Ergonomics, Drug Use, and Violence

"Workplace safety." Does the mention of the term immediately bring thoughts of Workers' Compensation or OSHA to mind? Today, however, workplace safety is about much more than just avoiding accidents. Companies are focusing on a new wave of safety issues—not only to comply with legislation, but to create safer, happier environments for their employees and customers. This article reviews three of the "hottest" safety issues—ergonomics, drugs in the workplace, and workplace violence—and what you can do to lower healthcare costs, reduce workers' compensation claims, and increase productivity.

ERGONOMICS

Ergonomics is the science of fitting the job to the worker. If you have a mismatch between the physical requirements of a job and the physical capacity of the worker, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs) result. Another problem, repetitive motion injury (RMI), results when you do not match the physical requirements of the worker to the work environment.

Why do ergonomics matter?

1. Repetitive stress injuries and illnesses cost private-sector employers more than $60 billion annually in workers' compensation claims. Injuries cause an estimated $100 billion in lost productivity and turnover every year.
2. RMIs and CTDs are the fastest growing workplace injuries in the United States. The incidence of these injuries has jumped 770% in recent years! It's not just a big-company problem; mid-size companies have the worst injury rates.
3. A company concerned with ergonomics promotes the well-being of its workforce, and is perceived as caring about its workers.

How can I diagnose potential problems?

1. Look at injury and illness logs for patterns that may indicate repetitive traumas or point to other potential MSD culprits.
2. Look for areas of high employee turnover, long or repeated absences, or lagging production.

3. Observe employee behavior. Are people wringing their wrists or stretching their backs? Do they look uncomfortable or awkward when completing certain tasks?
4. Get employee input on workplace design and activities that cause them pain or fatigue.

> *For companies who've made the commitment, the resulting decreases in injuries and workers' comp costs far outweigh the expense incurred.*

What can I do to make my workplace safer?

1. Train employees in basic ergonomic principles to help them identify the source of their discomfort. You may end up shifting workers into different positions, or start cross-training efforts to prevent RMIs.
2. If you're going to invest in new equipment, make sure it is *easily adjustable* to meet the size of the people that might use it. Train people how to use it effectively.

Ergonomics on a Budget

- Use a rolled-up towel for lower back support.
- Empty boxes make decent footrests.
- Folded tissue paper, or a rolled-up washcloth makes a low-cost wrist rest.
- Don't throw away last year's phone book! Instead, tear off the cover and tape it to the top of your computer screen to form a glare shield. Use the rest of the book to raise the monitor to eye level.
- Vary tasks for workers—either rotate positions or schedule a variety of tasks throughout the day.
- Encourage short rest breaks for workers doing repetitive tasks.
- Place computer keyboards below waist level.
- Encourage employees working at computers to break every 20 or 30 minutes and focus on a distant object, at least 20 feet away, for 20 seconds, to rest their eyes.

Creating an ergonomic work environment is not a one-time event. Keep basic ergonomic principles in mind as you design new job tasks or purchase new equipment. For companies who've made the commitment, the resulting decreases in injuries and

workers' comp costs far outweigh the expense incurred. And, once you resolve to make your workplace safer, your employees will thank you.

DRUGS IN THE WORKPLACE

Drug use in this country is increasing, and the number of functional addicts is growing. The result is an increase in accidents and violence in the workplace. Drug abuse is becoming even more of a problem for small and mid-sized companies. As large companies develop stricter drug testing policies, drug-using workers detour to smaller companies bringing with them all of the problems associated with drug use.

Why should I worry about employee drug use?

1. Sixty-five percent of all on-the-job accidents are directly related to an employee's use of drugs or alcohol—either at work or prior to starting their shift.
2. Substance abusers are absent three times more often, use 16 times as many health care benefits, and are six times more likely to file a workers' compensation claim than non-abusers.
3. You are liable for an employee's actions. So, if an employee on drugs or alcohol causes an accident and you did nothing to discover or stop the problem, then you could be charged with "negligent hiring."
4. Drug sales have moved from the street into the workplace. As employees need cash to "feed their habit" they turn to selling drugs to their coworkers. (Some companies are even working with police to set-up undercover drug stings in their own offices!)
5. Young employees are more comfortable using drugs and are likely to continue their habit as they leave college and enter the workforce.

How can I diagnose potential problems?

1. Look for changes in employees' attitudes and behaviors. Is an employee who was once very cheerful, now moody and irritable for most of the day?
2. Examine your accident logs and injury reports. Does a particular name show up repeatedly?
3. Have you noticed a decrease in productivity from a previously productive employee?

What can I do to make my workplace safer?

1. Follow state laws containing guidelines for workplace drug screening. These laws offer protection against discrimination lawsuits for employers who follow the guidelines.

2. Institute a drug-free workplace program:
   - Establish a zero-tolerance policy.
   - Make drug testing a part of your hiring process.
   - Test only those applicants to whom you've extended a conditional offer of employment, to protect yourself from ADA legislation.
   - Test the applicant immediately after making the offer to prevent him/her from getting drugs out of his/her system.
   - Educate your supervisors and employees on the program and teach them how to spot potential problems.
   - Conduct sporadic drug testing to support your zero-tolerance policy.
   - If employees are able to predict when testing will occur, they can stay clean for a few days in order to pass the test.
   - If a test comes back positive, decide whether you will immediately terminate the worker (as 25% of companies do), or offer counseling or a treatment program first.
   - Address and document problems and work-related conduct that negatively impact on-the-job performance. Make sure you document only performance-related issues to prevent any claims of discrimination.
   - Follow-up. If job performance does not improve after problems have been addressed, offer treatment or terminate the employee.

Any step you take to prevent drug and alcohol abuse in your company is a step in the right direction. The costs you incur in setting up programs to protect employees will be worth the money you save in workers' compensation costs and health care benefits. Ultimately, you will be protecting yourself from liability issues if one of your workers injures himself or others on the job.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Did you know that homicide is the second leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the U.S.? Here's a scary statistic: approximately 1 million people were assaulted while at work or on duty each year between 1987 and 1992!

Workplace attacks range from simple assault to aggravated assault, robbery, and rape. And, incidences of domestic abuse are being carried over into the workplace—where coworkers can be caught in the middle of violent attacks. Approximately 74% of battered woman, who are employed, are harassed on the job.

Why should I worry about workplace violence?

1. Workplace violence costs money due to increased sick days, absenteeism, health care costs, and decreased productivity.
2. Many people believe violence is propagated by "violent" people who suddenly explode. This is a myth. Violence is situational—in most cases "normal" people simply escalate their actions in response to the environment.
3. Employers may be liable for "negligent retention" if they keep a violent person on the job who has threatened other employees.
4. Workplace violence creates a tense work environment, which can increase turnover.
5. Domestic violence costs $3 to $5 billion annually in health care costs and lost productivity. Victims of domestic abuse miss 175,000 days of paid work every year.

How can I diagnose potential problems?

1. Look for departments with high turnover. Can the turnover be attributed to a particular employee causing problems with coworkers?
2. Has anyone in your workplace demonstrated signs of extreme rage when confronted with a problem? Some people may not be able to cope with set-backs without becoming angry—situational pressure can push those employees out of control.
3. Look for changes in behavior. Employees may stop taking personal calls for fear of talking to an abusive spouse, or may start showing up late for work for unexplained reasons.

What can I do to make my workplace safer?

1. Adopt a zero-tolerance policy regarding workplace violence. Require all incidents to be reported to management and make it clear that no threat will be tolerated.
2. Become an "activated witness" by learning what to look for, then addressing the problems you discover. Too often, people choose not to see problems, in the hope that they will go away. Teach your employees to be activated witnesses as well.
3. Educate your workforce. You can do this unobtrusively by holding seminars during lunch, distributing information with paychecks, or simply hanging up a poster by the time clock or in the break room. Include places employees can go, or numbers to call, such as a community sponsored crisis center or abuse hotline, where they can get help.

4. Start an employee assistance program where employees can receive counseling, talk through problems with coworkers, or get help leaving a violent relationship. You may be able to team-up with other companies in your area to share the cost.
5. Make counseling services an additional benefit in your compensation packages.

Having a workforce that is aware of what to look for in order to prevent workplace violence will greatly benefit your organization. Once everyone realizes that violence escalates due to situational pressures, you may all approach work a little differently. Encouraging workers to talk through their differences, seek out help when needed, and help each other find solutions to problems will make your workplace happier, healthier, and safer.

Safety First

Workplace safety is no longer just about eye wash stations and caution signs on wet floors. It is an ever-broadening concern facing all businesses every day. To operate profitably and minimize liability, start with the internal policies that affect your biggest asset—your workers. Make sure you have created a safe, comfortable environment in which your employees will be happy to come to work each day. Give employees what they need to be productive. Help those who may not be meeting their goals reach them. By taking steps such as these, you can transform workplace safety from a liability into a source of competitive advantage.

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