

A Healthy Workforce Equals a Healthy Bottom Line

by Zoe Robinette, President and Founder, Studio A, Inc.

A report released on Friday, November 17, 2006, by The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics on occupational injuries and illnesses, makes the numbers we have been kicking around for last year old news.

The construction industry has the highest injury incident rate, at 239.5 per 10,000 workers, of all major industry sectors. Key findings in 2005 data compiled by the DOL indicate that sprains and strains were the leading nature of injury and illness in every major industry sector. Injured workers in the construction industry had a median of nine days away from work.

A high percentage of work-related injuries in your industrial sector has an impact on your insurance rates. Important to this discussion is the recognition that sprains and strains are musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). MSDs are preventable injuries.

Injuries to Watch Out For

A sprain is a stretch and/or tear of a ligament – a band of fibrous tissue that connects two or more bones at a joint. Injuries are graded based on whether a tear is partial or complete and the number of ligaments involved.

A strain is an injury to either a muscle or a tendon – fibrous cords of tissue that connect muscle to bone. Depending on the severity of the injury, a strain may be a simple overstretch of the muscle or tendon, or it can result in a partial or complete tear.

A sprain can result from a fall, a sudden twist, or a blow to the body that forces a joint out of its normal position and stretches or tears the ligament supporting that joint. Sprains may occur when a worker lands on the side of the foot, twists a knee with the foot planted firmly on the ground, falls and lands on an outstretched arm, slides on wet surfaces and lands awkwardly, is struck by a falling object, or makes forceful contact with an object.

Understanding the mechanisms involved with incidents specific to your company creates the target areas for effective preventive measures. With the target areas defined, specific proven health fitness-injury prevention methods can be applied. If you are saying, “I know that, and I have been trying, but the injuries just keep going up,” I suggest that you carefully review the prevention methods you have in place. An outside professional review may be in order if you have been seeing work-related injury cycles remaining the same or going up year after year.

Retool the Org Chart

If, as a group, the construction industry can control preventable injuries at the workplace, incidence rates will go down, case counts will go down, experience modifiers will go down, insurance premiums will go down, and capital reserves will go down. The sector could affectively remove itself from the “Top Five” by aggressively controlling this line item.

Review your workers’ compensation financial picture with the controller. Is work-related injury a major source of revenue drain? If so, review your organizational chart. Where have you placed the Department of Health and Safety and the Health and Safety Officer? If like many companies I work with, those functions and departmental leaders are at the bottom, it may be time to check your premise and retool the organizational chart. Realign health and safety with strategic operational control. The most effective use of this realignment practice I have seen is when the chief operations officer rides shotgun on innovative health and safety practice. Whatever it takes to place this function at the top of the organizational chart is money in the bank.

Critical to your success in reducing work-related injuries is a comprehensive review of your own numbers, safety policies, procedures and practices. Address this issue from a solid business standpoint and conduct an internal review using information gathered from your internal specialists. A word of caution – do not focus on medical treatment and insurance costs as a place for solution. The fix for the problem is in reducing injuries, which in return will reduce associated costs. Focus on the preventable aspects of your corporate policy and the rest will follow. A comprehensive approach, with specific targets, industrious implementation of proven health fitness and injury prevention methods will result in a healthier workforce and company bottom line.

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Zoe Robinette, M.A., CSHE, is a Fitness Promotion/Injury Prevention specialist with over 20 years in the industry. She has been an onsite consultant with numerous Fortune 100 Corporations, state and national award-winning workers’ compensation cost containment programs, as well as with the insurance risk management and occupational medicine markets. For more information, visit www.studioa.biz; and email zoe@studioa.biz.