



The 10 most frequently asked questions on the working office environment

1. When and why can working in the office become burdening?

The more disruptive factors that are encountered in the workplace and crop up in the working environment, the higher the level of burden. Among the factors that can contribute are poor lighting, noise, an unfavourable indoor climate as well as inadequately corrected vision and psychomental factors. In addition, work in offices is predominantly carried out seated and the strain on muscles, particularly in the case of poor posture due to poorly set-up workstations, favours the development of physical problems. These are for the most part chronic back and muscle problems that can be exacerbated by mental tensions.

2. What is the most common cause of accidents and how can they be avoided?

More than half of all occupational accidents take place in the office environment. The most frequent are accidents related to tripping or falling. The source of these accidents are technical and structural faults (e.g. wear and tear, planning flaws), organizational flaws (e.g. excessive demands, time pressure, poor working atmosphere) and human factors (e.g. inattention, haste, fatigue). Each year, five out of a hundred employees are victims of an accident in the office that lead on the one hand to absences and on the other to overtime for other staff. In order to avoid such accidents, care must be taken that objects in the office are correctly stored, lifted and carried and that all walkways are kept free. Open drawers, cable covers, liquid on the floor or bunched up carpeting can all cause accidents and should be avoided or immediately taken care of.

3. How should tables and chairs be adjusted?

Each person is built differently and this should be taken into consideration when adjusting tables and chairs. This includes not only the person's height but also the length of his or her limbs and body weight. The level of the elbow without raising the shoulder is taken as the standard for the correct sitting position as this determines the height of the table. Working for periods standing up is also recommended. This can be achieved using a table with a surface that can be raised or lowered electrically. The same criteria apply as when standing: the table should be set to elbow height.

An ergonomic chair has a backrest that can be adjusted in height or a separately adjustable lumbar support. The curve of the back of the chair should be positioned at the level of the lower back. For chairs it is also important that the height and depth of the seat can be adjusted. Armrests are not absolutely necessary. Should the chair be fitted with armrests, they should be set back away from the table in order to avoid pinch points at the table's edge. The optimal sitting position at a desk with a monitor also demands good posture. The feet should be placed flat on the ground and the legs bent at an angle of 90°. This helps to avoid any pressure that might stop the flow of blood circulation when seated.

4. What is the optimal set-up for a workstation with a monitor?

The optimal set-up for a workstation with a monitor requires the correct positioning of the chair, monitor, keyboard and mouse – all of which should be regarded as a single unit. It is important that everything is positioned on the same axis with the mouse placed as close as possible to the keyboard. Documents should be placed between the keyboard and the monitor and not in front of the keyboard. The distance from the keyboard to the edge of the table should be between 10 and 15 cm. If any problems related to the shoulders, elbows or wrists are experienced, a keyboard without a

numeric pad should be used to avoid additional strain to the affected areas through sideways movements. The monitor should be placed so that it is not necessary to turn the body and that reflections from light sources do not appear on the screen. The distance between the screen and the user should ideally be an arm's length and the height of the screen should be a hand's width below the level of the eyes.

5. What has to be taken into consideration when planning lighting?

Where possible the workstation should have natural light and no glare. This is not always possible, but ambient artificial lighting should be provided with a minimum of 500 Lux. As one gets older, more light is required and local lighting can remedy the situation. Care should be taken that younger employees do not suffer from glare as a result. This can be avoided by reorganizing the workstations or by using light absorbing/repelling elements such as soundproofing panels or plants. Care should be taken, however, to ensure that natural light and the windows are not obstructed.

6. How can stress be minimized in office environments?

Everyone experiences stress differently. What annoys one person will not bother another. For example, some people find working under extreme pressure very motivating, while others react with panic attacks. Basically, situations that present too little or too much of a challenge should be avoided over the long term. A good working atmosphere with opportunities for continuing education and development can actually reduce stress. Each individual should understand his or her stress signals, take them seriously and react quickly – by talking, by reducing stress levels or with medical help. At www.stressnostress.ch you will find useful information, a checklist and possible measures for dealing with stress.

7. Which disruptive factors should be avoided in office environments?

Perception differs from person to person. Whether something is seen as informative, pleasant or disruptive depends on the degree and the circumstances. Sources of aggravation can include temperature, draughts, noise levels, ringing telephones or tools (computer, printer, etc.) that do not work. Professional or personal discussions among colleagues working in the same office can also be disruptive depending on workload and noise level. It should therefore be ensured that a meeting room is available and that wherever possible frequently used devices are kept in a separate room.

8. How much room must employers provide?

For safety at work, it must be ensured that enough room is available at and around the workstation. That means a work surface of at least 160 x 80 cm to allow space to lay out documents and at least 100 cm space for the chair between the table edge and the nearest obstacle behind. Should this be a filing cabinet with drawers, the extended drawer counts as the nearest obstacle. It is also important to have access to the workstation that is at least 80 cm wide. In addition it is important to have room to store the tools and devices that are necessary to carry out the job as well as somewhere to store personal effects such as coats, umbrellas and bags. As a rule of thumb, around 8 to 10 m² are necessary for each workstation. For more complex activities or larger groups, 12 to 15 m² should be allowed to compensate for the increased level of disruption (e.g. noise levels). In addition to meeting rooms, the extended working environment includes washrooms and a break room with windows and plenty of natural light. These additional areas should also be included as part of office planning.

9. What must be taken into consideration in terms of indoor climate?

The indoor climate influences our health and, as with stress, everyone experiences this differently. The issue of room temperature can often be sorted out through direct discussion among the staff. The following guidelines for the ideal temperature will apply to most people: in winter the temperature should be between 21 and 23°C, in summer it may go up to 25°C. The ideal level of humidity is between 30 to 65 percent. To improve the indoor climate further, plants can be installed and regular airing of the workspace can help to avoid premature fatigue. Should humidity drop to below 30 percent, staff should be encouraged to drink more water.

10. What are the rights and obligations of employers and employees?

In terms of health and safety, the rights and obligations of employers and employees are laid down in Article 82 UVG (Accident Insurance Act) and Article 6 ArG (Labour Act). They are often more precisely defined in collective agreements that are accompanied by a set of regulations. In this way, the employer is obliged, for example, to take all the measures necessary to protect employees' health and personal integrity by guarding against occupational accidents and illness and keeping the working environment equipped with the best available technology in line with the prevailing circumstances. In turn, employees are included on questions regarding health protection and are obliged to support the employer in complying with regulations.