

Ergo on the go: good laptop ergonomics

You see them everywhere carrying their laptops. They are businesses' "Road Warriors" with offices on-the-go. These offices on-the-go are allowing people to work all hours of the day and night. And from anywhere: their company; their homes; libraries; at customer sites; while traveling in planes, cars, trains, and buses; and even while taking in some sun on the beach! Laptops have become the equipment-of-choice for employees on the go.

Improving comfort when using laptops

The main feature that makes laptops the equipment-of-choice is their compactness. While standard desktop computer units consist of three basic and separate components – the keyboard, the screen, and the pointing device, the laptop integrates these components into one compact unit. While it is the laptop's compactness that makes it popular for carrying around anywhere, at any time, this compactness also means that the laptop forgoes some of the adjustability of the standard desktop computer.

Adjustability is a major factor in user comfort. The lack of adjustability in laptop units can pose some unique user comfort challenges. For example, when the laptop keyboard is in an optimal position, it may be that the screen is not in the best position for eye or body comfort. When the screen is in the optimal position, it may be that the keyboard is not in the best position for body comfort. The laptop Road Warrior, then, has a key challenge to find ways to maximize ergonomic good practices when on-the-go.

What can laptop users do to help compensate for the laptop's intrinsic lack of adjustability in its design? There are a number of practical ideas to help laptop users improve their performance and keep them on the "road" to comfort. Here are a few:

The keyboard

The keyboard on laptops is generally smaller than desktop computers. Help to maximize your data input comfort with the following tips:

Laptop keyboard tips: Continue to float your hands and lightly touch the keys while keying. Evaluate if the laptop has any special key sequences (isolated cursor control, function keys and hot keys) to reduce keying and provide shortcuts to using your input device. If you can, take short breaks to relax your wrists, hands, fingers and arms. Wherever you have a main location (office or home), consider the use of an external keyboard, which you can connect to your laptop. Ideally, the keys should be at elbow height.

The monitor

Many laptops have 15-inch screens. Additionally, netbooks and tablets are becoming more commonplace. Help to maximize your visual comfort with the following tips:

Laptop and netbooks monitor tips: Angle the laptop screen so that you can see the font with the least amount of neck deviation. Work to position the top of the screen at or slightly below eye level. This may require you to elevate the laptop off the support surface using reams of copy paper, old phone books or monitor risers and then have a separate attachment for the keyboard and mouse. In the office or if you use your laptop at home, consider attaching a full-sized monitor to your laptop. Note: Some laptops have docking stations, which provide a full-sized monitor and keyboard. This allows the user the ability to adjust for comfort.

Tablet screen tips: Most tablets accept a connection for an external keyboard via Bluetooth, which is the preferable method if you have to frequently type into this kind of device. If you have to type directly onto a touch screen, you should vary your postures by frequently alternating your typing styles such as typing with the tablet on a table or holding it in a vertical orientation and typing with your thumbs. This can help reduce neck discomfort caused by looking down constantly when typing on the screen with the tablet on the table. And if possible, keep your typing to the least amount necessary.

Input devices

Many laptops make use of a small button centrally located on the keyboard to serve as the input or mouse device. Help maximize your hand/arm/digits comfort with the following tips:

Laptop input device tips: Use your whole hand and arm when moving the input device with your finger. Do not tensely hold your fingers and thumb nor squeeze them together when keying or using the input device. Consider the use of an external full-sized input device, which you can connect to your laptop.

Additional on-the-go considerations

In addition to comfort tips related to the keyboard, screen and input device of the laptop, you can give consideration to the following “travel” tips:

Hard drive: Back up your hard drive when you are on the go. This should help limit your data loss, in the event your laptop is damaged, stolen or there is some power interruption.

Carrying: To ease the weight on your shoulder, neck and back, consider using a pull-along bag on wheels versus a shoulder bag.

Plane: When on a plane, place your laptop on the fold-down table. If you need more room to work, try to request a bulkhead seat or an exit row.

Car: Park your car and move into the passenger seat. This will give you more leg room and room to key and position your body. If you have a briefcase, place it under your laptop. When you key, do not twist or rotate your body, as this will cause stress and strain on your vertebrae. Face your laptop so your body is as parallel as possible to the laptop monitor and keyboard. Maintain a reasonable distance between your eyes and the monitor. While in your vehicle, keep your keying to a minimum, since vehicles do not allow for the most ideal set-up.

Hotel: If available, use a desk as your computer work area. Avoid using the laptop while sitting in bed as it introduces strain. An ironing board can also make a nice height adjustable work surface if you find the desk is too high for the chair. Use a phone book if you need to raise the height of the laptop. Use pillows to sit on if you need to be higher in the chair or roll up a towel for additional lumbar support.

When it's “ergo-on-the-go,” be in the know with some practical tips for the road to ergonomics comfort.

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