



## University of Toronto Governing Council

### Policy for VDT Operators

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## Policy for VDT Operators

An increasing number of administrative jobs within the University involve the operation of visual display terminals or VDT's, also sometimes called video display units (VDU's) or cathode ray terminals (CRT's).

It is the University's belief, based on all available scientific information, that operation of a properly designed and functioning VDT does not constitute a health hazard of any kind. However, this work does place special demands on employees and ergonomic and job design considerations are important in ensuring comfortable VDT operation. Supervisors must ensure that close attention is paid to furniture and office design, environmental and equipment testing where necessary, and job structure.

Many staff members work at terminals for only a portion of their day. For purposes of this policy, an operator of a VDT is one who spends a total of two hours or more per day at the terminal.

### (a) Ergonomic Considerations

A proper relationship between the operator, the terminal, and the environment in which the terminal is used is important to avoid fatigue and muscular discomfort, eye strain and irritation. Among these ergonomic considerations are proper lighting, adjustment of keyboards and display screens to proper heights, provision of divider screens and carpeting for noise absorption, and desks and chairs providing proper support at appropriate heights.

The **GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF VISUAL DISPLAY TERMINALS** published by the Office of Occupational Health and Safety and reprinted for ready reference in the Manual of Staff Policies as Section 4.03.02 should guide the selection of office furniture and equipment, and the design of VDT work space.

Furniture should be selected and work space redesign planned at the time terminals are ordered. Where this has not happened, and budgetary constraints do not permit all aspects to be addressed at once, a phased plan for upgrading should be developed. Because some of the most common and troublesome symptoms of discomfort associated with VDT operation are related to postural problems, acquisition of properly-designed chairs should be the first priority.

### (b) Job Design

Jobs should be structured and work schedules organized in ways that can be helpful in minimizing operator fatigue.

The semi-autonomous work group concept permits operators to schedule and co-ordinate their work flow among themselves and with others, thus giving them considerable control over their own work. It is particularly recommended for word processing equipment operators in work groups of two or more. Other job design alternatives include job-sharing, where one job is shared between two part-time staff members; and job rotation. For consultation on and assistance in introducing these concepts, the supervisor should call the Personnel Generalist or Salary Analyst responsible.

Operators' work should be organized in a way that provides visual relief periods, when viewing the screen is not required, for approximately 15 minutes every two hours of continuous use. For jobs where continuous VDT operation amounts to 50% or more of the employee's time, the visual relief periods should be increased to approximately ten minutes per hour. The timing of the relief periods can be flexible, according to individual job requirements; and since these breaks are for visual relief only, non-VDT tasks that provide a visual change should be scheduled. In structuring jobs that involve specialization in VDT operation, non-VDT duties must be incorporated in such a way as to make these visual relief periods feasible.

The staff member working at the screen can do much to avoid fatigue, by adjusting his or her posture from time to time, looking away from the screen periodically at any distant object, and blinking frequently.

Exercises for the VDT operator are outlined in Appendix A of the **GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF VISUAL DISPLAY TERMINALS**.

### (c) Vision Testing

Employees should be encouraged to have a visual assessment by their personal ophthalmologist on their initial assignment to VDT operation, and employees already operating VDT's should have a vision assessment periodically. Annual vision testing is covered under OHIP.

The purpose of the initial vision assessment is to detect any pre-existing visual defect that might be aggravated by VDT operation, to correct vision if necessary, and thereafter to ensure that uncorrected or corrected vision remains compatible with comfortable VDT operation.

### (d) Operator Pregnancy

Much publicity has been given in the last few years to possible health hazards of VDT operation for pregnant women and their unborn children, and pregnant staff members may become worried about possible ill effects. These fears are understandable, and should be dealt with in a manner which demonstrates concern for the employee, but at the same time reflects the University's belief that there are no proven hazards arising from VDT operation.

Safety may be contacted to arrange for a test of the operator's VDT, to ensure that it is functioning properly and that no potentially harmful emissions are present.

If the employee is still sufficiently concerned to ask for a transfer to work not requiring VDT operation, every reasonable effort should be made by the department (with the assistance of the Personnel Generalist or Employment Counsellor) to accommodate this personal request with modification of job duties or reassignment to another position temporarily. The Personnel Generalist or Salary Analyst responsible must be consulted regarding salary treatment appropriate to each individual case, taking into account the level of job being performed and the duration of the reassignment.

Failing reassignment, the employee may opt to commence her maternity leave earlier (within legally established time frames) or, at the employee's request a leave of absence without salary will be provided until the earliest date that maternity leave can begin. Employees should be aware, however, that an unpaid leave of absence at this time could affect the level of benefits payable during maternity leave. The Benefits Administration section of the Personnel Department should be consulted for fuller information about the implications.

Normal conditions of return to work from maternity leave apply.

(signed)

Alexander C. Pathy  
Vice-President, Business Affairs

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