilitate working and what changes are being made to offices as we transition back into the office after the pandemic.

Today, I'm joined by Antony Hylton, who is an ergonomic specialist, a workstation assessor, and physiotherapist. Hello, Antony.

**Antony:** Hi.

**Hannah:** So first up, can you just give us a brief insight into some of the work that you do and why it's important to consider ergonomics in the workplace, especially when organizations are considering office relocations or redesigning spaces.

[00:00:52] **Antony:** Yeah, thanks, Hannah. So as you mentioned, I am a physiotherapist. For the last 20 years I've been treating lots of musculoskeletal problems, aches, pains, necks, backs, arms, and the like, much of which are, of course, work associated. So your neck pain and back pain can be very prevalent, particularly in the office environment where people are seated for long periods.

So I treat those conditions and over the last 10 years, I've also been working as an ergonomics advisor for various companies. And primarily my role tends to be where somebody has specific issues that the organization can't deal with themselves. They don't necessarily have the relevant expertise. They'll call me in to do an ergonomic assessment of their, of their workplace.

I'll talk to the member of staff, explore the issues that they're having. And then make recommendations, apart from having a conversation with the individual, how they're managing their problem themselves. I'll also then go back to the organization and give them advice about how they can support the employee with both work processes and, of course, equipment.

So that's the main role of mine within ergonomics, but also I act as an advisor as well. So if a company is, for example, looking to buy new chairs, they might ask me to come in and help them to [00:02:00] decide on what kind of chairs and, in that decision-making process along with course other stakeholders like the architects and designers that tend to get the last word, unfortunately.

And so in terms of ergonomics, what we're thinking about is it - people think about a chair, of course, they think about an ergonomic mouse et cetera, but ergonomics of course incorporates everything associated with the fit between the person and their work. So when we're thinking about ergonomics, we're talking about, and one of the, one of the adjustments that I've made previously in the past is "can this person work from home for some of the time?" Because maybe their issue is that the commute getting into work or maybe it's to do with "I can't focus when I'm in the office and I'm having struggles, struggling with my productivity". So often, interestingly, I would recommend people work from home and now of course, people doing that as a standard, which is, which is great.

And it's been a great experiment, I think for employers and employees alike. Well, typically when we think about ergonomics, we're thinking about how individuals mesh with their, their working environment. And that can include everything from temperature. I'm sure you're aware of the gender discrepancies when it comes to temperate comfortability.

But also of course, that then the more things we think about is our body anthropometrics, isn't it – our dimensions. Whether you're kind of five foot, one or below, which is in the bottom fifth percentile or six foot four and above, which is the top 50% average which is where I am. And it's kind of thing.

Do we have equipment? Do we have chairs and et cetera, that can meet both needs in terms of body dimension? So that's tends to be what we think about primarily when it comes to ergonomics. And when companies are redesigning and looking at, perhaps they're looking at desks with chairs, whatever it is, with spaces, then you need to be thinking about all of that, the variety of requirements that the employees have.

[00:03:49] **Hannah:** Fantastic. Thank you for that. And I think you're right. As someone who is the lower end of the percent of those quarters, quartiles, um, [00:04:00] Yes. Often my feet do not touch the floor as, as someone who is five foot one. So I think that is something that we really need to consider. Yeah so obviously you kind of mentioned this, but as people are working from home during the pandemic, have you seen any sort of patterns or trends in regards to consequences for maybe general health and wellbeing?

[00:04:21] **Antony:** Yeah. So, I mean, obviously working from home - initially people were thrust into this place, right. And there's some people who have had experience with that already, which is great. And they tend to have fared well in the earliest stages and the people that were put into this situation, without any kind of experience of it.

And I think the two main issues to think about - there's the postural challenges associated with work from home. In other words, do I have a chair that supports my posture in a neutral position? Do I have a screen I can bring up to the correct height so I'm not leaning over my laptop? So there's at the very - and that depends on a number of factors.

Do you have a space at home that you can dedicate to work? Do you have other people in the workspace that also use the space? Have you got other people using the wifi? Can you

afford to buy equipment, a laptop stand, a chair, et cetera. So the various factors which will depend on whether or not we can deal with these postural challenges.

The other thing, which I think is almost more important, is how people have dealt with this work-life balance, this merge if you like. We kind of, now we work and live in the same space. And I think that's been particularly challenging for a lot of people, especially where some people had to work in their bedrooms.

And, and so they've worked - they've got a corner of this kind of sacred space, isn't that your bedroom. So you've got your pillows and your, and your decor – it's really important. And now you've got this work area stuck in the corner and so I think it's really – work has infiltrated the office space, and how people have dealt with that.

It's been really interesting to see how people have managed and some of them have really well. I think it's almost like when the pandemic's come, you see people go two different ways, haven't you. You've seen people that have kind of [00:06:00] hibernated more, been less active, maybe made more poor food choices, and then put on those COVID pounds that people talk about.

And you've got other people who've gone the other way and become more active and started doing more activity and going out and, running club that increases their membership, or doubled their membership from last summer to now. So I think it depends how you've approached working from home and how well you've managed that work-life balance has made a massive difference in terms of how well people, how have people's health has it been affected by, working from home?

So, how well they've dealt with postural challenges and how well they've kind of... Because I think you can, you can look at it like, "I've got to be at work from nine to five." What some people have done is said they're going to spread their working day; I usually leave my house at seven, my commute, and I get home at six. So, actually, I've got a 11-hour window. Do I have to do eight consecutive hours? Or can I have two-hour lunch break and go for a run and take the dog for a walk or do this? And those people that have managed to navigate that the best and had this flexibility to do that within their role, they're the ones that have seemed to have fared better, I think from working at home.

[00:07:00] **Hannah:** Yeah that's really interesting. Cause I think you mentioned, obviously it's not only their control of their own job for example, if they can control their own working hours, but then what they do with those hours as well. I think that's really interesting. So now, as we sort of think about that transition back to the office, so people maybe not working from home, they might not have the kind of flexibility, but also we're seeing, especially in the news that, organizations are wanting people back, to collaborate and to have in-person meetings with fewer fixed-desks, for example, and more breakout rooms. Do you have any insights or kind of concerns about this from that kind of ergonomic perspective?

[00:07:43] **Antony:** Yeah. I mean, you're absolutely right. My clients have come to me, and the majority of them have said, you know, we're going to adopt this hybrid situation where some people are going to be at home and some people are gonna be welcome on at any given time. Yeah. What's been fascinating is that everyone wants home day on Fridays.

Yeah. So that, and [00:08:00] that's a challenge that companies are going to have to face, is how do we get people in on a Monday or Friday, because we're doing this 50/50. People tend to come in Tuesday to Thursday, so that's going to be a challenge. Some companies are putting in booking systems. So you have to book in before you come into the office, but in terms of coming into the workplace, and presumably having less desks now, right, than they have had before, because they're redesigning the space, they're expecting less people in at any given time. So companies are just kind of either, where they've been on two floors they may be coming down to one floor, and they may be having more collaborative spaces. Maybe some pods for video meetings.

So now they have less of the standard desks available for any given number of staff. And so of course that means that people are going to be sharing the same desks. And fortunately, hot-desk or shared workspaces have been a trend for a long time now for many years. Companies have decided that it's more efficient, more cost effective to share workspaces than it is for each individual to have a workspace.

And so we've got some experience of that. And some of the things that we've noticed are: people do well, companies do well when they make everything uniform so that people aren't rushing to get the best desk with the best chairs and the best screens and the one next to the window, et cetera. So it's trying to have some parity when it comes to the equipment that's available for individuals.

The other thing about shared workspaces is making sure that everything has got a standard height for the desk. So a 74 centimeter desk, which allows for you to accommodate about 90% of your work population. You assume that people are kind of below six foot four, once you get over six foot four, it's slightly different.

But making sure that things like footrests are available for people that are more, shorter, um, and having - one of the biggest things I think is having a chair that's fully adjustable, of course, but also having screens that are adjustable. One of the issues that I found a lot with hot-desks is that the screens just weren't adjustable enough.

So people were having to stack them up with reams of paper, or trying to find, [00:10:00] monitor-risers and things. And that seems to be one of the biggest things, because the chair it's naturally got lots of levers on it and you can make adjustments to it, but the screen often it isn't as adjustable. So I think making sure the screens are fully adjustable, making sure there's good consistency across the equipment available, and obviously a large range of adjustability as much as possible is really the key.

[00:10:20] **Hannah:** Yeah, I think that's great. And I've definitely had experiences as someone who is shorter. The screen is way too high for me, cause I can't adjust them. I think it's interesting, if we are going into this hot desking space, we need to make sure that even though desks and spaces are equal, at least they are adjustable enough to each individual.

And I think the kind of differences in an employee are sort of overlooked a little bit in some of these redesign spaces, focusing on...

[00:10:45] **Antony:** I think so

[00:10:46] **Hannah:** ...the variety of tasks.

[00:10:48] **Antony:** And to add to that. And it is "what if I turn up to work for a meeting and there are no desks? Are there collaborative spaces? Can they be adjusted to allow me to go and work from there?" For example, so let's say I have a sofa area with a chair is there somewhere I can grab a laptop stand and a separate keyboard and mouse, and then I can set myself up at this kind of non... maybe not an ideal space, but somewhere like I can at least work for a few hours without... so otherwise I've made this hour commute or two hour commute, whatever it might be, going to a meeting. And now I've got to go home or find somewhere else to work. And often I guess people will end up in coffee shops and things, which is not ideal either. So if there aren't desks available, is there a backup plan? I think that's something that companies probably should consider from an ergonomics perspective.

[00:11:35] **Hannah:** That's really interesting and that's not something that's really been discussed in the news or any of the research. So I think that is, yeah, a really interesting perspective on that.

So I think we're sort of coming to the end of, of this podcast now, but I want to just ask what, given the things that you've experienced with your clients as well, during the pandemic, your top things that need to be considered as we return. What are your top tips, should we say?

[00:12:01] **Antony:** Top tips, indeed. Well, I think from an employer's perspective, we already touched on that - allowing that flexibility. How flexible can you be with your staff? I mean, I listened to some of your other podcasts that you've put out there. And one of the themes that came out was that flexibility of employees and talking to your employees and getting feedback from them. And yeah, that is really key. It's kind of looking at the job roles, looking at individuals, seeing how people have coped with home-work and talking to the line managers and, and such, and seeing who works better from home. So where some companies are saying, okay, we're going to have a 50/50, so three days in the office or two days from home or vice versa, maybe some employees would benefit from being in the office more and some less.

So it's not having a one size fits all approach, but actually being a bit more flexible around homeworking. And, and also in terms of working hours, as I mentioned before, do I have to cram everything into this kind of standard nine to five day? Or can I have some flexibility

around that so that I can manage school runs and dog walking and exercise and everything else that contributes to my own individual wellbeing and health. Which is, which is really important.

And from an employee's perspective is really just taking advantage of that. If you do have that flexibility, are you doing the right things? There's the triumvirate of health, if you like - your mental health, your nutrition, and your exercise. Are you getting enough exercise? Are you eating the right things? You know, nutrition is very individual, but there are some basic principles in terms of cutting down on sugary snacks and less caffeine and eating fruit and veg, et cetera. These things are just pretty obvious. So it's just trying to apply some of those things into your life.

And then, your mental health – are you taking time off? Are you managing stress well? Which is something that is big, a big thing nowadays, particularly as COVID still just drags on and on. It starts to wear people down and how are you managing that? And are you finding time in the day to do things to deal with that?

Whether it be a [00:14:00] yoga session or some meditation or something like that, or just spending time outdoors, which we know is really good for your mental health. So it's just, as I say, taking advantage of that as, as individuals.

And just from the last, I guess the last tip from, if you like from an ergonomics perspective, purely thinking about your postural challenges and workstation setup, I think the number one thing you can do is just to make sure your screen is at the right height.

If you think about our postural adaptations, I could adapt an office, a dining chair fairly well, and I can put cushions on. I can raise it up. I can do lots of things, but one thing I have, and I can therefore get a reasonably neutral posture. But one thing that is going to impact that is if my screen is kind of on the desk level. And so I'm always in this forward-leaning posture with your head forward - I call it the Gollum posture, from Lord of the Rings, where you're really hunched over leaning forward and that will impact your spine and your head and your neck and more than anything else.

So try and get your screen up to eyes - the top of the screen is at eye-level. Use a separate mouse and keyboard to the operate your screen, and get out, get active. That's the best thing that you can do.

[00:15:07] **Hannah:** Fantastic. Well, those are some great tips. So I hope people do take them into account, both individually, personally, and also as we're transitioning back to the office as well. So thank you very much.

If any of you listeners would like to find out more about our “adapting offices” research project, all details and a link to our project webpage can be found in the podcast show notes. Thank you.