

Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group 2004: Ergonomics for Collections Conservators *and* Doing More with Less

ABSTRACT

The Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group (LCCDG) had a two-part session at the 2004 AIC Annual Meeting. The first topic was “Ergonomics for Collections Conservators,” where participants covered various facets of workspace design. Two key concepts that emerged were the incorporation of frequent stretch breaks and proper configuration of the workbench area. The second topic was “Doing More with Less.” Participants looked at methods for stretching conservation dollars. Two successful strategies for cost savings were sharing resources and finding alternate methods of funding, both internally and externally. Creative approaches to both topics were shared by the discussion group participants, making for a lively and informative session.

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This open discussion took place on June 13, 2004, during the AIC 32nd Annual Meeting, June 9–14, 2004, Portland, Oregon. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

ERGONOMICS FOR COLLECTIONS CONSERVATORS

The discussion began with the distribution of *Archival Products News* (vol. 10 no. 4) containing the article “Ergonomic Considerations for Furniture and Equipment in a New Conservation Lab” by Heather Kaufman. Kaufman then gave a slide presentation illustrating many of the ergonomic features of the E. Martin and Ethel Wunsch Conservation Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Libraries. She highlighted the adjustable workbenches and chairs, mobile furniture, knee spaces at the fume hood and washing sink, and other flexible features that had been incorporated into the space.

Next, Patricia Silence (Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia) offered ideas about ergonomics from a textile conservator’s viewpoint. She talked about the usefulness of looking at other professions, such as dental hygiene, for furniture and tools to enhance ergonomic compliance. Chairs that adjust in all ways (including some with a support for the chest), tools kept within a sixteen inch radius of the conservator, and timers set at frequent intervals as a reminder to stretch were three of the key concepts that she shared with the group.

The floor was then opened for questions, contributions, and discussion. One participant noted that training for basic tasks such as lifting is very important, and that fixed-height workbenches could be made more adjustable by introducing platforms for shorter individuals. Another person reported that she divides work for her staff into manageable portions, which helps avoid strain, and uses dental tools for conservation work since they have been designed for precise, repetitive motions. Luxo lamps were mentioned twice, as some models have a built-in magnifier that many find helpful. Others noted that they liked the mobility of taborets (storage carts on wheels), since they can be moved easily and serve as both storage and an additional work surface. Another participant talked about using readily available shoe inserts rather than or in addition to

anti-fatigue mats for reducing strain while standing. Fixed-wheel presses were noted to be ergonomic by two individuals, since the press platen can be cranked down without unnecessary reaching.

Tips for computer work included using stretch break software to remind and encourage staff to take necessary breaks and rest their eyes. Some said that using the mouse with their non-dominant hand reduced shoulder and neck pain.

Finally, if an employee is injured on the job, make sure that the incident is reported to the employer and that the employee receives the appropriate support to be able to recover from the injury and possibly continue to work if and when appropriate.

STRETCHING A CONSERVATION DOLLAR

During this part of the discussion, many helpful tips were shared on making conservation budgets work harder. One participant began by stating that he employs students, so his budget is supplemented by the institution's college work/study program. Others mentioned strategies such as working with the fundraising department (if your institution is lucky enough to have one), purchasing items using donor funds, working on special projects in conjunction with departments that have available resources, and using volunteers when appropriate. Adopt-a-book programs were mentioned as a successful fundraising strategy, as was the readiness to give tours to prospective donors.

It is helpful to have rules in place about how money in the payroll budget is allocated, to analyze whether or not one can afford any extra staff, as well as maintain fair salaries across the board. Another person noted that she finds it more cost effective to bring trainers and workshops to her lab rather than pay for her entire staff to go out to a workshop.

On the issue of managing budgets for supplies and equipment, one person stated that he himself performs some of the basic maintenance on machines, such as presses and board shears. Others order supplies in bulk (such as Japanese paper in rolls rather than in sheets) and make sure to ask vendors for their best prices, facilitated by collective bargaining with other institutions in the area. Some participants reported success in bartering for supplies with other book conservators and bookbinders. Sharing lab space and/or equipment with other departments or institutions may also help in cutting costs.

Finally, taking in outside conservation work for cost recovery purposes was mentioned as a way to pay for an institution's conservation program and provide conservation service to a community at the same time, though of course there are many issues to be considered before embarking upon such a plan.

In summary, many participants shared productive, creative solutions in the ergonomics of conservation and doing more with less conservation funding. It became clear in the course of the afternoon that any solution be tailored to a specific situation or program.

TOPICS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

At the end of the session, Doyle and Kaufman gathered ideas from participants about what topics they would like to see covered at future LCCDG sessions. The most popular choices were:

- Materials going to storage: How do we prepare materials for storage, how are items transported to and from storage, and what other conservation issues impact storage decisions?
- Shared equipment purchases: What are the pros and cons of this novel approach to sharing resources?
- Preparation for digitization: Are we handling items in a sound manner during digitization?
- Fundraising: How are we raising money for education, outreach, and conservation?

We look forward to exploring some of these subjects together at the next AIC Annual Meeting!

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