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FIT Ergonomics: Keeping your work force safe and healthy

Why Training Does Not Prevent Back Injuries

By Dennis Downing

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Back injuries have been the bane of industry for decades. They are the source of high dollar claims, significant lost workdays, and can instantaneously ruin one's quality of life forever.

Corporate America, despite many attempts, has not been able to significantly reduce the frequency or severity of back injuries to any desired degree. Back injuries (and other sprain/strain injuries) continue to cost Corporate America lost production and billions of dollars of lost profits every year.

There have been many attempts to mitigate this problem. Back belts, ergonomics, and training have been tried. Back belts did not achieve the desired effect, ergonomic interventions have helped mechanize many lift tasks, but does not seem to be the complete answer, and training, well what about training?

We have all heard that training people on how to use their bodies correctly does not yield results. Many of us have witnessed this first hand. But how can that be? We can teach a 12 year old girl to do a back flip on a balance beam that is four inches wide and four feet of the ground; we can teach a 4 year old how to swim; we can teach a monkey to jump rope; and even I learned how to eat Chinese food with chopsticks; yet we have not been able to teach willing adults how to lift a box correctly.

In the mid 1990's, based on a study conducted, it was pronounced by a well-known medical journal that back training does not work!

Does this make sense? Well it didn't to me. What then are we missing?

We have employers not wanting employees to be injured. We have employees not wanting to become injured. No conflict of purpose there.

We can train athletes of any age to do and repeatedly perform tremendous physical feats, yet responsible workers are being labeled as untrainable?

I had the good fortune of meeting the Doctor who conducted the previous mentioned study and who concluded that training does not work to reduce sprain/strain injuries. The thought process was to discover what methodology was used and how this conclusion came to be.

I discovered very good intentions, but severe problems in the design of the training protocols. In fact, it was so flawed there was zero chance of reducing injuries. The obvious flaws were:

- **There was very little management support.**
- **Employee buy-in was non-existent.**
- **And the biggest problem was the training was theory and demonstration only. There was no practical or experiential module for the employees to learn by "doing".**

There is not one physical activity that one can learn without doing that activity. "Back schools" have typically been theory only (video or experts talking about it). Would you teach your four year old to swim with only a video and then introduce them to the ten foot end of the pool? Then why, in essence, are we doing that to our employees?

Training to reduce costly injuries **does** work. The return on investment in many cases is phenomenal. When one applies the correct methodology to teaching employees how to perform activities of daily living, employees will eagerly listen and learn even amongst groups with questionable morale.

The formula for successful injury prevention training must include:

- I. **Care about your employees** – Your goal is not to lower workers' compensation costs when conducting an injury prevention training. Your goal is to help your employees to go home healthy everyday. THEN you will see your workers comp costs decline.
- II. **Employees must buy-in** – You cannot mandate proper lifting or sitting techniques. It must be a self-determined decision of each employee to apply healthy body movement at home and on the job for their own well being.
- III. **The theory content must be customized for your employees** – Job specific training “hits home” and facilitates employee acceptance.
- IV. **Practical Module** – ALL physical skill training must be drilled to be assimilated. “The value of any training is only as good as it IS applied”.
- V. **Employee Enlightenment** – “Wow, no wonder I have been hurting all these years. This is good stuff”. Employees must feel the benefits of the training during the training and know it can make a difference in their lives.
- VI. **Commitment** – The employees, based on their new knowledge of how to control their own health, must commit to use these skills on AND off the job.

There are other steps to perpetuate a successful back training implementation that will ensure long-term benefits. However, without an initial workshop that impinges upon the employees, designed specifically for them, and taught in a way that changes attitudes and behavior, reinforcement measures will yield little benefit.

The bottom line is that a correct training program does prevent back injuries.

This article may be reprinted in its entirety provided that the following resource box is left intact:

Dennis Downing is the founder and President of Future Industrial Technologies, Inc., a nationwide Industrial Injury Prevention Training Company. It specializes in improving conditions at work and in life by utilizing the proprietary injury prevention programs, BACKSAFE® and SITTINGSAFE®, that have proven to be highly successful.

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