



Culture, Fear & The John Wayne Syndrome: Why Workers Don't Report Injuries

By Anne Engleman January 2003

“Oh, come on mate, I've had a bad back for 20 years and it never stopped me from working!”

“Look out mate, you might lose your job if you put in a compo claim.”

“Ah, it's nothing, she'll be right in a day or two.”

These comments epitomise some 'classic' reasons for why workers don't report workplace injuries: Culture, Fear and the John Wayne Syndrome.

The 'Early Reporting' mantra of workers compensation regulators, insurers and treatment professionals has sunk in (slowly) with employers. But the true beneficiaries of early reporting are injured workers. An injured worker's early report of injury generally leads to expedited diagnosis, treatment and return to independence (physical and financial). Early reporting needs to occur on two levels to be optimally effective. That is, reporting by (a) worker to employer and (b) employer to insurer (or regulator).

Several research papers have proven the cost benefit of employers' early reporting. The Hartford Insurance Company¹ demonstrated that a two-week delay in employers reporting an injury to the insurer could result in an 18% increase in claim costs. A five-week delay could result in a 45% increase in claim costs!

But little of the research has addressed the issue of encouraging workers to report injuries earlier. This article will examine why workers don't report workplace injuries and provide some suggestions on how to create an environment that encourages reporting.

Fear of Over-Reporting

For those who reel at the thought of encouraging workers to report injuries, remember that what is not measured is not managed. You measure items like inventory loss, recalls, rework. None are positive occurrences in business, but knowledge of where and why business processes are not supporting productivity at least allows **informed** decision-making.

Some employers may fear an 'epidemic' of injury reporting. Remember the 'RSI' epidemic that splashed across Australian media in the late 1980's? Seemed like any worker with a manually repetitive job put their hand up, as it were, for workers compensation. The outcome was that practitioners became adept at diagnosing and targeting treatment to optimise recovery from specific conditions (eg: carpal tunnel, tenosynovitis, epicondylitis). By the early 1990's, RSI claims were not 'epidemic'. Certainly these conditions still arise from performing manually repetitive tasks. But the 'flood' of reports of RSI spotlighted attention and lead to a **managed** situation.

Even if claim numbers do increase as a result of more workers reporting more injuries, general experience shows that these claims are likely to be contained, and nowhere near as expensive as a massive 'blow-out' claim. The Hartford Insurance study demonstrated the dollar impact of reporting delay for particular injuries. A week's delay in reporting a lower back injury lead to a 35% increase in claim costs. Strains and sprains were likely to be 13% more expensive if unreported for a week. In the same time frame, carpal tunnel syndrome claim costs increased by 11%. If nothing more, the cost imperative of early reporting is a strong incentive to encourage workers to report injuries.

Nine Reasons Not to Report

Research (see Side Bar) suggests nine reasons for why workers don't report injuries:

Fear of Impact on Employment

Not only are workers in pain when they sustain an injury, they are often fearful of the impact on their job prospects. They fear losing their job, or being transferred to a less attractive job. Best to keep quiet and keep the job.



Fear of Loss of Income

The workers compensation system is not a welfare system. The benefits are not designed to keep a worker in the manner to which he/she is accustomed. Often overtime and bonus payments are lost. Many workers cannot afford to be hurt.

Stigma

The stigma of having a workers compensation claim can have far-reaching implications. Employers are often loathe to promote or hire workers who may aggravate an injury. They are wary of a potential increase in premium costs, not to mention productivity costs! The stigma of a claim can also affect co-workers' perceptions. The injured worker may be perceived as a 'bludger' or 'trying one on'.

Fear of Penalty

Reporting an injury to an employer may highlight a worker's mistake. Fear of penalty for negligence or just plain stupidity keeps many workers mum. They also may keep quiet if their team is rewarded for the number of days they work without an injury. No one wants to be the player that causes the team to 'lose the game'.

Lack of Understanding / Comprehension

Workers with weak literacy skills or those from non-english-speaking-backgrounds may be intimidated or embarrassed to admit that they do not understand the injury reporting process, the return-to-work policy or the workers compensation system.

Hassle Factor

For some reason, workers compensation reporting and claim forms are among the most convoluted and confusing documents around. Even for well-educated, well-read individuals! Collecting the necessary documentation can also be 'painful' and time-consuming.

Loss of Social Contact

For some workers, work is 'their life'. The thought of having to stay at home or being removed from their social work circle is dreadful enough to make them push the injury to one side, and soldier on.

Negative Prior Experience

Negative experience with the workers compensation system is unfortunately fairly common. Whether the experience is personal or vicarious, it's often enough to make an injured worker try to deal with recovery on his or her own and avoid the intrusive and inquisitorial nature of the system.

The John Wayne Syndrome

This is the most common reason for workers not reporting injuries. Most people do not want to face the possibility that they may be hurt with more than a 'mere flesh wound'ⁱⁱ. And most do not want to be 'a problem'. So they hobble along,

hoping things will be better when the sun rises. Call it the 'John Wayne Syndrome.'

Overcoming the Barriers

Knowing why workers don't report is a start. Knowing what to do to change this behaviour is even more important. Here are some suggestions:

Counter the Culture

A culture which belittles injured workers or reeks with suspicion when a report is submitted is likely to have higher workers compensation costs than one that encourages reporting and genuinely supports a worker's recovery. Confront negative cultural attitudes head-on. Stifle the stigma.

Develop a 'way with words'

Develop policies and procedures that use 'supportive' rather than 'legalistic' language. For example, *"In the unfortunate event that you are hurt at work, we will help you to recover, by providing ..."* is much more encouraging than *"Under Section xyz of the Workers Compensation Act you are obliged to ..."* Which would make you feel more comfortable?

Be more than just 'good on paper'

Make the policies and procedures 'live'. Ensure managers 'walk the talk'. They are supportive. They do make an effort to reassure injured workers that their injuries will not negatively impact their employment. Or, if the injuries are severe enough to jeopardise return to pre-injury duties, reassure workers that vocational rehabilitation assistance will be provided.

Define "What's in it for me?"

Make sure that all levels of the organisation are aware of the injury reporting policy. Present the information to each group, specifically outlining 'what's in it' for them. Workers regain independence faster (physical and financial). Supervisors minimise disruption to work flow. Middle managers can stop fretting about having to explain spiraling premium costs. Senior managers can allocate cost savings to more productive uses. Sell it.

KISS the confusion goodbye

Set up reporting systems on the KISS principle: Keep It Simple and Straightforward. What methods are workers most comfortable using to report an injury? The phone? Fax? Email? And as for the paperwork, do employers really need all the risk assessment information so common these days on Injury Report formats? Think about the end goal: you want a productive worker, at work, with as little disruption as possible.



Focus on the System, not Scapegoats

When a worker is injured as a result of his or her own actions, focus on what went wrong with the system of operation. Did the worker need more training? More supervision? More help? Blaming workers, even if an accident was their fault, often only succeeds in making them 'bury' their issues. The ramifications of blaming also spread quickly through an organisation. How many of us have learned vicariously what not to tell the boss?

None of this is rocket science. It is just application of basic management techniques, focused through a workers compensation 'lens'. Hopefully this summary will help employers, insurers and injured workers to identify the potential barriers they create within their injury reporting processes. And give them some ideas for knocking the barriers down!

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Research on Reporting

Australian researchⁱⁱⁱ suggests the following reasons for why workers don't report injuries:

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| Minor injury only – not considered necessary | 49.0% |
| Not covered or not aware of workers compensation benefit | 14.2% |
| Other - don't know why | 12.9% |
| Did not think eligible | 8.6% |
| Inconvenient – required too much paperwork | 6.7% |
| Employer agreement to pay cost | 4.4% |
| Negative impact on employment | 4.2% |

US researchers^{iv} conducted a case study on the extent of and reasons for workers not reporting injuries within three industrial organisations.

A questionnaire and interview survey was administered to 110 workers performing similar tasks and several managers, health, and safety personnel at each site.

The researchers commented that "although less than 5% of workers had officially reported a work-related injury or illness during the past year, over 85% experienced work-related symptoms, 50% had persistent work-related problems, and 30% reported either lost time from work or work restrictions because of their ailment.

Workers described several reasons for not reporting their injuries, including fear of reprisal, a belief that pain was an ordinary consequence of work activity or ageing, lack of management responsiveness after prior reports, and a desire not to lose their usual job."

ⁱ Pitruzello, G. (2000), 'The High Cost of Delays: Findings on a Lag-time Study', *NCCI Issues Report* Summer 2000, www.ncci.com
ⁱⁱ Gilliam, T. and Jones, T. (Directors) (1975), *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*, (Film), Scene 4: The Black Knight www.stone-dead.asn.au
ⁱⁱⁱ Workplace Relations Ministers' Council (2002), *Comparative Performance Monitoring Report*, p125 www.workplace.gov.au
^{iv} Pransky G, Snyder T, Dembe A, Himmelstein J. (1999), Under-reporting of work-related disorders in the workplace: a case study and review of the literature. *Ergonomics*, 1999; v42: p171-182.