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Office Workers' Productivity
Enhanced by Ergonomics

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New Books

Vol. 10, No. 1

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Office Workers' Productivity Enhanced by Ergonomics

A new field study by researchers at the Upjohn Institute, the University of Texas, Liberty Mutual, Health and Work Outcomes, and Steelcase Corporation will examine the economic and health consequences of two ergonomic interventions. Until now, economists have almost entirely ignored the productivity impacts of ergonomics as a topic of research. A recent search of EconLit using the keyword "ergonomics" yielded 16 articles, and a search using "ergonomics" and "productivity" as keywords yielded none.

Most data sets utilized by economists are based on surveys of individuals and thus contain information on individual characteristics, including earnings and wages, but not work performance per se. Furthermore, health data found in surveys of individuals are often very general. A typical question may ask respondents whether or not they are disabled or to classify their overall health as "good, fair, or poor." Thus, existing data are not well suited to answer the question of whether ergonomic work practices are likely to reduce pain associated with musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and to improve worker performance. This new field study has been designed to address this research void.

The study, which will cover about 900 individuals in three separate firms, collects pre- and post-intervention data on productivity, absenteeism, and health. Results have been obtained from approximately 200 volunteer participants from the first firm in the study, a governmental agency that collects sales taxes. Following the study design, researchers assigned participants to one of three groups: a control group, a group that receives ergonomic training, and a group that receives an ergonomically designed chair and training. Data were collected from study participants in the two months immediately prior to the group assignments and implementation and during the second, seventh, and twelfth months post-intervention.

Study Design

This study utilizes a quasi-experimental design, meaning that instead of using random assignment, researchers deliberately allocate participants to groups. Random assignment is not feasible in this study because both interventions involve information. The primary concern is that contact between people in different groups might contaminate the study results. Workers who receive ergonomic training might share their new information with co-

workers nearby, especially if they happened to notice a co-worker using a less than ideal posture. In order to prevent information from "leaking," individuals were assigned to groups so that members of the control group would be physically separated from participants in the other two groups. Thus, where possible, all participants from the same building were assigned to the same treatment group. When this was not possible, people on different floors of the same building were assigned to different groups. Attempts were made to balance workload requirements and job descriptions as much as possible across the three groups, although pre-intervention differences exist. The data collection on dependent and independent variables prior to the implementation of the two interventions allowed us to correct for these preexisting differences at baseline.

To be included in the study, participants must spend at least six hours a day sitting in an office chair and at least four hours a day computing, they must be able to complete a questionnaire in English over the Internet at work, and they must not have filed a workers' compensation claim in the last three months. Furthermore, a company must be able to provide researchers with detailed data on both an individual worker's productivity and work hours in order to be included in the study.

Health Outcomes

The primary health-related hypothesis the study team developed is that the "training only" and "chair and training" interventions would reduce the pain of study participants relative to those in the control group. The two measures of pain used to evaluate this hypothesis are detailed below.

One form of pain data is collected from the administration of a series of Daily Health Diaries (DHDs), a short one-minute e-mail questionnaire that asks participants to rate their current level of pain for nine different body parts on a scale of 0–10, 0 being no pain and 10 being extreme pain. Thus, the scale ranges from a low of 0 to a high of 90. Daily Health Diaries are administered

three times a day for an entire week during each survey month (–2, –1, 2, 7, and 12). Participants are asked to report pain levels at the beginning, middle, and end of the day for an entire work week. Each individual may report up to 15 pain levels a week in each survey month, which results in as many as 75 scores over the entire study. The DHD pain score is a series of instantaneous pain measures that cover one week out of a month.

The other pain data are derived from the SF-36 health instrument, a well-known and often-used survey. In addition to the DHD questions, study participants are asked two questions from the SF-36 that deal with pain. The questions ask how much bodily pain the individual had in the last four weeks, and how much that pain interfered with normal work. Responses to these two questions are then scaled from 0 (extreme pain) to 100 (no pain).

The two pain scores offer different insights into the effectiveness of the interventions and the relationship between work performance and different types of pain measures. The DHD score allows researchers detailed, contemporaneous measures of pain by body part, time of day, and day of the week. Whereas a full analysis of these effects will appear in an upcoming working paper, Figure 1 shows a preview. The left-hand side of the graph is the average pain score for the two pre-intervention months, by group and by time of day. The right-hand side of the graph shows average pain for the three post-intervention months, also by group and time of day. Figure 1 reveals two important features of the interventions. First, the chair and training intervention appears to be about twice as effective at reducing average pain levels as the training only intervention. Second, while the post-intervention pain scores for the training only participants are shifted down in a parallel fashion relative to the pre-intervention scores, the post-intervention line of pain scores for those in the chair and training group is shifted down and the slope flattened. Thus, those receiving the chair appear to not only start the day with lower pain levels, but pain

appears to grow at a substantially slower rate over the workday.

Productivity Effects

The individual productivity data from the first firm are particularly interesting to economists for two reasons. First, the firm's primary measure of individual productivity, monthly sales tax collections, is measured in dollars and is the "revenue" of the firm. Thus, the model of individual sales tax collections developed in this study can also be viewed as a production function in which an ergonomic intervention is one of the inputs. This makes a cost-benefit analysis straightforward—one simply compares the estimated increase in revenues post-intervention with their associated costs. Second, the firm is able to provide detailed monthly data on absenteeism and on hours worked per month. This level of detail allows the research team to separately analyze the effect of the intervention on lost work time (absenteeism) and on production per effective workday.

The effects of the two interventions on production per effective workday are analyzed fully in an upcoming working paper using difference-in-difference estimators that control for job characteristics, tenure, gender, and years of education. The first major finding of that study is that these particular ergonomic interventions have no effect on lost work time (absenteeism). However, the second major finding is that the chair and training intervention has a substantial and statistically significant effect on production per effective workday. Table 1 shows the coefficients from two different types of panel regressions, a fixed effects model and a random effects model, which summarize the net impact (in dollars collected) of the two interventions. While the training only intervention appears to affect sales tax collections positively, the coefficients associated with this intervention are not statistically significant. In contrast, the coefficients on the chair and training intervention are both positive and statistically significant. The chair and training intervention costs approximately \$1,000 per employee, but the net impact

Figure 1 Average Bodily Pain Scores, by Group and Time of Day

of this intervention increases collections by either \$325.09 or \$354.18, depending on the estimation method. The chair and training intervention appears to pay for itself within three days using this methodology.

A second methodology yields similar results. This model first estimates the effect of the two interventions on pain, then the effect of pain on productivity. These two estimates are then combined to calculate the health mediated effect of the

training only intervention and the training plus the chair intervention. Our results from both models indicate that the chair and training intervention reduces pain and improves productivity relative to the control group but does not affect sick leave. Furthermore, the productivity benefits that result from the chair and training intervention are quite large compared to the costs of the intervention. Our lowest estimate (from the health mediated model) of the benefit flows indicate that the chair and training intervention pays for itself within 10 working days. In contrast, the effect of the training only intervention is not statistically significant for any of the studied outcomes.

Conclusion

The initial results from this new field study of ergonomics, health, and productivity appear to confirm that ergonomic interventions can lead to lower pain levels and increased productivity among office workers. These results are of interest to lawmakers considering the social costs and benefits of ergonomic work standards, to Occupational Safety and Health Agency regulators considering

what type of work standards might be most appropriate in an office setting, to business managers seeking to improve the performance of their employees, and to economists interested in the relationship between health and economic outcomes.

The net impact of the chair and training intervention is not only statistically significant, it is large enough to cover its costs within days. The impact of training alone, however, is less certain at this time. While point estimates of the impact of training alone on pain and production are all in the expected direction, none of the impacts are statistically significant. This may change as more participants from the next two firms are added to the study.

Furthermore, the results presented here suggest that ergonomic interventions have a substantial impact on production per unit of time worked, and that an economic analysis of ergonomics on MSDs should not be confined to lost workdays alone. This additional economic channel may be empirically important because an ergonomic intervention that has a large effect on production per effective workday may have no corresponding effect on lost work time. Thus, past research on the benefits of ergonomic interventions that focuses solely on lost workdays may substantially underestimate the total benefits of such programs, or the costs of MSDs.

Table 1 Changes in Production per Effective Workday Post-Intervention

	Fixed effects	Random effects
Chair × post-interaction	354.18**	325.09**
Training × post-interaction	151.01	155.54

NOTE: These estimates control for gender, age, tenure at the firm, disability status, years of education, job type and level, pre-intervention group assignment, and individual-specific effects. ** = statistically significant at the 5% level.

Suggestions for Further Reading

National Research Council, Panel on Musculoskeletal Disorders and the Workplace, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. 2001. *Musculoskeletal Disorders and the Workplace: Low Back and Upper Extremities*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

National Research Council, Steering Committee for the Workshop on Work-Related Musculoskeletal Injuries: The Research Base. 1999. *Work-Related Musculoskeletal Disorders: Report, Workshop Summary and Workshop Papers*. National Academy Press, Washington D.C.

Kelly DeRango is a research fellow at the Upjohn Institute.

Saul D. Hoffman and Laurence S. Seidman

Then and Now

The Earned Income Tax Credit

In 1990, the Upjohn Institute published our book, *The Earned Income Tax Credit: Anti-Poverty Effectiveness and Labor Market Effects*, a slim 91-page monograph that surveyed quite thoroughly almost everything known at the time about the economic impact of the earned income tax credit (EITC). The EITC, which was introduced in 1975 as a small work bonus for very low-income working families, was then still a little known and lightly funded government program that played a minor role in the government's set of antipoverty policies. Despite the cutbacks of the Reagan era, traditional welfare still thoroughly dominated antipoverty policy.

Yet even then, the EITC was clearly something different. Alone among income transfer programs for the poor, the EITC conditioned its benefits on earnings. Families without earnings received nothing, and benefits actually increased with family earnings through a portion of the income distribution before eventually phasing out at higher incomes. This was just the opposite of traditional welfare programs, which provided maximum benefits to households with no earnings. The unique benefit structure of the EITC for 2001 is shown in Figure 1; households with one child receive slightly lower benefits, and childless households receive a very small maximum credit.

Married couples as well as single parents were eligible for EITC under identical rules, which was another difference from traditional welfare. Technically, the EITC was not even a welfare program—it was a tax credit administered by the IRS. And unlike most other tax credits, it was refundable, which meant that poor working families could fully realize its benefits, even if they owed little or no taxes.

For these reasons, the EITC was emerging as a government antipoverty program that both liberals and conservatives could support. It was fast becoming, as we wrote then in our introduction, “a rallying point in redirecting poverty policy.” We noted that its “time in the national agenda has clearly come,” and we predicted that it would grow.

passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which led to the end of welfare as we knew it. Effective July 1, 1997, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the primary cash assistance program for the poor since the mid 1930s, was replaced with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, or TANF.

As a result, the EITC today is almost unrecognizable from its former modest self. It is now the largest cash transfer program for the poor and the near-poor, distributing a total of approximately \$30 billion to more than 18 million families. In contrast, in 2002, TANF served an average of 2.1 million families, providing them approximately \$12.5 billion. As seen in Figure 2, since 1990, the average credit doubled in real terms, and the

Figure 1 EITC Benefits, by Household Income, for Families with Two or More Children, 2001

If only we could be so accurate with all our predictions! Today, it is almost impossible to imagine U.S. income transfer policy without the EITC. Two major policy actions were decisive in this transformation. The first was the expansion of the EITC program itself in 1991, and again and more substantially in 1993. The second change resulted in the

number of households receiving a credit rose more than 50 percent.

The enormous expansion of the EITC has prompted a large increase in research about the EITC and its impact on the economy, as well as some controversy and criticism. In light of that, we set out to update our 1990 book. Our new book, *Helping Working Families: The Earned*

Income Tax Credit, which was just published by the Upjohn Institute (see p. 7 for details), is the result of our efforts. It now weighs in at a respectable 245 pages, befitting the increased importance of the program.

Our own position, reinforced by the many research studies we have reviewed, is that the EITC is a government program which, on the whole, works well. That alone is no small achievement in the policy world of antipoverty programs, many of which have a well-documented history of failure and/or unanticipated negative effects. The EITC continues to offer substantial and meaningful earnings supplements to low- and moderate-income households. It successfully

tax and the payroll tax, yields a marginal tax rate of nearly 50 percent. There is growing evidence that this high tax rate has discouraged work in married-couple families with moderate incomes.

- The EITC imposes substantial financial penalties on many married couples. If a childless full-time minimum wage worker marries a full-time minimum wage worker with two children, they suffer an EITC marriage penalty of more than \$1,600 compared to what they could have if they remained single. If they each have two children, their EITC financial sacrifice to marry would be \$5,600!

beginning point of the EITC phase-out range for married couples by \$3,000 over the next five years. We propose a further reduction in the EITC marriage penalty, implemented in a different way. In addition, we would make two more changes:

- Reduce the current EITC phase-out rate for a family with two or more children from 21.06 percent to 15.98 percent, which is the current phase-out rate for a family with one child. This will improve work incentives for families on the phase-out range, reduce the marriage penalty, and help lift larger families above the poverty line by allowing them to retain a greater proportion of their EITC grant while they are still below the poverty income level.
- Provide a new, more generous rate schedule for families with three or more children by increasing the phase-in rate from its current value of 40 percent to 42 percent, and increasing the income on which that credit is earned by about \$1,000. This would increase the maximum EITC grant for these families by \$600 if they are single parents, and by \$1,500 if they are married. This too reduces the marriage penalty of the EITC, and it also helps lift larger families above the poverty line.

In our most recent book, we examine the likely impact of this reform using representative national data on households. Our proposed reform would increase the number of families qualifying for the EITC by about 20 percent and increase program costs by about \$13 billion, which really is not an enormous amount. Of all the new spending in our reform, almost half will go to working families with an income that leaves them less than 50 percent above the poverty line, and only about one-sixth will go to families with incomes of at least twice the poverty line. Ninety percent of all new spending goes to families with two or more children. Nothing we can foresee suggests that transfer policy or labor markets will change in ways that will make the EITC

EITC Receipt and Average EITC Benefits Per Recipient Household, 1990–2000

pushes many working families out of poverty, and it is a viable and attractive alternative to an increase in the minimum wage.

However, some problems have emerged:

- Like any income support program, EITC benefits eventually decrease as a family's income increases. As shown in Figure 1, this occurs at a household income between about \$13,000 and \$32,000. For families with two or more children, the phase-out rate is 21 percent, which, when combined with the federal income

- The EITC still leaves larger families with low-wage workers in poverty. A married couple with two children and a single wage earner working full time at \$6.50 an hour are still poor even after adding in the \$4,000 EITC income they would get. Larger families remain even further below the poverty line.

Fortunately, these problems are not independent. Solving one problem contributes to solving the others. The Economic Growth and Tax Relief Act of 2001 has already provided some EITC marriage penalty relief by increasing the

less important. In the 2000s, many women with few labor market skills will undoubtedly enter the labor market, most likely in a less robust economy than was seen in the 1990s. Also here to stay, it appears, is the poorer labor market position of less-skilled, less-educated workers. Most economists believe that these labor market changes reflect underlying changes in labor demand driven by changes in technology, especially computerization. That trend is unlikely to change in ways that would benefit less-skilled workers. Globalization of the economy is another contributing factor, and that too is unlikely to be reversed. Policies to promote human capital investment will be important, but there certainly will remain workers whose skills leave them without the ability to earn middle-class incomes. We believe that continued generous assistance to these workers is fully appropriate. It is very much in the American tradition of helping the "deserving poor," here understood to include families above the poverty line but well below middle class. And in that effort, the EITC will remain the policy instrument of choice for the foreseeable future.

Saul D. Hoffman and Laurence S. Seidman both teach economics at the University of Delaware.

New Book Addresses Challenges of Balancing Work and Family

The Upjohn Institute has just published The Economics of Work and Family, which contains proceedings from the 2000–2001 Werner Sichel Lecture-Seminar Series. Employment Research recently sat down with one of the editors, Jean Kimmel, to talk about the book. Kimmel is an associate professor of economics at Western Michigan University, which, along with the Upjohn Institute, is a cosponsor of the annual lecture-seminar series.

Employment Research (ER): *Thank you very much, Professor Kimmel, for taking the time to provide our readers with some information about your new book, coedited with Professor Emily Hoffman. First, could you tell us why you organized the seminars around this particular set of issues?*

Jean Kimmel (JK): As labor economists, Emily and I are aware of growing concerns regarding workers' efforts to balance work and family, and the related research and policy agendas. While work/family balance has always been a concern for labor economists, with the dramatic recent increases in the employment of women—particularly mothers of young children—the topic is gaining increased interest. It is a timely topic, and we felt the book would be of interest to a broad audience.

ER: *How would you characterize the bottom line of your seminar presenters about the issues such as child care? Is there a role for public policy?*

JK: The only bottom line on which the two child care chapter authors agree relates to the problems of inadequate quality and affordability. They propose to solve the problems in very different ways. Professor David Blau outlines a two-pronged approach in which quality is addressed through incentives for providers to acquire accreditation, and affordability is addressed through income-based child credits that are not given conditional on employment or even the use of paid child care. Professor Barbara Bergmann focuses on the affordability problem, particularly for single mothers, and proposes solutions

that include substantial increases in federal spending targeted on child care. Given the severe financial constraints facing single-mother families, it may be that the current approach to welfare-to-work is ill-advised, given its emphasis on work first without sufficient child care support. Although child care spending has increased, single mothers still report being unable to find and pay for quality care.

ER: *What about family leave policies? Are there public policy issues involved with these?*

JK: The federal government entered into the family leave policy arena due to a concern about economic security for families. With the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in 1993, most workers are guaranteed 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for an ill family member or for personal illness. Examining seven years of data concerning access and take-up of this leave, Dr. Katherin Ross Phillips of the Urban Institute found that the majority of such leaves are taken for personal illness, thereby debunking the myth that FMLA is women's policy rather than family policy. Additionally, as Dr. Phillips explains, because FMLA-granted leave is unpaid, workers who might need the leave most are unable to take advantage of it due to financial constraints. She offers a list of specific policy proposals that would help to alleviate the financial burden faced by families with a worker taking leave from work.

ER: *Who is the audience for this book?*

JK: Each chapter in this book is written in a straightforward, nontechnical manner, so the book is intended for a broad audience, including scholars as well as the general public. In addition, Emily and I believe the book would be an excellent supplemental text for numerous college courses, including Women and the Economy, The Economics of the Family, and Labor Economics courses. In fact, I am using the book as a supplemental reader in my Women and the Economy course this semester, and I think the students will find it useful because of its content and will appreciate the relatively low price!

ER: *Thank you. We wish you success with this book.*

New Books

Imports, Exports, and Jobs

What Does Trade Mean for Employment and Job Loss?

Lori G. Kletzer

Kletzer adds to our understanding of the magnitude of the costs and benefits of free trade by presenting a focused examination of the relationship

between changes in international trade, employment, and job displacement for a sample of U.S. manufacturing industries. The link between international trade and domestic jobs is also explored through studies of both net and gross employment job change.

Descriptive data reveal that sharply declining exports are strongly associated with employment decline, particularly in industries accounting for the bulk of manufacturing sector employment loss. Rising imports are also strongly associated with employment decline, but typically in smaller industries that are traditionally import-competing.

Patterns found in the descriptive analysis are reexamined in the econometric analysis. With respect to changes in industry employment, the results are consistent with arguments that increasing imports reduce employment and that increasing exports (and domestic demand) enhance employment.

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\$18 paper ISBN 0 88099 247-6 / 2002.

The Economics of Work and Family

Jean Kimmel and Emily P. Hoffman,
Editors

Using an economic perspective, the contributors confront work/family issues, including child care, how parents balance time between work

and family obligations, links between women's childbearing and their economic outcomes, the success of the Family and Medical Leave Act, and the relationship between family structure and labor market outcomes. They also argue for specific policies designed to alleviate the stresses related to these issues. The chapters are:

- Federal Child Care Policy
David M. Blau
- Thinking about Child Care Policy
Barbara R. Bergmann
- Parents' Work Time and the Family
Cordelia W. Reimers
- Fertility, Public Policy, and Mothers in the Labor Force
Susan L. Averett
- How Family Structure Affects Labor Market Outcomes
Joyce P. Jacobsen
- Working for All Families? Family Leave Policies in the United States
Katherin Ross Phillips

This would make an excellent companion reader for courses on gender issues. See the Publications portion of our Web site for information on how to request an examination copy.

191 pp. \$35 cloth ISBN 0-88099-246-8
\$15 paper ISBN 0-88099-245-X / 2002.

Helping Working Families

The Earned Income Tax Credit

Saul D. Hoffman and Laurence S. Seidman

Hoffman and Seidman offer an up-to-date assessment of the EITC in which they analyze, evaluate, summarize, and critique the current state of

the program. They find that, overall, the EITC works well, and that it has earned its political popularity. Yet they also uncover several problem areas that they address with specific recommendations based on their analysis.

The good news, the authors say, is that these problems are not independent of each other. In fact, they point out that a revision to improve one of the shortcomings may contribute to the solution of the others. By recommending 1) a reduction in the current EITC phase-out rate for a family with two or more children, 2) the establishment of a separate, more generous EITC schedule for married couples, and 3) a new rate schedule for families with three or more children, Hoffman and Seidman believe that the nation can take a good program and make it even better.

245 pp. \$36 cloth ISBN 0-88099-254-9
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