

## **Sewing Room Ergonomics –**

### **A Series of Articles by Rhonda Duncan**

#### **Ergonomics and Your Perfect Quilting Space – by Rhonda Duncan**

I work in an office all day. Over 40hrs a week I sit over a computer and desk, if the ergonomics of my workspace aren't right, then I feel it. I feel it in my wrists, hands, shoulders, lower back, legs and neck. Making your desk, whether it's in an office or your craft room ergonomically correct will enhance your experience, and prolong repetitive injuries from occurring and from returning.

There are many websites that will tell you how to setup your office space, but only a couple that will assist you for crafting. Gwen Deck, a guild sister, introduced me to a couple of great books that were available from our local library (yeah local) that were geared specifically for Quilting.

These books not only share the best tips and tricks for ergo comfort, they show you how to setup your DREAM SEWING spaces no matter what size of space you have to work with. Every type of space from a closet to an entire studio was showcased in the books. The books asked me to analyze me, my needs and my space. (See attachment for the questionnaire on analyzing your needs & space). We are all different and thus that means that all of our spaces will be different as well. The key is to pull ideas from others to enhance your space (I've included some tips and tricks that I've been privy to by fellow quilters and some that I've crossed over from other crafts).

My personal quilting space at home varies from the type of project I am working on, everything from my dining room table (so I can keep an eye on the 3yr old) to my craft studio in my basement (for those late night marathons). The tips and tricks I found in the books were fabulous and I will share some with you in the next couple of months in my upcoming newsletter articles. These tips and tricks were so numerous, I couldn't fit them all into one article, and I wanted to see what tips my fellow guild sisters could give me.

Now, I would like to challenge everyone to a little contest (yes there will be a prize at the end).

I would like everyone to take a quick photo of where they quilt right now (go on; go take the photo right now). Bring your photo to me at the December meeting (or mail it to me snail mail or via email). Please attach a quick write up of all the things you like about your space and all the things you don't. During the January Guild meeting, you will be able to view all the submissions, listing the pros and cons and what ergonomics would be more helpful, etc. for each submission.

Now comes the contest part, I want everyone to take a good look at what others are doing from the submissions posted at January Guild Meeting, you will have three months to make changes, or no changes at all. At the April Guild Meeting I want you to bring me a photo of your "new and improved space". At our May Guild Meeting, I will post the before & after photos (just like on the decorator challenge shows) along with a little write up of what was changed and why (please let me know what you have changed, why and how it's helping you). This will help all our veteran quilters, newbie quilters and lifers to see what makes us all tick, what inspires us and what we can do to make things better.

Please ensure that when you send in the after photo, you tell me what you did and if it cost anything, or if you recycled what you already had! Recycling items around your house is a huge part of keeping your space yours. However, sometimes a little retail therapy never hurt anyone.

**Good Luck everyone, I can't wait to see what you all come up with.**

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#### **December's Tips & Tricks to a safe, ergonomic and organized Quilters Space**

Things to keep in consideration of your space when you begin: Is the size of the space adequate? Is the Electrical power adequate? Are your heating, cooling and ventilation needs adequate for you? Are there exterior windows, adequate lighting? What will the noise level be like?

Do you use your dining room, or can it be transformed into a quilting space so that you can still watch over the kids and grandkids while you work?

Do you like to switch things up occasionally? If so, use moveable cabinets and storage solutions so that you can move things to re-arrange your space at your whim!

When choosing your cutting space, whether a folding table or custom built, consider a way to store items below it to utilize the space more effectively.

Do you like your fabric out where you can see it? Consider a custom made "ladder" that you can prop against a door or wall to drape your fabrics. Or, use clear plastic containers that will keep your fabrics dust free, yet allow you to see what is inside without opening them all.

Design Wall got you stumped? Use a piece of flannel, tacked to the wall, or tack two pieces of flannel/quilt batting to each side of sliding closet doors to keep the closet doors useable for more than just hiding your stash. (purchasing quilt batting on 50% days at your local fabric wholesaler makes this project a quick, inexpensive one).

Need a place for all your fiber and thread? Try looking at garage & Estate sales for old antique medicine drawer units or old school library card cabinets. Old canning jars are great for keeping your thread and wound bobbins together in the same space, as well as keeping all your colors sorted in their respective color combinations. Old baby food jars are great for all those fibers and buttons that seem to get lost in the bottom of your sewing basket. It also makes a very eye pleasing decoration for your space. Cover the tops of the jars with fabric and a ribbon and viola, gorgeous accents.

Do you have space for a favourite chair? If so, this can become a great place to read your magazines, patterns and books to get inspiration in a relaxing setting.

Rulers always in your way? Putting a piece of peg board on your wall or interior side of a closet door will allow you to hang them up out of the way, but allow you to see them at a glance.

Plants, everyone needs fresh air when they quilt, it inspires, it pushing your brain to think outside the box, so add a small plant or favourite bouquet to your area, the colors, shapes and contours may just inspire you further!

Sewing Chair! Make sure that you have a comfortable, sturdy chair. Ensure that it is at the proper height for you, if it is adjustable, ensure that you have locked in your height (draw a line on the base so that if it is moved, you know where it belongs). If your chair is at the wrong height, it will surely make your shoulders, arms and back ache with the added tension from your sewing space.

Inspiration: do you have your favourite photos, pictures, fabrics on the walls to inspire you? Do you have favourite quotes or words on the walls, your space will surely help keep you going when you are stuck if your favourites are close by.

Keep a stash of treats close by. It's always a hassle to run to the kitchen to get a snack when you are knee deep in a project. Keep a small container with treats to fuel yourself up on those long nights of quilting. (I always keep a couple bottles of water too).

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Clock or No Clock, that is the question? Do you keep a clock in your space, or would you rather not know or be reminded what time it is? I set my old alarm clock to ring every 45 minutes. Why, to remind me to get up and stretch! Get up and go to the loo! Get up and realize the rest of the world is out there!

Mirrors, keeping an inexpensive full length mirror (Wal-Mart under \$10) attached to a wall or closet door, allows you to test out your colour combinations in the mirror. Hold your fabrics up in front of you and face the mirror. Close your eyes, when you open them, see if any particular color jumps out at you as not belonging!

#### **Human Energy: Do you have it!**

Human Energy is the amount of energy that you expel in a 24hr period. Do you manage your energy to ensure you have enough Energy to sew each night? Depending on your mental health, genetics and physical health, your human energy will vary at different times of your life, your month, your week and your day. Maximizing your “good energy” times for the fun stuff is to your benefit.

When you are sewing you require different types of energy and combinations of those types, Mental Effort, Visual Effort, Manual Effort and Pedal Effort are all types of energy efforts that you will need to stay on top of your projects and your well being.

Mental Effort is required for organizing and to complete simple tasks.

Visual Effort is the constant requirement to have your eye directed at the movement of your surroundings and your body.

Manual Effort is all those nasty reaches, pulls, tugs, pushing, bending, turning, rising, stooping, sitting and kneeling movements that you need to get the job done.

Pedal Effort is a very important movement of your foot, including walking, standing and the up and down flex movement while you are using your machine.

Important effects of Energy during sewing is a simple statement, do not stay in one position or posture for any amount of extended time. Allowing your body to freeze or tense in single position is a huge drain on your body and it's energy depletion. Changing your position every 15 minutes helps to renew your energy and circulate your blood flow for a healthy and safe environment. Roll your shoulders every 30 minutes to eliminate a stiff neck and shake out your hands as often as you can.

Ergonomics is a concept of designing your work space to maximize your physical comfort. Allowing yourself to be comfortable and relaxed helps out your mental health effort and allows your visual effort to work at an easier pace.

Ergonomics is a science and has been studied for years. Dealing with proper heights and depths and proper design and spacing help your effort to maximum your output. Lighting, machinery, chairs and tables/desks are all a part of your Ergonomics. Rule of thumb is if you hold it, sit on it, stand on it, lean over it, or push, pull or tug it...you need ergonomics.

#### **Did you know?**

- Your elbow when sewing should be at a 90 degree angle (give or take 20 degrees).
- Your hips (and we know we all have them) should be at 70-80 degrees.
- Your countertop height for rotary cutting should be 6-8 inches below mid-elbow.
- Your countertop height for pressing and cutting with shears should be 3-4 inches below mid-elbow.

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- Your sitting reach for work area should be 16 inches maximum, after that you are probably leaning and not sitting to your maximum energy potential.
- An average woman has a maximum reach of 16 inches, ensure when you are storing things, that you keep your well used items within your reach and when storing items, you store them so that your reach allows you to retrieve them without too much over stretching.
- If your storage area is above a workstation or table, your reach is reduced with the extension of your body across the table so be cautious of what you put up high in those cupboards.

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#### **Fabric Storage Ideas**

- Small tags on your fabric to label washed/unwashed and the amount of fabric folded.
- When creating a Fabric Pantry or Fabric storage area, ensure that you have enough space to grow with your stash.
- Shelves ideal size for fabric is 18” depth (with 16.5” clearance) and as high as you can reach without everything toppling over onto the floor. This depth allows you to fold your fabric in quarters so that there are not too many folds to crease the fabrics.
- Label your shelves by type of fabric, thus keeping your linings and fleece away from your flannel and cottons.
- Put your fabrics in color batches, this makes it easier to choose from when you’re trying to find the perfect match.
- Keep larger cuts or bolts of fabric in a separate area of storage so that you can see at a glance which cuts are large enough for backings.
- Put bolts of fabric in a new garbage can so that they stay upright and don’t slip and fall to the ground.
- Use pant hangers to hang smaller cuts of fabric and use a clothing rack to display your stash.
- Use a storage caddy (like the plastic or canvas ones used for shoes, etc.) in a closet or on a clothing rack to sort project pieces. These hanging storage selections often come with a plastic zipper front for sweaters, which turns into a great dust free alternative.

#### **Remember when using drawers for fabric storage that “digging for fabric” is using up energy.**

- Laundry Baskets, clear shoe boxes, wicker baskets and cardboard boxes (such as liquor boxes) or drawer sorters are all great ways to keep your shelves organized with your fabrics. They are also easier to label as well.
- If you use containers that are not see through, take a photo of the fabrics in the box, print them off in “wallet” size format and tape or staple them to the outside of the box for easier findings. This eliminates a waste of energy in searching every box for that special piece of fabric.

Use your fabrics as Art in your craft/quilting room. Drape fabrics over the curtain rod or hang dowels from a suspended ceiling and drape fabric overtop for a effect that you can change as often as you like, and your fabric is out and staring you in the face screaming “ use me” all the time.

Attach a towel rack to each end of your desk or cutting table so that you can drape favourite fabrics or often used items on the rack.

Tie a ribbon onto your scissors and rulers and other often used items and hang on repositionable hooks onto the side or front of your desk/cutting table. You could install hooks onto a wall that is within an easy range of reach for good energy usage, as well as keeping them out for you to see. Remember, if you can see it, you will use it.

Install corkboard onto the inside of a door or closet and use push pins to hang fabrics side by side to see if they will look good together. This also doubles well as a design wall for hanging blocks!

When storing trim, wrap it around an empty paper towel tube and write on the tube the length of the trim for ease when choosing.

Use an old recipe box for storing pkgs of ric rak and other prepackaged trims.

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Keep a box of Medium Size Freezer Ziploc bags in your quilting area to store your patterns in. Use large size Ziplocs to store your pattern and fabric choices until you begin your project. This eliminates the need to go searching for that great fabric you bought for your project to only find that it was in your stash and you used part of it for another project. (personal reference here, my son needed fabric for his home economics class at school, I told him to pick from my stash, he did, and when I went looking for that ever so elusive piece of fabric, it was gone!) Lesson learnt.

#### Threads and Fibres

Now we are talking, this is my favourite stash item of all time....you can never have too many spools of black thread or too many pairs of black heels!

Custom racks are the best storage solution hands down, but due to cost not always economically sound.

There is a new gadget out that I have fallen in love with, it's blue, it's straight and you stick your wound bobbin on one end, and insert the other end into your spool. Viola, never to have the bobbin separate itself from the spool again, until you are ready to use it. They cost about \$6 for 10 or so. A cheaper alternative to this is to stick a skewer through two spools of thread, at each end add it's respective bobbin and stick a cork, piece of fleece or cotton ball on each end to ensure the spools and bobbins don't fly off the skewers. (also so you don't poke yourself)

Another great favourite that I use often is old baby food jars; they fit two spools and two bobbins quite nicely. Using Quart jars for those threads that you have multiple of work great too. These jars are great for keeping the dust out.

- Tie a pipe cleaner through a spool and bobbin and twist the ends together to keep your thread and bobbins from separating from each other.
- Saran Wrap around a spool will keep the thread from unwinding.
- If you are blessed to get a great wooden spool rack, screw some key hooks into the bottom row and you can hang your scissors and other small nick knacks from the hooks.
- Using an old medicine cabinet keeps the thread off your work service and can be easily mounted into a wall at the height and located that you desire.
- If you store your thread in a drawer, purchase drawer dividers or a plastic spice organizer (made just for drawers it has 3 slants) and organize your threads by colour and content.
- Bobbin storage containers are a plenty and are usually pretty inexpensive. My bobbin storage unit is made of wood with a magnet inlayed into the curve in the wood so that when I knock it off my table the bobbins stay put!
- Medicine bottles are great for storing bobbins and most pharmacy will sell them to you for mere pennies a jar if not free!
- Other create bobbin, thread storage units are: ice cube trays, tool boxes, fishing tackle boxes, your son's old hot wheels car carrier(this is awesome each individual compartment fits a thread and bobbin perfectly), egg cartons, mini sandwich snack bags, etc.

Buttons can be stored in the small way. I personally keep all my buttons in quart jars by color and place the jars in my window sill to reflect the colours all over my work area.

If you collect buttons like I do (and I am obsessive about old jars of buttons) you can store them in old antique containers, old flour jars, tin cans from Xmas baking or in a button book. A button book is just a bunch of layers of muslin or velvet or whatever you like sewn together down the centre like a book. Then you sew the buttons onto pages by category and

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color. A one slip sew on to make it easy for removal and this book allows you to see your buttons all at a glance and easily take what you need. It also makes a very chatty and conversation starter coffee book. Have fun with it!

Pills bottles and old tic tac containers make great bead and button storage.

Expandable coat rack units/or mug racks make great fibre storage, you can hang your ribbons and fibres and even zippers on the racks and extend the unit to the depth of the fabrics hung. This also double as a great piece of art and inspiration in your workspace. These racks can also be used to hang scissors and other tools on.

Use old baby wipe containers that have the pop up top to store fibres and yarns for when you're couching and embellishing your quilts.

A carpenter's tool box is a plethora of treasures for quilters. Did you know that the T-bar Ruler and L Ruler are great for squaring off large quilts? Did you know that wearing a tool belt with all your most used tools helps save your energy from reaching, stretching and looking for the lost pair of shears? An electrician's bag is perfect for storage and for on-the-go quilter with its numerous pockets and storage space. It also is much less costly than the "fashion colored versions at the fabric shops". I purchased a single black one for \$25 less than the pretty brown and pink one at a fabric outlet centre. That's almost 5 fat quarters saved!

Some of the tips & tricks were taken from the following books available at the Sherwood Park Public Library:

[Dream Sewing Spaces – Design & Organization for spaces Large & Small](#), by Lynette Ranney Black

[Creating your Perfect Quilting Space – Sewing-Room Makeovers for any space and any budget](#), by Lois L. Hallock