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Five Steps To Controlling Back Injury Costs

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**Back injury costs continue to dominate the
Worker's Compensation system.**

To control back injury costs, employers must:

- 1) recognize the magnitude of the problem
- 2) address the problem proactively
- 3) encourage those who experience back pain to report it
- 4) do everything possible to prevent litigation
- 5) develop employer/employee coalitions mutually interested in health promotion and healthcare cost reductions.

This article discusses these five steps, examines the various entanglements of the Worker's compensation system and explains how the overall problem may be divided into manageable parts.

STEP ONE: RECOGNIZE THE PROBLEM

When employers explore the issue of back pain, they discover the problem is significant in numbers and widespread. It is generally reported 80 percent of Americans seek medical attention for back pain at some time in their lives. In addition, once back pain is experienced, there is a 90 percent probability of recurrence. Obviously, back problems do not go away through routine procedures.

Back pain has been a major healthcare concern among the general culture, long before it became a major Worker's compensation expenditure.

STEP TWO: BE PROACTIVE

Individuals experiencing back pain are motivated to take corrective action.. Unfortunately, when asked, "*What they might do about it?*" they answer: "Probably go to the doctor"; "Take it easy for a few days"; "**I really don't know what to do!.**"

Therein lie the problem and beginnings of a solution. A great opportunity is available to employers who proactively confront back injuries by training employees in self-management skills. This training leads to:

- a) back injury prevention
- b) early intervention of back pain and more effective techniques for addressing back pain as soon as it occurs.

Some proactive employers have seized this opportunity. **The Tennessee Valley Authority** (TVA) for example, provided approximately 4,000 employees with [Freedom From Back Pain](#) self-management training, leading to injury prevention and early intervention techniques for strains and sprains, with special emphasis on low back injuries. TVA also provided employees with [Freedom From Back Pain Home-Study](#) videocassette programs so they could share the training with their families. TVA trainers continue to reinforce on-the-job injury prevention training with follow-up programs.

Note: Since this article was published TVA reported:

"Our work related back injuries since we began your program have dropped to almost zero recordable injuries among a 450+ construction work force. Of course, our compensation rate has also dropped."

Likewise, **Northeast Utilities** in New England implemented Freedom From Back Pain training for several thousand employees and reported a resulting **66%** reduction in back injuries.

When employers proactively manage back injuries, employees feel valued and become involved in the solution; morale improves, positive labor/management relations evolve, with employees and family members taking greater responsibility for their health. **People work together to solve the problem.**

STEP THREE: REPORT THE PROBLEM

To effectively manage back injuries, employees must be encouraged to report back pain when it occurs. This is not asking for trouble. This is asking for a report of *trouble that already exists*. Employers must welcome early reports of pain and employers must respond quickly to these reports with solutions. This promotes early intervention procedures and meets employees' desires for a responsive work environment.

Since employers typically provide health benefits for employees and their families, it makes sense to *encourage family members to also report back pain*. When employers offer training programs addressing health education needs of the entire covered population, these programs are more widely supported and acted upon. People become involved and share valued information and self-help procedures. Thus, "life-style" changes are first promoted by employers and then maintained by employers, employees and family members. This makes a lasting difference at both *group health* and *Worker's Compensation levels*.

Employees encouraged to report back pain feel valued because they are being treated with respect. Under these positive conditions, additional benefits accrue. *Employee loyalty and labor/management relations are enhanced*. People work collectively and progressively to promote health and control healthcare costs.

STEP FOUR: PREVENT LITIGATION

The constructive influence of positive industrial relations enhanced by Steps One, Two and Three, facilitate control over back injuries and related costs at all levels. Cooperation and communication exist as *people collectively support*

prevention and early intervention techniques for improved health and healthcare cost containment.

Employers overlooking these important opportunities face a different, more problematic situation. Although they may implement one or another element of a comprehensive back injury prevention program (i.e., correct lifting techniques, ergonomic alterations, back support belts, stretching exercises, etc.), back injuries will continue to occur. These employers *fail to integrate the most important component of human resources development programs* - the virtually untapped self-management intelligence and capabilities of employees and their families.

Job dissatisfaction is recognized as a significant variable underlying many Worker's compensation back claims. Employees unhappy on the job are also more likely to submit stress claims. *The best predictor of these rapidly rising Worker's compensation claims is a negative working relationship between employee and supervisor.*

Consider the following scenario: **Employer X** is downsizing; job insecurity is rising; rumors of layoffs abound; communication between management and labor is minimal; supervisors have inadequate interpersonal skills; production pressures are high.

Employee Y has experienced recurring back pain for several years, yet has not reported it to his employer because he didn't feel he needed to. Now, he dislikes his supervisor, is insecure in his job and fears for his future.

Employee Y played softball over the weekend, giving the team his competitive best, straining his back in the process. Monday morning, with a sore back, Employee Y returns to his usual job, lifting boxes, pulling and pushing of various objects. Now, his back is really hurting. In fact, he is not sure he can make it through the day.

What are his options? He can report the problem to a supervisor he distrusts. He can continue working, although additional strain will aggravate the pain. He can take time off from work. He can visit the doctor. He can file a Worker's compensation claim.

What will he do? This depends on available options and how Employee Y views these options. If employer X is viewed as apathetic toward employee welfare, employees are more likely to seek assistance outside the work environment.

Suppose Employee Y finishes the workday and returns home, hoping a good night's rest will help the situation. *Watching television that evening, an advertisement catches Employee Y's eye.* He has seen it before, but has not paid much attention to it. The ad asks, "Are you home because your back is hurting? If so, you may be entitled to thousands of dollars in Worker's compensation." After reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, and encountering numerous advertisements of similar persuasion, Employee Y succumbs to their enticements.

Had Employee Y been introduced to effective back injury prevention and early intervention training, had he been encouraged to report back pain to a supportive supervisor, had he been directed toward proper medical and rehabilitative care,

he/she would have had useful options and been less inclined to seek legal counsel. Since preventing litigation is a major key in controlling Worker's compensation costs, employers must continually develop and maintain positive employer/employee relations.

STEP FIVE: DEVELOP EMPLOYER / EMPLOYEE COALITIONS

Numerous individuals and organizations are motivated by attractive rewards provided by the Worker's compensation system. Much is at stake! Attorneys and some healthcare vendors eagerly promote their services and are often entrepreneurial in this regard. Their promotional efforts are enticing and effective. Already alienated employees are easy targets for these commercial interests.

All this can change. Back injuries and related costs can be significantly lowered, perhaps far more than ever imagined. Employers must take the lead and aggressively compete with the advertising and promotional interests of attorneys and some healthcare providers. Whatever solutions employers discover, none will surpass the power of positively motivated employees and their virtually untapped capacity for self-management of personal health.

When employers empower valued and respected employees with useful knowledge and self-management procedures, employees do take constructive action. Belief in people is a powerful - often overlooked - tool for solving human problems.

If Worker's compensation problems are to be resolved, employers and employees must trust their capacity for cooperative enterprise. In the final analysis, it is the Partnership that works!

For information regarding the American Network Services, Inc. back injury prevention and early intervention training programs, including train your trainers and train your employees, go to <http://www.thenaturalathleteinyou.com>