

The Boston Globe's Best in Class Ergonomics Process

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Introduction

Founded in 1872, The Boston Globe is New England's largest newspaper and winner of 18 Pulitzer Prizes. With two sites, in Boston and Billerica, Massachusetts, The Boston Globe employs 2,200 full-time and 550 part-time employees. Since 1993, The Boston Globe has been a wholly owned subsidiary of The New York Times Company. The company's core purpose is to enhance society by creating, collecting, and distributing high-quality news, information, and entertainment.

The Challenge

The Boston Globe believes that the safety of its employees is paramount no phase of operations or administration is more important. In 2002, the company initiated a revamped safety program focusing on management commitment and accountability, accident investigation, and safety auditing to support its safety mission. In late 2004, injury prevention results began to plateau, and the company launched a multi-dimensional ergonomics initiative focusing on its three largest production departments: Pressroom, Mailroom, and Delivery.

The Pressroom and Mailroom's 500 combined employees are involved in high-risk activities such as pushing paper rolls, climbing ladders, operating tying machines and stackers, and moving pallets of material. The Delivery department's 300 drivers use step vans and relay trucks, and carry up to 500 bundles weighing 20 to 30 pounds each per shift. The Pressroom, Mailroom, and Delivery areas account for 75% of The Boston Globe's work related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs).

The Solution

The Boston Globe set out to become a leader in both safety and ergonomics. Knowing that it needed to accelerate its injury reduction efforts, the company enlisted the help of Humantech. Jointly, The Boston Globe's safety steering committee and Humantech's ergonomists developed and continue to implement a multi-step process to establish a sustainable ergonomics program.

The first step, creating a partnership between management and labor unions and communicating their unified support throughout the organization, helped kick off a successful program. The focus then shifted to developing the program's infrastructure. Key elements included establishing a work plan, defining the roles and responsibilities of all personnel, and leveraging existing mechanisms. The infrastructure was solidified with a written ergonomics policy and a guidance document specifying goals and describing how The Boston Globe would achieve them.

With the infrastructure in place, the team concentrated on improving the workplace by analyzing all 38 operations within the three departments, and prioritizing the jobs based on ergonomic risk and time exposure. The ten highest-risk operations were studied in greater detail. Short-term and long-term improvement plans were established and ranked based on impact and cost. Short-term ergonomic improvements were implemented to ensure employee involvement in the entire process, and when feasible, successful models were replicated across similar jobs. Long-term improvements continue to be implemented as resources become available.

Next, The Boston Globe focused on internalizing the ergonomics process to ensure its sustainability by developing the skills of its employees. Within six months, most employees participated in ergonomics awareness training or more specific concentrated courses. The steering team, process owner, subject matter expert, and foremen/supervisor training courses were customized based on specific roles and responsibilities.

A key element of success for the program was to integrate ergonomic improvements into the existing culture and Six Sigma initiative. All communication materials (training materials, handouts, and newsletters) were customized to promote continuity and consistency throughout the organization.

Since the first few years of any new initiative are typically the most challenging, the final phase in maintaining the program included conducting six- and twelve-month audits on the initiative. The audit results identified areas of success and identified those elements of the ergonomic improvement process requiring further progress. The Boston Globe is now focused on continuing and expanding its efforts and expects to see even greater results.

The Results

By turning its focus to creating ergonomically safer jobs for the company's most important asset, its employees, The Boston Globe has reduced its self-insured direct Workers' Compensation costs from a high of \$6 million in 2001 to approximately \$2 million in 2005. Indirect cost avoidance as a result of these reductions, such as savings realized by not replacing injured workers, as well as quality and productivity savings, account for additional millions. The organization has also lowered lost-time work-related musculoskeletal injuries by 75% over three years. Results for the first eight months of 2006 show an additional 44% reduction in WMSDs.
