

Double Click

Wednesday, November 10, 1999

Microsphere heads for the big time at Comdex in Las Vegas with its computer workstation

Geoff Orr (right) and Paul Conder (far right) are about to launch their new ergonomically efficient computer workstation.

Photo illustration
Ric Ernst — The Province

No pain in the neck

Stories by Ashley Ford
Staff Reporter

Working with computers can often be the proverbial pain in the neck... or the wrists, or the back.

Geoff Orr, founder of the Vancouver-based Microsphere Inc., aims to change that.

Next week, the tiny privately funded company will unveil its revolutionary workstation system at the Comdex computer show in Las Vegas, the world's largest computer trade show.

The promise to usher in a painless era for computer users may sound a bit pie-in-the-sky, but Orr and the four others involved in the project are convinced they are on to a winner.

Given the critical eyes Comdex attracts,

it will be a real baptism of fire for the company. But Orr steadfastly believes two years of research that started with a car seat in a basement will triumph, and he is predicting \$10 million US in sales in the first year.

"This is a completely new market and we intend to dominate it," says Orr.

Units at Comdex will be offered at a discount price of \$1,595 US and \$1,895 US on the open market and the company has a patent pending on its design, he says.

"Up until now, everybody has focused on putting people in front of a computer at a desk. Workstations have concentrated on the performance of the computers, overlooking the fact that the real brain behind the computer is the user."

Microsphere is an innovative seating

unit that can be customized for individual users and their body postures.

"Everybody has a different body," says company president and designer Douglas Brown.

"We wanted to create a system that would work as a natural integrated extension of the body allowing a wide range of users to sit for extended periods. We believe that the Microsphere will enable people to sit comfortably, longer and thus decrease the likelihood of repetitive stress injuries and cumulative trauma disorders," Brown says.

"What we have done is essentially remove the desk from the equation and created a workstation that is specifically designed for comfortable, ergonomically efficient, prolonged computer use."

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Injuries from computer work on rise

Repetitive strain injuries (RSI) and cumulative trauma disorders (CTD), often associated with working with computers, are no laughing matter to millions of Canadians.

The latest figures available from Statistics Canada show that, in 1997, an estimated two million Canadians sustained such injuries serious enough to hamper their usual activities.

RSI, which range from back injuries to tennis elbow and carpal tunnel syndrome, are caused by overuse of certain muscles. It has been suggested that poor or inadequate design of workstations is a major factor in the growth of RSI.

The increasing use of time at a keyboard

is another major factor. Liberty Mutual spent \$50 million on wrist injuries alone last year.

The company said that, when keyboard use increases from one hour to four hours per day, the probability of acquiring cumulative trauma disorders increases from 45 per cent to 92 per cent.

Such types of injuries have been gaining recognition among employers and medical experts as an increasing health problem, placing additional burden on health-care systems.

They are costing billions of dollars and the incidence is rising with the spreading use of computers.

They are the fastest-growing workplace

injuries in the U.S.

There are more than 128 million computers in North America and the number is growing at an annual rate of 22 per cent while ergonomic and related disorders represent the largest group of preventable job injuries in the U.S., which have cost employers more than \$20 billion US since 1993.

Indirect costs may run as high as \$100 billion US.

The Workers Compensation Board of B.C. says that repetitive strain injuries — not all of them directly associated with computer use — resulted in \$9.3 million in claims accepted between 1993 and 1997.

Young designers, entrepreneurs at work

Microsphere Inc. is hardly a household word in the world of electronic commerce.

It started out in 1997 with a couple of imaginative guys and a good idea.

The "team with the dream" that has produced an innovative computer workstation has since grown to five.

Geoff Orr, a 25-year-old holder of a finance and economics degree, founded the company along with Benjamin Moglin, a 29-year-old technology specialist who originated the idea.

They were eventually joined by Douglas Brown, a 25-year-old civil engineer who serves as president of the company,

Paul Conder, a 32-year-old industrial designer, and Rob McLachlan, a 25-year-old mechanical engineer.

Dr. Richard Abraham, an occupational health and safety expert from McKenzie-Willamette Hospital in Eugene, Ore., provided the medical and ergonomics expertise.

