

# EDGAR STENE PRIZE 2019 THIRD PLACE FRANCISCO CARREIRA ROCA

*Spain*



I am an architect and, since osteoarthritis caused me a spinal cord injury in 2014, I have volunteered for NGOs such as Liga Reumatológica Galega and LIRE (Spanish Rheumatological League). I attend conferences all over Europe addressing several topics relating to the patient's role in society, in the work force, in shared decision making and in making new policies about us (that are currently being done for us but without us).

As an architect I also work as a volunteer consultant on accessibility issues, providing advice on how to improve our environment, in search of universal accessibility.

I was born in Lugo, Spain in October 1974 and have lived all my life in A Coruña. I have been happily married since 2014. We still don't have children but we have a wonderful cat. I like travelling and practising sports such as sailing or boxing. I also like reading and driving.

I first heard about the Edgar Stene Prize competition at the EULAR Congress some years ago and, as it is a prize given to some very inspiring stories, I hope you find mine inspiring too.

# THIRD PLACE ESSAY 2019

## Work Right

When I was at school I loved to draw. I spent hours drawing, hunched over my desk, my face glued to my sketchpad. I went on to study architecture, continuing to draw, hunched over the drawing board and, later, in front of my computer screen.

My mother always told me to “study law” and I responded that I liked to draw, that a law degree wasn't for me. However, she wasn't referring to the law, but instead to my posture. In Spanish, my native language, the word she used, “derecho”, is the same for the two different meanings.[1]

In my professional life, I continued to draw on paper before working on the sketches on my computer. The many hours I spent sitting with bad posture ended up costing me a great deal. I developed osteoarthritis. One fateful day, I went to work like any other day, but the mere effort of opening the door was enough to cause a silent hernia (which I didn't know was there) to rupture, injuring my spinal cord. This marked a turning point in my life. In a matter of hours I went from leading a normal life – with a job, a partner, an athletic lifestyle – to being someone with a spinal injury, unable to move or feel anything below my chest.

A few emergency operations and years of physiotherapy have lessened the initial impact of the injury. This, added to my determination and the strength that my partner inspires in me, helps us support each other. Those who know us know that we are very positive people.

Now I work as a volunteer for various organisations. I don't have a boss, so I'm the one in charge of my postural health. However, if I were an employer – something I still haven't ruled out – I would think about certain things that I see but which aren't usually noticed. They are things that I would want for me and that I would put in place for everyone else.

If I were an employer...

As an architect, I was already aware of the importance of creating an accessible work environment but, as a wheelchair user, I have realised quite how many small details there are that can become insurmountable barriers. An accessible space for those with reduced mobility is ALWAYS, and I put this in capitals for emphasis, a convenient space for everyone. Does anyone find the lift more inconvenient than the stairs?

If I had an employee who was in pain because of a repetitive task they were doing, who had to take time off and who could end up developing a rheumatic disorder due to premature wear and tear, as happened to me, I would carefully analyse whether this task was the cause of their sick leave. I would look for a way to adapt the task so that, when the employee returned, it would not do them any further harm. I would also introduce the same measure for all employees who do the same task since they would be exposed to the same risk.

[1] Editor's note: The word “derecho” used in the original Spanish text has various meanings: “law” (the discipline), “right” (as in “correct” and also as a “legal right”), and “straight” (as in “sit up straight”). This aspect is also used in the essay title.

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As a result of my personal experience, I would not hesitate to invest in the health of my workers, whether they have a pre-existing medical condition or whether they become ill due to their work (and with greater reason in that case). Money spent on protecting health is never a waste, but an investment.

I would be very aware of the needs of my employees. I would be flexible about their work hours and I would let them work from home when, for health or work-life balance reasons, it's more convenient for them than travelling to work. Breaks during the working day are also very important as they help employees concentrate and stop them getting tired or bored. A happy employee is a good employee. I would seek to create a climate of co-operation, collaboration and understanding of the needs of everyone, striving to ensure that any adjustments and adaptations that a colleague may need are not perceived as privileges. Such modifications are aimed at ensuring everyone works in the same level of comfort based on their different capabilities.

A good colleague does not cease to be good just because they are diagnosed with a disease or because they need to change their working hours or place of work. This is something that all good employers should embrace and promote. A good work atmosphere is as important as a good salary – sometimes even more so.

Occupational health and safety measures, as I knew before my injury, are never a waste of money. They serve to prevent accidents and injuries, and to minimise the effects that these can have if they do happen. They are always a good investment, but few employers or employees see it that way. I discovered it in the most shattering way. Ensuring the correct posture at work is a health and safety measure as important as any other.

I don't know if I would be the perfect employer by implementing these measures, but there is one measure that would certainly make me closer to perfect: listening to the needs and suggestions of my employees and trying to facilitate their tasks. It is impossible to know everything, and the information provided by those who do the work day in and day out is very important. It doesn't matter if the work is something general like office work or something more specific, it can always be done in better conditions.

Working right is a right, an obligation and a good habit.