

VDT SURVEY, AFSCME LOCALS 2477 AND 2910, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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In October 1989 AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] 2477 and AFSCME 2910 issued a survey to the majority of bargaining unit members who work in the Library of Congress. The purpose of the survey was to gather information on the health and safety conditions of Library employees who work at video display terminals (VDTs). Three hundred and fifty-five employees answered the questions and returned the survey to the union office. Some of the surveys included written comments and we are including a sampling of these at the end of this report.

Because of our inexperience in designing surveys, some people who responded found our answering method confusing. We asked "yes" and "no" questions on one page of the survey and "often," "sometimes," "never" and "not applicable" questions on the next. In this report we are providing you with the total number of respondents to each question we are reporting on.

After compiling the results, we decided to correlate the responses with the amount of time people actually work at their VDTs. Many health and safety specialists believe that the longer you work at a VDT the more likely it is that you will receive one of the injuries that are associated with this type of work. We discovered that this was true at the Library of Congress also.

We have chosen to report on selected data which we feel reflects the health concerns of VDT users who work in the Library. These are: visual complaints (eye fatigue, burning and itching); musculo-skeletal problems (body aches and pains, lower back pain, repetitive motion injury); stress (headaches); and pregnancy concerns.

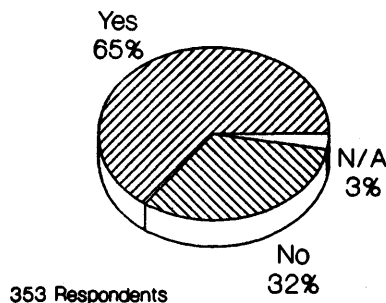
Pie charts are provided to illustrate the responses. We are commenting on the results of each question in the hope that the health and safety problems that are identified can be corrected. If the Library of Congress is to meet this challenge, it must begin by filling the industrial hygienist position which has been vacant since June 1989.

As the Library continues the automation of its operations, more and more employees will be working at video display terminals for longer hours. We are convinced that, unless solutions are found, VDT-related complaints and injuries will increase. We are publishing the results of the survey with the expectation that managers and employees will take the necessary steps to reduce or eliminate the health and safety hazards that are caused by VDTs.

With proper workstation design, ergonomic skills training, meaningful participative management and a serious commitment to VDT health and safety, we believe this can be done.

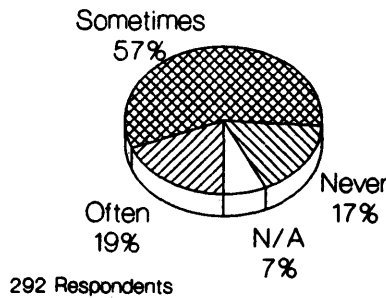
Do you spend more than 4 hours a day at a VDT?

Comment: As automation continues, increasing numbers of people will be working longer hours at their computers. In the coming years these figures will probably be much higher.

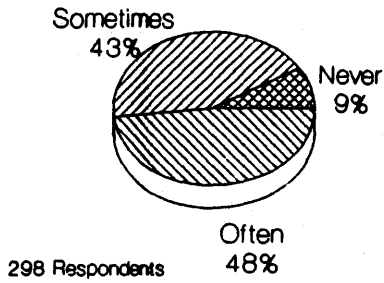


Do you get headaches at work?

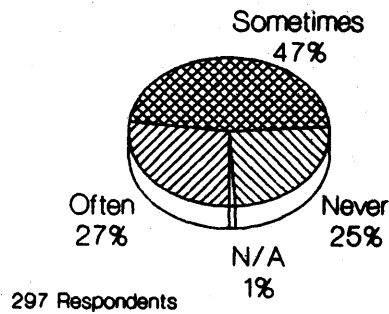
Comment: Headaches are often the result of tension, anxiety, and frustration that is associated with the routine and heavy workload demands associated with prolonged VDT use. Stress may be caused when the organization of work is based on quotas and statistics in an atmosphere where employees are not allowed to participate in decision-making. Headaches may also be caused by disturbances of the visual system.



Do your eyes feel fatigue at the end of the day?

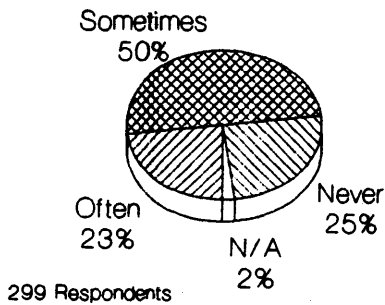


Do your eyes burn, itch or tear at work?

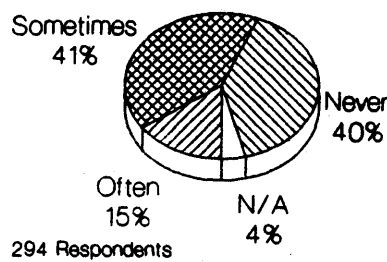


Comment: Glare and reflection on the VDT screen is a major cause of visual complaints. Overhead lighting that is too bright and not diffused properly is the major culprit. Lack of glare screen, task lighting and adjustable document holders also contribute. Since uncorrected or improperly corrected vision is extremely detrimental to VDT workers, we urge employees to have professional eye examinations at least once a year.

Do you experience body aches or pains at work?



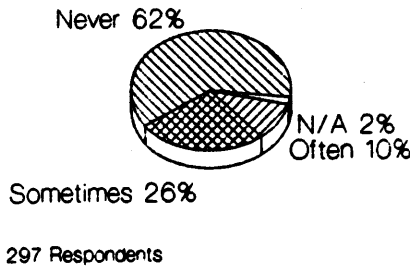
Do you experience aches or pains in the lower back?



Comment: Musculo-skeletal disorders—pains in the neck, shoulder, back, arms and wrists—can be eliminated by providing furniture that adjusts to the needs of the individual VDT worker's body. Adjustable chairs, adjustable tables, footrests, document holders and task lighting all help reduce this type of injury.

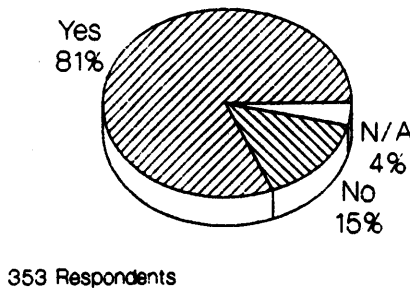
Have you ever experienced numbing, pain or tingling in your hands or wrists?

Comment: Repetitive motion injury—tendinitis, tennis elbow, carpal tunnel syndrome, etc.—is a serious problem for library employees who work at computer keyboards or perform other tasks that require frequent use of hands and wrists. The high number of employees who reported complaints in this area is disturbing and reflects the need for education and training.



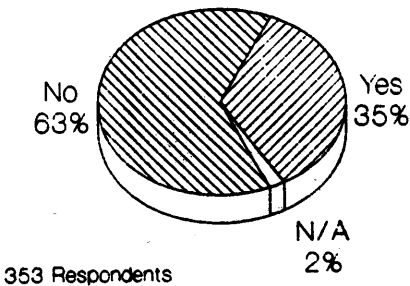
Are you able to take rest breaks that you feel are adequate?

Comment: It is heartening that the large majority of those reporting are taking advantage of the break times that industrial hygienists recommend for VDT users. Since many injuries are attributable to sitting for long hours in awkward positions, it is a good idea to perform varied tasks or just get up and walk around.



Have you received any training which explained the health and safety problems associated with intensive VDT work?

Comment: Only 35% of those who answered this question received training in this area. Since we know of very few departments where this has occurred, we suspect that some of this training was obtained independently and away from the worksite.



If you worked at a VDT while pregnant, did you experience any problems with your pregnancy? Responses to the question: not applicable—173; no response—87; yes—11; no—86; total number of responses—357.

Comment: We regret that we did not frame this question more carefully as many women have been concerned about “clusters” of miscarriages and birth defects that have been discovered among certain groups of pregnant VDT workers in North America. In our survey we failed to define “problem pregnancies” and we did not ask employees to identify where they worked in the Library.

At present there is no available research that proves a causal relationship between reproductive problems and VDT use. While there has been debate and speculation concerning this issue, it is presently unknown if VDTs are a risk to reproduction.

We do not know the significance of the data we received from this question and are reporting on it without drawing any conclusions.

The Congressional Research Service

In August 1989 the Congressional Research Employees Association (CREA) surveyed bargaining unit employees in the Congressional Research Service. Approximately 200 surveys were returned and the results were strikingly similar to those reported in the AFSCME survey.

Survey results pertaining to headaches, eye strain, lower back pain, and repetitive motion injury were compared. The number of VDT-related complaints reported in the CREA survey appear to be approximately 10% less than in the AFSCME survey. In some areas the results were approximately the same, or higher.

Written Comments from Survey Respondents

Since many employees already have eyeglass prescriptions, the cost of purchasing yet another pair of glasses would be prohibitive.

I can read a yellow-on-black screen for hours at a time; green-on-black for only minutes.

The glare from the shiny keys severely hampers my typing.

Switching keyboards—from typewriter to computer—prevents me from adjusting to the computer keyboard.

Perhaps more input would help to get something done about the horrible bright lights in my division.

I use an Apple Macintosh with a black-on-white screen, lucky me!

I was issued a glare screen without asking; I use prescription sunglasses all day instead.

The cubicles catalogers must work in are uncomfortable when it comes to doing work on a VDT along with occasional typing on a typewriter and handling printed matter.

Have any employees developed bumps or nodules on their wrists? I have developed two (one on each wrist) on the underside, just below the palms. My doctor said it is probably work-related.

There should be “eye breaks” or at least some formal training on how to cope with VDT-induced stress.

“Down time” on a computer is still time spent at a VDT and this isn’t taken into consideration.

My doctor says that my next eyeglasses will need to be bifocals. I have heard that VDT work needs a different focal point than reading. Are special glasses needed? Does AFSCME or the Health Office have any information on this?

My right hand (3 fingers) has begun to hurt. I’d like to suggest that the keyboard have the numbers also on the left side so I can alternate hands when inputting numbers.

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