How to Reduce Injury and Absenteeism While Increasing Productivity

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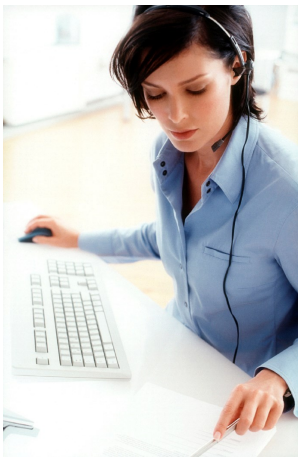
With an average of 130,000 work-related injuries per year, nearly half of compensable claims are due to strains and sprains arising from manual handling.[1] The average cost per claim is around $9,600 with an indirect cost of nearly 5 times that[2] in lost time, re-training and other costs.



In the current economic climate it is more important than ever to reduce unnecessary costs and improve business performance. This can be achieved by providing a safe and healthy work environment resulting in:

1. Lower insurance premiums
2. Reduced staff turnover
3. Increased productivity
4. Lower hiring costs
5. Higher employee morale
6. Competitive advantage

One of the key ways to achieve a safe and healthy workplace is to ensure that the people hired are physically suited to the physical demands of the job.

Pre-Employment Functional Assessments (PEFA)

One means of assessing a worker's physical fitness for an occupation is through a Functional Capacity Evaluation (FCE). FCEs are developed to assess the physical requirements of an individual job or task, and a candidate's ability to meet these requirements. If carried out at the beginning of a worker's employment, this is usually termed a Pre-Employment Functional Assessment (PEFA).

Carried out under the guidance of a health professional (often a physiotherapist,[5] occupational therapist or exercise physiologist[3]) PEFAs give an employer a snapshot of whether or not a candidate is suitable for the job demands based on his or her:

- Strength
- Mobility
- Cardiovascular fitness
- Manual handling technique

If a candidate does not meet the recommended criteria, then areas of concern are flagged. Physical testing can determine if someone is unsuitable for a position or whether certain job modifications are required.

PEFAs have been found to dramatically reduce the incidence of injuries in workers.[4] One study found that for each dollar spent on PEFAs, $18 was saved in the form of lost-time injuries and cost per injury.[4]

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Employers who include pre-employment functional assessments in the recruiting process have a competitive advantage.

How to make your pre-employment testing most effective

1. The testing must be objective and well documented.

To ensure defensibility in the event that a hiring decision is tested, it is essential that hiring is objective, equitable and legally defensible. Quantitative data supported by accurate records is one of the most effective means of achieving this.

2. Testing must be customized.

It is essential that testing is relevant to the job being tested. The World Health Organisation Bulletin in 2008 stated that "any health assessment has to be appropriate to the job requirement." Close collaboration between the testers and employers with customisation of the testing process is required to achieve this.

3. Testers have to be skilled and the test environment needs to support this.

Testers need to be appropriately qualified and experienced. Relevant findings are often subtle. An inexperienced assessor can invalidate good testing protocols. Physical testing, for example, requires someone with knowledge and skills in Physical Capacity Evaluation, an orthopaedic assessment with knowledge of injury and pathology.

A multidisciplinary team is often required, as well as unique equipment. Comprehensive testing can require several locations so testing staff has access to the necessary equipment. A substandard environment equates to substandard testing.

4. The testing must be comprehensive...

...and cover all reasonable risks. For example, drug and alcohol screening should be included in many occupations, and attitudes towards workplace safety can be assessed via psychometric assessment. Visual acuity is essential for many tasks and peripheral vision is required for driving.

Many testing protocols are generic. This is not recommended. Blanket testing of all conditions and scenarios is not possible. In the world of sports injury prevention, the testing for a rugby league team needs to be totally different from the testing for swimmers. Yet incredibly, in the pre-employment world generic testing is common.

5. Interpretation of the tests is as important as the testing.

There is no point in going through this process unless the results are correctly interpreted. The tester needs to work with the employer to determine cut-offs where the applicant may either be denied the position on medical grounds, further investigations are required, or the job modified to suit the applicant.

Conclusion

Pre-employment functional assessments are not foolproof; however, they are an effective tool in the risk management process. At-risk candidates can be effectively screened out before employment and training costs are incurred.

The assessing team should be considered key stakeholders in the workplace injury prevention team. Employers who include pre-employment functional assessments in the recruiting process have a competitive advantage.

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