Imagine a world where welders, machinists, secretaries, nurses, union and management workers all leave their desks or workstations behind to do stretching exercises together and work towards a common goal - safety. No need to peruse the science fiction aisle at the local video store; just stop by any of the American factories and workplaces that already have forward-thinking ergonomics programs in place.

"Stretching is important," says Pete Stevens, safety director for a leading hardware manufacturer. "It increases the blood flow back to the muscles and helps prevent injuries." Stretching is just one aspect of the hardware manufacturer's comprehensive two-part ergonomics program that Stevens credits with reducing ergonomic stressors and the resulting lost time injuries.

Ergonomics is taking a leading position in many company-based safety programs across the country. "Ergonomics has been a real focus for us for several years," says Tara Grisham, occupational health nurse for a maker of ball bearings. "This is largely due to the statistics and reporting through OSHA," adds Grisham. "No one in manufacturing had ever heard of carpal tunnel syndrome or musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) until repetitive jobs came to the forefront. Then, we found out how easily and cost-effectively these injuries could be prevented."

The Goal: Preventing Preventable Injuries
According to OSHA, each year 1.8 million workers experience injuries related to overexertion or repetitive motion, and 600,000 are injured severely enough to require time off work. Jim Johnson, health and safety coordinator at a maker of shocks, struts and suspension systems, believes that the greatest advantage to having a strong ergonomics program is the impact it has on workers. "The end result of a successful ergonomics program is that our people leave work at the end of their shift without a need for ibuprofen every four hours," he says. "Both management and union people are ending their careers with the ability to have a life, to hug their grandkids, to go fishing, to do whatever they want with full use of their bodies."

Stevens, Grisham, and Johnson all state that the changes ergonomics programs have brought to the workplace are substantial, and Dan Davis, the supervisor of divisional ergonomics for a major manufacturer for automobile transmissions. "Workers are more efficient. Any time that you can make it better for employees to do their job, it is better for the company as a whole," says Davis. The transmission manufacturer has realized a 57% decrease in OSHA "recordables" since the company started its ergonomics program ten years ago.

The More You Know, The More You Prevent
Most manufacturers agree that awareness is a key component in any successful safety program, and it is a major component of the ball bearing manufacturer's ergonomics effort. "We try to stress early recording so a problem does not progress to an injury," says Grisham. "Ergonomics and safety are a main focus for us and it makes a difference to our employees. We see them focusing and working hard to prevent loss-time injuries."
At the heart of the ball bearing manufacturer’s ergonomics program is training and education. "When someone comes in with a problem we do a mini-training session so that they learn to use the ergonomic equipment properly," explains Grisham. "We instruct them about the correct anatomic postures of the body part and introduce ergonomic stretches to the worker. We have an ergonomic exercise program in place, which includes stretching for hands, shoulders, neck, and back," adds Grisham.

Even with a well-rounded ergonomics program in place, the manufacturer of ball bearings maintains an on-site physical therapy center for their workers comp employees who require treatment to recover from on-the-job injuries.

Auto transmission manufacturer's Davis echoes the importance of ergonomics in all facets of the work environment, and firmly believes a little education can go a long way. "One of our employees was experiencing neck pain and he didn't know why," says Davis, "so our ergonomics team came in and watched him at work. He wore bifocals, which typically force the wearer to look over his or her glasses at things and to bend their neck way down. We simply raised his computer monitor up two inches so he wouldn't have to bend his neck in a damaging way. It was as simple as that."

**Fitting the Job to the Person**

Ergonomics has precipitated nothing short of a paradigm shift in industry since it hit the radar screen of proactive, safety-minded corporations. "For many years the worker had to adjust to the work environment," Davis of the transmission manufacturer explains. "Now, we are trying to make the workplace adjust to the worker. This means that he or she does not have to assume an awkward position that could cause an MSD, and as a result our workers are happier, healthier and more efficient."

Fitting the job to the worker is where corporations see the value in a safety partner such as Magid. Johnson of the shocks, struts and suspension systems manufacturer says that Magid was instrumental in helping him find the right gloving options for all his employees. "Our rep cleaned house on our existing gloves and brought us gloves in sizes which we weren't getting from our other supplier. The glove solution Magid provided features padded palms to help ease the strain of vibration and offers a variety of sizes to accommodate our diverse workforce." Johnson adds, "Sizing is a big factor. Previously we had women wearing a man's size-nine glove, trying to hold onto the glove and the part at the same time - that is a big ergonomic stressor. Now we have the ability to fit the glove to both the person and the job."

Stevens of the hardware manufacturer underscores the importance of having a supplier like Magid to provide counsel and to help keep their ergonomics program up to snuff regardless of where in the organization the ergonomics need may arise. "Recently, we worked with Magid to find the best chair for our workers. We needed adjustable chairs that could adapt to a number of workstations, and we needed them at a reasonable price," he says. "Our Magid rep went out of his way to find the exact chairs we needed, and he found them for the best price."

**The High Cost of Not Being Ergonomically Sound**

OSHA states that MSDs and other repetitive strain injuries can cost employers upwards of $15 billion a year in workers compensation costs, with total costs as high as $60 billion each year. Further, OSHA believes that by implementing an ergonomic standard, employers could save up to $22,500 in direct costs for each MSD prevented. In their estimates, OSHA believes an ergonomics standard would help prevent upwards of 3 million MSDs over the next 10 years.
The best news, OSHA feels confident that more than 75% of general industry employers would not need to take any specific, additional action - even if an ergonomics standard were implemented immediately. Because many industrial organizations have been proactively addressing ergonomics since the original standard was first proposed in 2000, most have already implemented programs and plans to address many aspects if an ergonomic standard were to go into effect.

Thinking Ahead to Compliance
Since the 2000 proposed ergonomics standard did not pass, many companies have increased their ergonomic focus to prepare for the event if/when a new standard might be passed. Grisham says at the manufacturer of ball bearings, many of the intended requirements of the 2000 proposed standard are already in place today. "We are doing a lot of the recording, reporting, and training that the standard would have required. I don't think we would have to make any significant changes if an ergonomics standard passed; we would just keep plugging away," says Grisham.

Stevens at the hardware manufacturer says his company has also taken this proactive approach to ergonomics. "We are working to get a head-start on compliance," he says, "so we are ahead of the game if a new standard were to go into effect."

Davis, who has been with the transmission manufacturer for over 28 years, says they also have many of the possible would-be-required systems in place. "We already investigate all medical reports within 24 hours and ergonomics is currently in every aspect of production," he adds. "We plan to be even more proactive to make sure that any new or replacement equipment that comes into this plant is ergonomically sound and correct to the best of our ability."

A Successful Ergonomics Equation
Johnson says thanks to his Magid rep, the manufacturer of shocks, struts and suspension systems now has a glove supply that is ergonomically sound. Magid worked closely with Johnson and his safety team to find the best products for their work force. "Our rep has been unbelievable," says Johnson. "He has helped us find gloves and other products to help reduce vibration and improve dexterity. With a safety partner like Magid, I know we will be armed with the right solutions at the right price, no matter how an ergonomic standard would play out."

Johnson believes that the positive effects of successful ergonomics programs are far-reaching. "Our employees' lives are better outside of work because the working conditions have improved to the degree that their jobs do not take nearly the same physical toll they once did," he says. "This definitely promotes a better attitude and therefore improves productivity and general well-being." Now that's an ergonomics equation that "fits" into any company's view.