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Warehouse Workers Trained not to Strain

by Jennifer Hove

"Fitting the job to the worker" is a simple concept. But in practice, ergonomics can be tough to implement — especially when workers perform physical tasks on a daily basis. Variables like specific job tasks and worker capability figure highly into the equation, as does the need to work safely when an ideal ergonomic situation is not possible. Increasingly, companies that require strenuous, physical work from their employees are taking a real look at how to ensure that this work is done safely.

For the past year, two companies in the packaging industry — Crown Packaging and Smurfit-MBI — have trained warehouse workers at their Vancouver, BC locations to incorporate ergonomics into their daily work activities. The intent behind the training is to reduce work-related strain injuries in particular, which result from the repetitive bending, twisting and lifting common in packaging. Mark Kredba, health and safety officer at Crown Packaging, says "Due to the number of soft tissue strains we experience, it's beneficial to provide education sessions for our employees on the mechanics of lifting and how their backs work."

Equally important, the training increases employee awareness so that the workers themselves are involved in preventing injuries. Susan Rock, an instructor with Richmond, BC based BodyLogic Health Management who works with the two companies says, "Creating a conscious worker directly increases workplace safety. On an individual level, employees start to realize that they have control over how they feel at the end of the workday."

Workers are taught how to recognize "risky positions" or "caution zones," including hands above shoulders, elbows out, static tension and squatting. Prior to the training, an ergonomics committee at each location videotapes all job tasks in the plants so that workers can pinpoint unsafe work behaviour. Employees then

learn specific stretching and strengthening exercises, and how to perform "risky positions" in the safest manner possible.

Because their workers are involved in hands-on work activities, the training at Crown Packaging and Smurfit-MBI has also focused on manual material handling. Lifting is a trouble zone for both companies, so workers are taught the difference between the "ideal lift" and the "actual lift," and how to protect themselves when the situation does not allow for the "ideal."

"Workers will often try to carry loads that are too heavy so that they don't have to go back and forth as often," explains Bob Kirk, personnel supervisor for Smurfit-MBI. "But that leads to a grip that is unsafe. The training has increased awareness so that employees are encouraged not to put themselves at risk."

Along with increasing safety awareness, the training is successful because it incorporates employee input. Susan Rock explains, "Employees are your greatest resource in ergonomics. They do the job. They know what it feels like. And most of them can tell you the solution — they just need a little coaxing to implement it."

As this ongoing ergonomics training takes hold, both Smurfit-MBI and Crown Packaging are experiencing positive employee feedback and tangible results. "In a labour intensive environment, it's important to provide the necessary tools to protect employees from strain injuries," says Bob Kirk. "And overall, we're seeing far fewer repetitive strain injuries than before.

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