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Read the Signs

Employers who simply post warning signs concerning safety hazards around the workplace run the risk of having them ignored by employees, says Michael Wogalter, psychology professor in the cognitive ergonomics laboratory at North Carolina State University.

In a recent edition of the *Workers' Compensation Report*, Wogalter argues that ambiguity will undermine the sign's important message. He makes the following recommendations:

Use pictorial symbols whenever possible. Such symbols are more effective in conveying a message than plain text.

Make sure the sign includes signal words. Such words jump out at the reader and help

register the importance of the message. Examples include "warning" and "danger."

Use "Alert Symbols" whenever possible. These are symbols that most people understand and may be more visible than text, such as a stop sign.

Make sure the sign does not blend in. Wogalter suggests furnishing signs in colors that stand out, making them more visible in already crowded work environments.

Wogalter adds that including a motivation for the warning may be necessary to further emphasize the sign's importance. Such motivation may include risk of injury or illness if not followed. ■



Higher Risk for Younger Workers

Workers 24 years and under are at a higher risk of workplace injury resulting from a frenetic job pace, says the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Research concludes that adolescent and young adult employees who work jobs in a "higher pressure" environment are much more likely to be injured than older employees.

These jobs include work environments common to young workers, such as restaurants, retail and construction. The research is not conclusive in determining

exactly what it is about these fields that causes the increase in injuries. It does, however, conclude that the type of work-setting is independently associated with the elevated risk of injury.

Employers who offer work to young people, whether full- or part-time, should consider such factors when determining the level of responsibility associated with the young person's job. Management should show extra caution when overseeing the actions of younger workers. ■

Drug-Free Workplace



The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) says companies attempting to create and maintain a drug-free workplace are taking a big step in improving morale, reducing absenteeism and lowering workers compensation costs.

For those businesses considering such a policy, the DEA recommends the following:

Get management on board. Without their acceptance of the program, guidelines will be difficult to follow and enforce.

Decide if testing for substance abuse will be part of the program. Determine testing frequency as well as who will be subject to testing (e.g., new hires, current staff).

Determine disciplinary action. How will you discipline those found in violation of the program's drug-free policy?

Inform all staff of the benefits of such a program. Make sure everyone knows your intentions. Remind them that such programs are proven to reduce costs and lost work hours as well as increasing safety and health.

For more information, visit the DEA's Web site: www.dea.gov. ■

Disability Management

Employers looking for ways to minimize long-term workers' compensation costs may have a helper in the form of a "disability manager." Disability management is a relatively new advancement in long-term loss prevention. Advocates of disability management agree that the costs associated with such an initiative are proven to save big money over the long run.

A disability manager's job is to oversee work-related illness and injury claims from start to finish. In addition to monitoring how benefits are paid, a disability manager will develop ways to prevent long-term

payouts by getting injured employees back to work in some capacity. Some disability managers work closely with human resources and benefit managers in developing wellness and other programs designed to promote and maintain a healthy lifestyle among employees.

A disability manager may be of great assistance to employers who wish to control costs.

A disability manager may be of great assistance to employers who wish to control costs but who do not have the time or resources to view each claim on an individual basis. If workplace injuries and their associated costs are a concern, your business should consider a disability management program. ■

Ergonomic Improvement

Musculoskeletal disorders are becoming a major cause of injury, and these types of injuries bear the burden of exceptional cost and recovery time. Employers concerned with the possibility of such injuries occurring at their workplace should consider the following steps for preventing musculoskeletal disorders:

Ask if it hurts. Employees should understand your concern. Talking with them and soliciting their feedback will help you decide what if any changes need to be made to your current infrastructure.

Conduct a "chair review." Pay attention to the types of chairs employees use. Check to see if they are adjustable. If employees are confined to chairs that serve a temporary audience better than daylong sitting, these chairs could intensify the problem.

Explore the space. Specifically, employee workstations. Do they have enough



room to spread or stretch out on occasion, or are they confined to a smaller space limiting flexibility?

Review equipment. There have been many advances in ergonomically efficient technology. Such technology includes keyboards, monitors, mouse, phone systems and furniture, such as desks, lamps and chairs. If it has been a while since your office upgraded, a change in equipment should merit consideration. ■

Protection from Head to Toe

When was the last time your firm had a safety check-up? If it's been a while or you need help getting started, review the following questions:

- *Are outside workers prepared for sudden shifts in climate?* This may include easy and quick access to gear for working in rain, snow or extreme heat.

- *Are workers properly protecting their hands at all times?* Have gloves been examined for wear and tear? Are they appropriate for the task at hand?

- *Are workers properly protecting their eyes and ears at all times?* Eye protection may be necessary at many workplaces regardless whether or not machinery or equipment is being used. Hearing disorders are a

common form of disability that manifests over time. When was the last time you tested your workplace decibel levels?



- *Are workers aware of risks that may come from above and below?* This includes head protection from flying or falling objects and proper footwear for avoid-

ing slips, cuts, burns, etc.

- *When was the last time workers received training on common workplace occurrences, such as lifting or stacking?*

Are they actively wearing supportive gear to prevent injuries associated with lifting?

- *When was the last time you conducted training on burn protection?*

Do all employees, new and old, know the first place they should go or whom to tell if their skin becomes irritated or is burned by scalding surfaces, chemicals or other causes?

This list of questions can help you get started with assessing worker safety. Answer them and see if your business can get a clean bill of health. ■

Small-Fire Safety

When small fires break out, people can get hurt. Often it is those who attempt to extinguish the fire who are injured. This may be the result of improper fire-fighting procedure.

Fire safety at your workplace should always begin with proper evacuation techniques—this is the best way to prevent workers from being injured by the unpredictability of fire. Employers seeking to train staff on the proper procedure for fighting small fires should emphasize that employee safety takes precedence over property protection. It takes virtually no time for a small fire to become big. Employees who

underestimate the flames and choose fight rather than flight may find themselves in extreme danger.

Some fires, though, are small enough to battle on the spot.

Employers should emphasize that employee safety takes precedence over property protection.

Consider the following tips:

1. Designate several people per floor or office corridor as "fire marshals." These people should be trained on fire-safety

procedures and equipment.

2. Ensure everyone receives a once-through on the use and location of office fire extinguishers. This maximizes chances that, in the event of a small fire, time will not be lost figuring out the mechanism.

3. Mount extinguishers near escape routes or exits and mark them clearly. Service extinguishers on schedule.

4. Train all employees on basic fire safety to minimize fire starts and on proper escape routes.

Your local fire department may offer training. Give them a call and get started on small-fire safety today. ■

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happy to give the same great
service to all of your friends
and business associates.

Ask Yourself: When?

Following is a series of "whens" relating to job safety. The answers to these questions may help your business prevent workplace injury and reduce workers compensation costs.

When was the last time you researched the technology used in your business? Have there been relatively recent updates or new versions of machinery, equipment, etc. that may serve to reduce accident exposure?

When was the last time you reviewed your business' loss history? Look beyond the print on the page for patterns, clues and indications of areas that may need improvement.

When was the last time you did a walk-through? There are employees who may not adhere to required safety standards simply because they see no one is checking.

When was the last time someone was injured? If it was recently, explore the problem immediately. If it was long ago, review procedures and emphasize what's working. ■
