



Corporate Exposure: Oh, My Aching Back

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Who among us has never had a backache? Your employees? Not likely. Recent workers compensation analysis indicates one third of all claims reported in 1990 were back-related, with higher percentages noted in some industries. Conservatively, back injuries cost industry in excess of \$30 billion a year in workers compensation costs, lost productivity, and numerous other related expenses.

Considering the size of this problem, it seems hard to believe some enterprising group has not come up with a solution. Some argue that a product exists that can reverse this trend: the back belt. Recently, we completed an operational review for a company in which everyone is issued a back belt to control or minimize injuries. Whether the back belt or similar devices are truly effective is doubtful. We believe, in fact, that they may be more harmful than helpful, and we question the actual return on investment they offer.

Let me elaborate on my position.

Back Injury Problems

The majority of back claims reported are allegedly caused by lifting. The back belt will not reduce the number of lifts or the weight of the objects being lifted. As a matter of fact, the back belt may give wearers a false sense of invulnerability to back injuries. If the wearer lifts improperly, the belt will offer no protection. (In all fairness, the belt *can* serve as a reminder to the wearer to use proper lifting techniques.) In addition, research indicates that back belts may elevate blood pressure and restrict necessary side-to-side motion.

The solution to the back injury problem involves a multi-disciplinary approach. Our sedentary life style and generally poor physical condition are

significant contributors to back problems. For every ten pounds we add to our girth, we increase the amount of pressure on our backs *1000 percent*. Thus, the first step is to help individuals realize their own personal responsibility in controlling exposure to potential injuries. This can reduce back injuries on and off the job.

The second step is to eliminate as much lifting, bending, and twisting in the operation as possible. Raise the work level to eliminate lifts from the floor or consider lowering the operator. No operation should require an employee to lift anything above his or

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her shoulders. Each time something is lifted over the shoulders, the lower back is placed in extreme jeopardy. Any function that requires constant standing should include a stool to elevate one's foot similar to the brass rail you see in the saloons in old Western movies. Resting one foot on such a unit substantially reduces the pressure on the legs and back.

For positions that require sitting for long periods of time, a stool under the desk can help reduce back pressure. Pushing is preferable to pulling in any activity. Usually, pulling places all the pressure on the lower back. Worse still is when a person grabs a load with one hand, twists forward at the waist, and then pulls. Such a position puts the

back in one of its most vulnerable positions. Finally, strengthening through exercise the back and abdominal muscles is extremely important to controlling back injuries.

Reducing Backaches

All these educational issues, combined with operational redesign, will have a favorable impact on the number of back injuries sustained in the workplace. Anything that can be done to make a job less physically demanding will be beneficial.

This relationship between the employee and the work environment is most commonly known as ergonomics. But ergonomics is a term that is overused, and the concept is too often viewed as the savior of employee loss reduction, although there are certain limitations. Actually, an employee's individual job satisfaction level is a major determining factor in how many back injury claims are submitted. Employees who enjoy their jobs and who want to come to work usually do not submit claims.

Making employees appreciate their job tasks and helping them satisfy their personal objectives cannot be overstressed. Anyone who enjoys what he or she does and who has been properly trained in risk minimization techniques becomes a powerful resource. We cannot look to quick-fix solutions to this problem. Back belts, posters, and safety award games do not reduce back injuries. Anything that is expected to produce results requires planning, dedication, and complete involvement by all parties.

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