

Injury Prevention: Impacting the Bottom Line

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Examining U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) survey data from 2003 through 2008 reveals a decrease of 22% in total OSHA recordable injuries and illnesses. Nationally, in 2008, non-fatal workplace injuries and illnesses in private industry decreased from 4.2 to 3.9 cases per 100 equivalent full-time workers. While the statistics are encouraging, employers remain concerned about workplace injuries, as certain industries continue to experience injury and illness rates 2 to 3 times higher than the national average. Workplace injuries can influence the future success, prosperity, and longevity of any organization. Therefore, preventing injuries, and the direct and indirect costs associated with them, seems to be very prominent in the minds of employers these days.

Most organizations have an injury prevention program in place, or have attempted to implement such programs in the past, with nominal success after the initial rollout period. Also, over time, programs may fall to the wayside, and any potential benefits are lost.

Over the last 5 years, I have partnered with many organizations in various industries to reduce work-related injuries. My experiences have demonstrated some of the key components that play important roles in successful injury prevention initiatives. While all of these components may not be necessary, the concepts listed below are certainly worthy of consideration by those responsible for putting together an injury prevention initiative:

- **Determine exposures:** Review OSHA logs and workers' compensation claim records to "trend" injuries. Which job tasks are resulting in injuries, and how often are they occurring? Also, one may want to also consider "trending" injuries not only by cause of injury, but also by date of injury vs. date of hire, age of employee, body part injured, etc. Addressing all injury exposures (from a prevention standpoint) can be a monumental task. It makes more sense, and the greatest return on investment is typically realized, by addressing the most frequent injury exposures.
- **Review current and past interventions:** If a past or present program was or is not effective, try to determine why. Investigate, and interview employees, managers and supervisors to obtain more information. Details gleaned through this process will be invaluable in shaping future efforts.
- **Get input from frontline staff:** Talk to those performing the day-to-day tasks in the field. Allowing frontline staff to give input into the process demonstrates the organization's concern for the employees' health and safety, and can help to customize programs, particularly training, thereby increasing carryover to the real world.
- **Customize programs and allow time for practice:** This is particularly relevant with training programs. If a program does not address the risks found on the job, and does not allow time for the employee to practice actual on-the-job tasks using skills learned in the classroom setting, carryover into the real world will be minimal or non-existent.

- **Management buy-in is crucial:** Experience has shown that company or department-wide injury prevention initiatives that lack upper management and/or ownership support fail or fall severely short of expectations. So those in leadership roles must lead by example when it comes to safety and injury prevention.

- **Know when to get an expert involved:** While your organization may be experts at producing widgets, it likely lacks expertise in ergonomic risk analysis. Calling in professionals, when necessary, can help achieve more timely and effective results.

- **Periodically review the program for effectiveness:** A decrease in OSHA recordable injuries seems to be the most widely used barometer when evaluating the effectiveness of an injury prevention program. Look beyond numbers at things like staff turnover, productivity, and morale. These can all be positively impacted with an effective injury prevention program.

- **Consider a multi-faceted, team approach:** Injury prevention is more than just training, with the whole typically greater than the sum of the parts. Managers, supervisors, safety professionals, and insurance representatives can all assist and guide one in establishing the pieces that will comprise the most effective initiative, within the organization's budget. While not all inclusive, some options for injury prevention may include:

- Post-offer, pre-employment testing
- Drug testing programs
- Revision of policies and procedures
- Customized training programs
- Ergonomic risk analysis
- Job rotation or task enlargement

- Modification of tools and equipment
- Modification of the work environment
- Implementation of personal protective equipment, or replacing defective or less effective personal protective equipment
- Wellness programs
- Accident (and near miss) investigations
- Establishing a safety committee
- Implementing a safety incentive program

In March of 2010, People's Gas (a subsidiary of Integrys Energy Corporation), the natural gas supplier for the City of Chicago, in partnership with Accelerated, began a hands-on body mechanics training program for field employees. According to Chuck Wagner, Corporate Safety Director for People's Gas, employee evaluations have shown that the program has been very well received and appreciated by staff. Wagner said that several key items contributed to the success of the initial implementation and the ongoing effort, such as:

- Partnering with the industrial rehabilitation team at Accelerated Rehabilitation Centers, to lend expertise and credibility to the program.
- Customizing the program to address real world tasks field employees perform while on the job.
- Allowing time for practice of on-the-job tasks, with feedback from therapists and peer trainers.
- Management buy-in.
- Establishing certain employees as program “champions,” which increases the credibility of the program.

Also in partnership with Accelerated, beginning in 2007, Nicor Gas, the largest gas distributor in northern Illinois, implemented an extensive program to reduce ergonomic-type injuries among certain classes of employees. According to Jim Kuchler, a Senior Manager of Field Operations who leads the field operations safety team, the program has been successful. Since 2007, Kuchler reports a 55% decrease in ergonomic (musculoskeletal) type injuries, and an 81% decrease in lost workdays. The keys to the continued success of their program are:

- Partnering with Accelerated to provide the expertise in terms of ergonomics and musculoskeletal injury prevention.
- A customized program focusing on specific tasks that were causing injuries.
- Collecting employee feedback to continually improve the program.
- A diverse team involved with the program. “Everybody’s got a stake in the success,” said Kuchler.

Obviously, both of these organizations operate very similar businesses. Several key elements were common to the success that both companies have experienced with their respective programs. The key factors mentioned by Wagner and Kuchler, along with the other key factors discussed, are applicable and even crucial to a successful injury prevention program, regardless of the industry.

What, then, is the bottom line on injury prevention? A successful injury prevention program will surely save organizations money, positively affecting the financial bottom line. This is definitely a “win” for everyone. However, the true loss when a workplace injury occurs is the pain, suffering, and the loss of function (temporary or permanent) experienced by the injured individual. This is always a tragedy, which we should try to prevent; and that’s the bottom line on injury prevention.



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Mark Bell, PT, CEAS II, has been an Illinois-licensed physical therapist for 18 years. He currently specializes in ergonomics and injury prevention services, including job and ergonomic analyses, post-offer screen design, and injury prevention education. Over the last 3 years, Mark has helped customers such as Nicor, People’s Gas, Central Grocers, and the Park District Risk Management Association successfully reduce injuries. Clinically, Mark performs functional capacity evaluations and post-offer screens. In his spare time, Mark enjoys running and home brewing beer.