Risk Insight
Manual Handling

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) cause a third of work-related injuries in Great Britain. A significant proportion of MSDs and back pain result from uncontrolled manual handling. Injury and ill-health can arise due to over-exertion, cumulative damage and acute injury.

Manual handling is interpreted as the transporting or supporting of any load and involves a variety of movements, including lifting, lowering, pushing, pulling or carrying.

Incorrect manual handling techniques can cause musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), most of which are related to the back, although hands, arms and feet are also vulnerable.

MSDs consistently remain a problem for employers and continue to feature heavily on many businesses liability claims experience.

In QBE's experience, claims relating to acute MSD/Back complaints resulting from lifting and handling operations are difficult to defend where a diagnosis of work-related MSD injury is presented, particularly against allegations citing breach of duty in relation to insufficient information, instruction and training. Claims defensibility issues often revolve around:

- Develop a manual handling policy
- Risk assessment and implementation of controls
- Training
- The role of ergonomics in the design of work activity

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Policy

As an employer, you must protect your workers from the risk of injury from hazardous manual handling in the workplace. The Manual Handling Operations Regulations require employers to follow a hierarchy of control regarding manual handling activities as follows:

- **avoid** the need for hazardous manual handling, so far as is reasonably practicable;
- **assess** the risk of injury from any hazardous manual handling that can't be avoided;
- **reduce** the risk of injury from hazardous manual handling, so far as is reasonably practicable.

In considering the avoidance of manual handling activities, check whether you need to move it at all. For example:

- Can a large workpiece be worked upon without moving it?
- Can raw materials be delivered directly to their point of use?
- Consider automation and robotics, particularly for new processes and think about mechanisation and use of handling aids such as vacuum lifters and hoists.

Simple solutions can often be the best and can have a big impact on reducing injuries:

- Involve workers in choosing the best handling aids as they can often offer suggestions for practical solutions. This will also provide a feeling of ownership which in turn is more likely to lead to successful implementation.
- Experiment with ideas/solutions (e.g., hire equipment before purchasing) and modify plans if necessary, before full implementation.
- A solution which is reasonably practicable for one part of the work area may not be for another so consider each task separately. Manual handling solution providers will often alter their equipment to fit your needs or assist with bespoke designs.
- Check lifting equipment is CE marked and will be used within the safe working load.
- Risk assess solutions that you plan to implement to ensure that they do not introduce new hazards.

- Take account of other factors such as statutory inspections and training of operators associated with the use of such lifting and handling aids.
- Monitor and review the solutions to ensure that they are still effective.

Risk assessment and controls

This guide is intended to help clients enhance their risk assessment processes, safe systems of work and to provide a broader perspective regarding this process. Common issues in defending claims often arise from poorly prepared risk assessments, not reviewing and updating risk assessments periodically or through not having an evaluation process to check that workers are complying with task specific assessment controls.

When manual handling hazards are identified as part of the general risk assessment process, this should lead to a more detailed task specific manual handling assessment.

Managing risks to people's health and safety is a legal requirement in any workplace. A risk assessment is simply an examination of what could harm people in the workplace. Doing it well will make your workplace safer, need not be time consuming, and will help you focus efforts where they are most needed. Not assessing risk or doing it badly could lead to increased accidents and injuries, more sickness absences, greater personal injury compensation costs, reduced efficiency and legal non-compliance.

Manual Handling risk assessment is a five-stage process:

- Focus attention on jobs that are harder or highest risk. These may be jobs that have led to incidents before, or that employees describe as difficult.
- Decide who might be harmed and how.
- Evaluate the risks and take action to control them. Involve workers in the process.
- Decide whether the existing precautions are adequate or whether more should be done. Then identify what action to take. Review other organisations to see what good practice looks like, to match or exceed this.
- Record significant findings, inform employees about the possible risks, discuss possible solutions, and;

Regularly review risk assessments and revise them if necessary, for example, if the work changes significantly, or when someone returns to work after sickness or injury.

A good manual handling risk assessment considers all the relevant risk factors for the task that could cause problems and will help identify solutions or changes to the job to make it easier and safer.

The risk factors for manual handling can be grouped into four areas: the Task, Individual, Load and Environment (often abbreviated to “TILE”). Within this, consideration needs to be given to the weight, which should be displayed and dimensions of the load, can the load be broken down into smaller and lighter lifts, the frequency of the lifts and the distance the item is to be moved, where the loads centre of gravity is avoiding low and high lifting and the results shared with employees who undertake the task. Risk assessments that don’t take account of the relevant risk factors, or simply suggest that manual handling training is required without addressing the risk at source are unlikely to meet the criteria of ‘suitable and sufficient’.

Assessment review should not be viewed as an annual burden but an evidential based process to review and update the assessment as an ongoing activity reflecting incident rates, poor working practices, change in process or personnel or other indicators which suggest that the risk may have changed. This should then be suitably recorded and effectively communicated to operatives, preferably through revised safe systems of work and refresher training as appropriate.

Further guidance on this topic can be found in the Risk Essentials - Risk Assessment information sheet https://qbeeurope.com/document-library/risk-solutions/risk-essential/manual-handling-risk-essentials-risk-assessment/

Training

There are many misconceptions that have been promoted as best practice in relation to lifting and handling. The most typical examples of poor manual handling techniques that are often perpetuated are: -

- Bend the legs and keep the back straight
- Squat all the way down when lifting from the floor
- Use a weightlifting belt to support the back
- The maximum weight you can lift is 25/20 kg (men/women).

Manual handling training is often far too generic and rarely represents the real world of the employee. It produces images of diagrammatic figures lifting cardboard boxes from flat floors onto flat waist high tables. Training has historically tended to place an unhealthy emphasis on weight as the crucial risk factor, as opposed to technique and the pressure placed on the body. Literature, guidance, regulation and associated legal arguments on the subject have not always been helpful. In addition, safe operational practices are produced in a very vague manner e.g.

- Use the correct technique (which is?)
- Use technique as per your training (are we in the business of lifting boxes?)

Managers and supervisors often do not challenge poor lifting techniques due to a lack of knowledge or an unwillingness to engage with colleagues although manual handling tasks, because the 'rules' are less well understood and hence right and wrong is less obvious, the lack of effective supervision, auditing and monitoring of manual handling is therefore a problem in many organisations. Influencing and changing a culture in the workplace is under pinned by positive interventions from senior staff and colleagues when challenging incorrect techniques. Further guidance on this topic can be found in the Risk Essentials – Changing Behaviour information sheet https://qbeeurope.com/document-library/risk-solutions/risk-essential/manual-handling-risk-essentials-changing-behaviour/

Training and instruction is typically evidenced by a written form of technical risk assessments, policies and systems of working. It is rarely read by the operators it is intended for and often only comes to light in the case of an accident, injury or civil claim. Whilst documentation is essential in terms of regulatory compliance and defence of civil claims, in the case of manual handling, the content and articulation of what has actually been delivered is rarely sufficient to provide a full defence to allegations of insufficient training i.e. being generic as opposed to task based, without validation of the employee's understanding and competence, nor evidencing a system of supervision, audit and refresher training. Further guidance on this topic can be found in the Risk Essentials – Training information sheet https://qbeeurope.com/document-library/risk-solutions/risk-essential/manual-handling-risk-essentials-training/

QBE can help you with identifying appropriate manual handling training providers along with wearable technology solutions who understand the principles of correct lifting techniques and provide appropriate training and instruction.

Ergonomics

The primary focus of ergonomics is on the design of work activity that suits the person, in that it takes account of their capabilities, limitations and behaviour. Matching the requirements of a job with the capabilities of the worker can reduce the risks of musculoskeletal injuries resulting from handling materials manually.

Ergonomics emphasises the prevention of work-related musculoskeletal disorders through recognising, anticipating and reducing risk factors in the planning stages of new systems of work or workplaces.

In effect, design operations from the outset that ensures proper selection and use of tools, job methods, workstation layouts and materials that impose no undue stress and strain on the worker. Additional costs are incurred in redesigning or modifying existing processes therefore it is more cost effective to reduce risk factors at the design stage. The primary design strategy is the removal of manual handling, where this is not possible, then design strategy should focus on reducing risk factors associated with manual handling.

The essential considerations in ensuring a proactive approach include:

- Designers should have appropriate training in ergonomics and have appropriate information and guidelines regarding risk reduction.
- Manual handling issues are identified and resolved in the planning process.
- Management commitment and employee involvement in the planning activity are essential.
- Decision-makers planning new work processes must become aware of manual handling risk factors and principles.
- Design strategies emphasise fitting job demands to the capabilities and limitations of workers. For example, for tasks requiring heavy materials handling, use of mechanical assist devices to reduce the need for manual handling would be designed into the process.
- Other aspects of design that can be considered include the load design, the layout of the workplace to allow for ease of access when using mechanical aids, to eliminate unnecessary lifting and improve housekeeping.

Further guidance on this topic can be found in the Risk Essentials – Common Solutions information sheet https://qbeeurope.com/document-library/risk-solutions/risk-essential/manual-handling-risk-essentials-common-solutions/

Conclusions

Residual manual handling exposures are prevalent in many workplaces and often impact on accident frequency, employee absence and ultimately on an employer's liability claims experience.

By implementing the above advice and measures, employers can limit their risk, manage residual manual handling tasks more effectively and improve the health, safety and wellbeing of their employees.

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