

Back-Saving Dialogue

OSHA Expert's Presentation Covers Proper Lifting Technique, Safety Measures

BY CARYN GIZNIK

While construction ergonomics sometimes isn't first and foremost on the minds of those working on a construction site, OSHA's Dana Root showed safety professionals why it should be.

Safety professionals gathered at the last Builders Association Contractor Safety Forum of 2008 at the Chicagoland Construction Safety Council November 13. Bob Smith, chair of the Builders Association Safety Committee, welcomed Root, who presented the best practices to decrease jobsite injuries associated with lifting. With a background in physical therapy and a certificate in ergonomics, Root offered her expertise in a presentation centered on measures construction companies can take to prevent injuries, specifically those of the lower back.

After coming to an agreement that most of the group has had a lower back injury or knows someone who has suffered from a lower back injury from working on the jobsite, Root offered a 101 on lower back anatomy and a quick tutorial on back muscles.

"The most common injuries that occur on the jobsite are lower back and shoulder injuries," she said. "The muscles in our back are connected from the base of our skull down to our lower back. As these long thin muscles contract discs are compressed at one end."

Root stressed it is important to keep your body out of a slouched/forward position when lifting, and decrease the horizontal distance between you and the object you are lifting. This will relieve pressure from your lower back.

"You are ten times more likely to re-injure your back if you have had a previous lower back injury," Root explained.

She also offered tips on how to keep lower back injuries from occurring:

- Do not lift anything below knuckle height. This causes you to bend over and your upper body weight puts pressure on your lower back, causing injury
- Plan the worksite and organize tools so you do not have to bend below knuckle height
- Decrease the horizontal distance between you and the object you are lifting

"The further away an object is the more force on the lever arm," said Root. She explained that the long muscles from the base of the skull to the lower back are not real strong to do lifting. Therefore, these muscles are longer when bent over and not as strong. A slouching position causes the muscles to elongate, causing pressure on the discs of the lower back which can cause injury.

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Experts Agree: Safety Could Be 'All In The Family'

BY CARYN GIZNIK

After listening to Dana Root's presentation on ergonomics, attendees of the Builders Association Contractor Safety Forum shared their ideas about marketing safety to their employees.

The group presented ideas on keeping safety a top priority for employees. Paul Howard of Frank H. Stowell started the discussion by explaining a commercial he had seen abroad that clearly sent the message that employees are more likely to listen to their families when it comes to being safe on the job.

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Construction companies and owners can take specific preventive measures to reduce the risk of onsite injuries. Engineering control options include:

- Modify and redesign the worksite
- Change or limit the weight of the object being lifted
- Do not twist while lifting the object
- Reduce the amount of exposure

Root also urged workers to think outside of the box and ask “can this be done a different way?” Pushing, sliding or pulling the object that needs to be lifted are some options.

There are a number of changes that can be made through administrative control. Root suggested owners adjust work schedules and rotate workers so employees are not over exerting the muscles of their lower back. She also urged owners to cross train workers to do several jobs, adjust the work space and alternate heavy tasks with light tasks. Workers should increase the variety of tasks that are done on the jobsite, which will allow rest time for muscles.

Shane Deaton of Henry Bros. Company noted concern for his employees, asking Root if it was better to eliminate the amount of weight lifted with more repetition or less repetition with a higher weight. Root explained that her concern leans more toward the horizontal distance between the object and the person. A lighter object will provide less of a horizontal distance and therefore will be better for preventing injury.

Nancy Hauter, OSHA Compliance Assistant Specialist, wondered who would be protected from injury if two people are lifting an object. By asking participants to stand, Root explained that using two people to lift a load may not protect one from being hurt. People of different heights and weights mean they will lift differently. She provided the group with other options to arrange a different set up and to plan ahead.

Although Root explained she does not have all the answers to ending lower back injuries, she can provide people with the correct information to enlighten construction companies to change bad habits.

Safety Committee Chair Bob Smith of The Levy Company strongly agreed that safety is 24 hours a day, not something that only occurs on the jobsite. Smith also congratulated Pepper Construction Company for its poster contest available to the children of workers to draw safety posters.

Smith noted this was a “brilliant way to get the family invested in safety.” Leaning toward the types of regulations and steps companies can take to force employees to be safe, Bob Smith provided an example from The Levy Company. In 2000 a man on the jobsite went blind because he was not wearing his safety glasses. Today The Levy Company enforces that hard hats and safety glasses must be worn on the jobsite, if not that employee will not work that day and can be suspended.

“You must be willing to take a couple of hits to get your message across,” Smith explained to the group.

Paul Flentge of Pepper Construction wondered how to sell the message of safety to employees.

Bob Smith suggested, instead of giving a jacket or t-shirt to an employee who practices safety on the jobsite, that the company give a gift certificate to dinner for the whole family. Smith also mentioned the possibility of a family seminar or safety day.

“The family needs to be involved when enforcing jobsite safety,” Smith said.

“People need to understand the severity. Construction is consistently one of the top 10 most dangerous jobs.”

Nancy Hauter, OSHA Compliance Assistant Specialist educated the crowd with the staggering statistic that there were over 5,400 construction related fatalities in 2007.

“The tools to market safety need to be changed to grab people’s attention,” Hauter said.

There is never enough the construction industry can do in order to promote safety, Flentge insists. “The industry is getting better, it is changing, it is an evolving process.”

Attendees also wondered how the current economic climate will affect employees and a safe job site. Will someone not voice an unsafe site in fear of losing his or her job?

Agreeing that there can never be enough ways to market safety to employees, Luke Lukowicz of W.B. Olson, Inc. said that his workers are grateful for W.B. Olson’s required physical capability test. For example, five employees were tested and three were diagnosed with high blood pressure. All three were unaware and immediately sought out physicians. Although the cost for the test comes out to a day of pay, Luckowicz sees no push back. Workers appreciate the test so they know what they are capable of accomplishing.



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