



Manual Handling

In this editorial Jo Kitney takes a look at how manual handling can be managed, even when it is a major part of getting the work done.

Manual handling or manual tasks are carried out in most types of work. This includes activities that require someone to exert force in order to grasp, manipulate, strike, throw, carry, move (lift, lower, push, pull), hold or restrain an object, load or body part. This may be working on a process line, managing stores, working on parts, using equipment and tools, the list goes on and particularly so for manufacturing, where manual tasks are a large part of work.

If we take a moment to look at Safe Work Australia's publication 'Key WHS Statistics, Australia' and think about this for the manufacturing industry, it is a sobering read. The publication provides Australia-wide 'lag-indicators' for health and safety, sometimes referred to as 'outcome indicators', with information collated from notifiable incidents reported to state or territory WHS regulators and workers' compensation claims.

Costs which cannot be ignored

With one in five serious workers compensation claims involving an injury to the back, 40% of injuries involving 'body stressing' and the manufacturing industry's injury incident rates substantially above the 'all industries' rate, these are costs to workers and employers that can't be ignored.

Manual tasks can contribute to injuries affecting all parts of the body, particularly the back, shoulder and wrist. These are commonly called musculoskeletal injuries and account for more than half the costs of workers compensation claims, numbers of days lost from work and absences from work over six months.

The extension beyond immediate costs to the worker and employer cannot be underestimated. Working lives may be shortened with costs to families and society. Businesses may absorb costs but they will undoubtedly affect the bottom line and may have longer term implications. With manual handling a major part of manufacturing, managing these hazards and risks should be a major part of WHS and business management.

Controlling risk factors and preventing injuries

No-one wants to be a statistic and there are legal as well as ethical responsibilities for managing hazards at work. State or territory legislation places obligations to protect health and safety and at a business and industry level we can refer to codes of practice, industry standards, prosecutions and case studies to find practical information on how obligations can be met. We can also learn from experience and take the knowledge from the incident and claims data and use them to focus attention and manage risks.

Similar to other industries, in each metal manufacturing business there will be some common risk factors for manual tasks and some that are specific to certain work tasks and activities. There is a difference between general manual tasks and hazardous manual tasks, with the latter having a higher likelihood of injury. Identifying these is a first step to management. The more we understand, the better our decisions will be.

Reducing risks

If workers need to use forceful exertion, awkward postures, repetition, static positions, exposure to whole body or hand arm vibration, regular use of hand tools, lifting and shifting of loads, then these activities are more likely to cause them harm. So whether taking one task or risk factor at a time or a whole of business approach, eliminating or managing risks will reduce injury. Where hazards cannot be eliminated, the following will all help to reduce risks:

"It doesn't only happen to middle aged men"

A new film was launched by Workplace Health & Safety Qld (WHSQ) in September.

"In it for the long haul: The Tiffany Ward story" is a 13-minute film based on a workplace accident in 2008 which nearly ended Tiffany's life.

At 18 years of age, Tiffany had her arms trapped in a factory auger, leaving her permanently injured. Her incredible resilience and spirit cannot hide the overwhelming impact the incident has had on her future and her family. Tiffany's inspirational message is for workers from all industries. As she says, "It doesn't only happen to middle aged men"

To promote this important safety message, visit the website at: www.deir.qld.gov.au/workplace/tiffany

- Making sure the height of work benches suit workers.
- Maintaining tools in good working order.
- Providing suitable and well maintained trolleys, cranes and other lifting aids.
- Designing stores and shelving to keep heavier or bulkier loads mid-line to the body .
- Putting in place lifting and handling limits.
- Rotating work and minimising awkward, repetitive or static postures.

The risk factors listed above tend not to come alone. Other factors that need to be managed include housekeeping and making sure walkways are clear, tools are put away and spills cleared up as well as making sure that work is organised so that unnecessary movement is reduced.

Beyond 'safer' manual handling

Manual handling is no different to other health and safety risks in that the hazard needs to be managed in the context of other risks, some of which are within and others beyond the control of the business. People who are fitter, have better physique and are not overweight are less likely to injure themselves at work and will have a faster recovery than those who aren't.

Businesses may not be in the position to control workers' personal health choices, but the workplace can certainly be used to promote healthy choices and wellbeing. With half of waking time spent at work, the Federal Government's 'healthy workplaces' initiative with state and territory funding is aimed at making this happen. State and territory WHS authority websites will have information on resources being developed and how businesses can benefit from these.

Jo Kitney is Managing Director of Kitney Occupational Health and Safety, which provides occupational health, safety and wellness services to businesses across Australia. Information and useful resources can be found at: www.kitney.com