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Xandex finds prize in ergo scavenger hunt

Real gains in CTD-related injuries and costs come from detailed workstation analyses, proven interventions and lots of training, right?

Not necessarily.

Xandex Inc. of Petaluma, Calif., has shown how productive an ergonomics program based on employee incentives and rest breaks can be. The company has managed to lower its workers' compensation costs by thousands of dollars when its experience modifier dropped from 201 percent in 1994 to 122 percent in 1997.

Competitive proposals for the 1997-98 coverage allowed the company to pick a reputable carrier, which offered $12,000 less in premium cost than others.

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Employees: 75
Ergo program began: 1993
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Xandex, a manufacturer of semiconductor test and assembly solutions, currently employs 75 people whose duties include assembly, administration and computer-aided design. The company experienced an outbreak of tendonitis that first occurred in the production area, where all-day assembly tasks involve repetitive handling of small parts ranging in size from .0045 inches to 2 inches. The final product is no bigger than the size of a thumb.

Problems developed with wrist, arm and neck strains caused by hours of forceful pinching, flexion, extension and ulnar deviation of the hands, stagnant postures and prolonged sitting.

Injuries impact 28 percent of work force

"By 1993, injuries in both administration and production areas climbed to a point where we had difficulty getting workers' compensation coverage without being subject to a hefty surcharge," said Debbie Lothe, human resources representative for Xandex. "In 1993, about 10 people on our 35-person work force had filed CTD-related claims."

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The family-run business stood up and took further notice when several key long-term employees were off on disability. "As a consequence, there was a lot of support by upper management, even though we didn't have a lot of understanding on what to do," said Michelle Ellison, marketing director.

Shadi Shamsaveri, director of human resources, enlisted the free support from the company's insurance carrier and contracted reputable physical therapists and ergonomics specialists to help evaluate the company's work environment and provide employees body mechanics training. She also designated a local occupational clinic to manage work-related injuries so the physicians would have good knowledge of the company's work conditions and maintain close communications.

On a scavenger hunt

In addition, a company-wide "scavenger hunt" for anything and everything on ergonomics was initiated, said Ellison. Shamsaveri attended ergonomics seminars. Representatives from the company's occupational clinic offered advice. Employees clipped articles from publications ranging from yoga magazines to athletic club newsletters.

"After about three months of data collection, we had a pretty good idea of the direction we wanted to take and the changes that would be meaningful," said Ellison. It was necessary for the company to make widespread and fundamental changes.

Both administration and production areas were provided adjustable chairs (costing between $500 and $600 each) where needed, task lighting, under-desk keyboard trays to reduce extension, foot rests, document

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holders, and head sets for heavy telephone users. Hazardous manufacturing tools also were replaced.

"I had an executive-style oak desk and chair. I am a relatively short individual, and I had to sit 6 to 7 inches away from the back of the chair, with glaring florescent lights," said Ellison. "That's the way it was for many people in the office area."

According to Ellison, the company established ergonomic safety rules, which included morning and afternoon stretch breaks. The company also encouraged prompt reporting of first symptoms. It also required job rotations every two hours for some production jobs, while urging computer users to take one-minute to two-minute rest breaks every hour.

It pays to behave

To encourage and reinforce desired behavioral changes, the company developed an incentives program with a $2,500 budget. The incentives were divided into three categories:

- Hazard identification and corrective solutions
- Prevention practice and wellness
- Initiative and support

While some employees were winning movie tickets and exercising on their breaks, others resisted change.

One cynical and resistant engineer pushed himself into permanent disability by ignoring the ergonomics rules and repetitive motion injury symptoms. "He'd say, 'I work out and I'm in shape.' He worked on computer-aided design systems for 10 to 12 hours a day," said Ellison.

Dissenter used a warning

The damage and impact on his professional and personal life were so devastating that this story was shared companywide as a warning for other skeptics and rebels who avoided company safety practices, according to Ellison.

But for every critic there were many more supporters, particularly among top managers. "The biggest thing early on," said Lothe, "was the managers becoming part of the team. Our CEO even stopped his work to go for a walk."

The company's CTD-related problems extended beyond the office to the manufacturing floor. For example, employees were having to fill ink cartridges by hand, pulling the plunger on the syringe to withdraw ink from the container and pushing the syringe plunger to fill the cartridge. The company purchased a pneumatic device operated by foot pedals to dispense the ink.

"While there was some resistance to the breaks and exercise in other departments, the workers in manufacturing liked taking breaks because what they were doing was so tedious and they were feeling the pain."

In 1996, the incentives budget increased to $3,000 but so did the employees' boredom with the incentives.

Burned out on bagels

"There was a lot of burnout on incentives. We tried posters, movie tickets, gift certifications, bagels and others. Everyone was saying, 'Yea, yea. We know," said Ellison. "The incentives weren't motivating enough. You can only eat so many bagels. We were talking about how much money we were saving on insurance premiums, but the employees weren't seeing any of it. So we revamped the program."

Last year, the incentives budget increased to $6,500 with cash awards of between $20 and $200. While award criteria still focuses on prevention, the 1997 program gives recognition to quick recovery and release from physician's care.

Asked if burnout might return again, Ellison said, 'We'll see how this goes for a while. It's very flexible and we can change. Incentives money may have to be used to buy larger gifts next."

Ellison pointed out that while employees were burned out on the gifts, they were not on the exercises. "Exercise has become part of the company's culture. It's something they look forward to."

Modified work works

Ellison also emphasized the company's strategy in accommodating injured employees with modified work. For example, production staff have been relieved from all-day assembly by working in the administration area for several hours doing filing. The engineer, who underwent surgery and took an extended disability leave, returned to work on a reduced schedule and gradually increased it by using a voice-activated computer. In return, the engineer's work on tool redesign substantially reduced the company's scrap costs.

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Xandex's management philosophy has focused on valuing employees' well being. Consequently, the company has realized the savings, both measurable and intangible. The incentives have helped keep safety in mind as well as ingrained good practices.

Hearing employees relay stories about stretching at home or in the middle of long business meetings at customer sites is common. Cultural change, according to the Xandex officials, takes time and dedication to core values.♦

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