



Managing Injuries Before They Occur

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Safety, safety, safety. Obviously, we think it is important. Having a good safety program not only protects your employees, it helps your business be profitable. The automotive industry has had an uptick in injury rates, leading Minnesota to require automotive repair shops to have an AWAIR (A Workplace Accident and Injury Reduction) program. What can you do to manage injuries?

We've identified eight primary components to controlling injuries:

1. Good hiring practices
2. Good safety program
3. Good reporting
4. Accident investigation
5. Injury care
6. Return to work program – light duty
7. Communications
8. Reviewing loss run reports

Hiring the right person for the right job is the first step towards ensuring the work gets done. That's not only ensuring the would-be employee has the right experience and education. It's also making sure the person can physically do the job.

When you're developing the employee's job description, develop a physical job description, too. That should list the physical requirements of the job, to complement the description that outlines tasks and duties. For an office job, it might include the ability to sit for some length of time and to type for that duration (note: the physical job description needs to be more specific than "sit for a long time"). For a mechanic or body tech, the physical requirements could include the ability to stand and walk all day, twisting, lifting 50 pounds, reaching above shoulder level, reaching and bending down.... Make sure it realistically reflects what your employees will do. You don't want to require lifting of 100 pounds, for instance – that's too much for anyone.

Once you've identified the physical demands of the job, work with your occupational health clinic to develop a pre-employment physical that matches those requirements. Then, when you're ready to offer the job, you can ask the candidate to be evaluated according to those criteria.

We've talked before about the need for good safety programs. They don't have to be cumbersome or complicated. But they do need to outline safety responsibilities and rules. They also have to be enforced.

Remind employees to report all injuries promptly. The sooner care starts, the more effective it usually is. And the sooner you know about the injury, the easier investigating it becomes. Even better, ask employees to report the almost-accidents, too, the problems that by luck didn't cause injuries.

Find out what happened. Accident investigations are not intended to find someone to blame, but to figure out how it could have been prevented. Did the person need more training? Different tools? Would a change in procedures have prevented the accident? This is where investigating the almost-accidents becomes valuable, because it allows you to take steps to prevent the serious injuries.

Ensure employees get prompt, appropriate medical care (we talked about that last month, when we discussed occupational health clinics).

Work with the employee and the doctor to get your worker back on the job as soon as possible. It may take some creative thinking to come up with light duty jobs, but having someone work, even part time, is critical to a timely recovery. It's better for your wallet, better for his wallet, and much better for mental health.

Communicate. If an employee is on light duty or off work due to an injury, keep in touch. Have him stop in to pick up his paychecks. Include him in all shop meetings and training, so he isn't behind when he comes back to work. Have him call in weekly. Better, call him often and see how he is doing. If you had an employee out for surgery not related to work, wouldn't you at least send a card? Treat an employee with a work injury at least that well.

After an injury, follow up with your insurance company. Request a loss run report, which will show how much has been paid out in claims, and how much the insurance company has put aside in reserves. Once an employee is back to work, make sure the insurance company closes out the case.

You want to do good work so your customers don't have problems. But stuff happens. When they do have problems, you want to follow up promptly to minimize the problem and keep their good will. The same is true with injuries: you want none. Take steps to prevent any, but if they do occur, don't expect them to manage themselves. Following up will minimize problems, and keep the good will of your employees.

<p>This article is intended to provide general information (not advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or chess@chess-safety.com</p>

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