



How to Protect People from Ergonomic Injury: Exercise & Stretch Programs That Ensure Engagement and Efficacy

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A rigorous warm-up and stretching process is key to assisting in soft-tissue injury prevention. Almost every college and professional athlete go through it during practice or before a game. So why don't workers at companies?

Which of the following sounds familiar?

"Corporate sent us a poster and some guidance."

"We showed the exercises to safety reps on each shift, and they started leading five minutes of stretching after the supervisors finished their daily job briefing"

"I don't think the workforce ever took it very seriously. Eventually, enough people opted out of it. Occasionally, I see people doing some of the exercises, but mostly when the weather is colder."

Having worked with hundreds of workplaces over the last 30 years, DEKRA has seen these soft tissue injury-prevention programs start and stop. The value of having manual workers participate in some level of warm-up and stretching exercises

makes good sense to everyone. This is especially true given an aging workforce and a general focus by industry on sustainably safe work performance.

Yet one of the most common implementation mistakes is the adoption of an "off-the-shelf" program. It's always easy to find an exercise routine online that looks safe and promises effective stretches for most industrial or even office workgroups. But the execution of an effective program, and sustaining it over time, is much more nuanced.

We've seen successful exercise programs contribute to improved productivity and reductions in soft tissue injuries. For example: Over five years, a food distribution service had the greatest number of cases/boxes picked per person per hour worked, the fewest number of miss-picked cases, and the **lowest workers compensation claims in company history**. These results were measured against 60 other distribution centers handling the identical products. The "X factor" was this company's warm-up for work exercise process, which the company continued to implement for decades.

What Makes a Warm-Up For Work Exercises Process Successful?

What makes a workplace warm-up exercise process successful is often not well understood. A process that reduces exposure to soft tissue injuries, builds employee buy-in, and is sustainable, requires the application of a series of best practices. They are:

The Creation of a Strategic Oversight Team

This team is responsible for the implementation, roll-out, communication, monitoring of key metrics and addressing barriers and recognizing success. It should be diverse and that include representation from all levels and constituent groups: The labor union, frontline and senior safety leaders, supervision and site management, and, if applicable, medical personnel.

Also, part of the team's role is establishing a foundation for an exercise process built on trust, cooperation, and flexibility. Team members will ensure that plans to launch the program are shared early and questions get answered as they arise.

The Participation of Leadership

Leaders at all levels in the organization should be included in communication about the process. Their support includes participation in some exercise sessions, asking questions that demonstrate an interest in the process, and both praise and gratitude toward workers for their participation.

Leaders should commit to participating themselves. Over the first 90 days, they should actively seek feedback from teams on how the new program is going. Feedback and other data related to the program should be reviewed by senior leaders, and communications about the positive benefits shared on calls and video updates, or other modalities commonly used by the organization.

Making Time to Motivate Others

Frontline supervisors and workers need to understand why the exercises are vital. They shouldn't feel that they are a chore or are a meaningless dictate from above. To help, frontline supervisors should be given time before work assignments begin for the team to perform the exercises. Supervisors also play a role in reinforcing the value of the exercises. This may include encouraging workers to repeat some of the movements when they interact during the workday.

Explaining Why It Matters

In order to get true buy-in, organizations need to have a subject matter expert on hand to explain why this process is important. He or she needs to coach workers on how each specific exercise increases the capacity of their muscles. Part of that coaching is revealing how overexertion is the top cause of work-related injuries and is responsible for 34 percent of all industrial compensation claims. Just as properly caring for a truck engine keeps it lasting a long time, so does preparing one's body for work protects us – and our livelihood – for years to come.

Some team members may be hesitant or resistant to participate in group exercises. Motivation and gratitude will help in getting these workers and their peers involved in the new required process for safe work.

Behavioral Science confirms that to sustain a behavior, the performer needs to experience timely success cues or he or she will not continue with the new exercise program. Early on, exercise leaders should take great care to ensure that participants can visualize what the exercises are actually accomplishing with a clear link to what they protect against. Credibility of the exercise leader can be built by making use of a subject matter expert as skills are transferred to company exercise leaders to ensure the efficacy of the program and its results.



Conclusion

As you launch or refresh your exercise program, showcase images or videos of teams from other areas of the company participating in similar programs. This helps emphasize that a workplace warm-up exercise process becomes a standard for success across the company.

Share ongoing results, anecdotes, performance improvements and injury reductions. Link these accomplishments back to messaging that people care about one another at your company. Investing time in warming up for the day is good for their bodies, and workers who start their day exercising together are actively preparing for safe work.

Successful implementation of a workplace exercise program is clearly more complex than simply adopting a corporate mandate or a safety committee's good idea. Creating buy-in, sustaining the engagement, and building the capacity of team members requires direction, rigor and commitment. The payoff is immeasurable in terms of demonstrating a passion for people, a commitment to exposure control, and embracing change, key characteristics of organizations that are world-class in safety.

Want to learn more about how you can enhance your work preparation processes for sustainably safe results? Connect with us:

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