

"Controlled Case Study of Supervisor Training to Optimize Injury Response in the Food Processing Industry"

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"Shift supervisors trained to communicate with employees may be the X-factor in reducing the number of injury claims and days off work, a newly published study reported.

Supervisors trained to properly answer and communicate with employees about their work-related health and safety concerns were responsible for a 47% drop in new disability claims and 18% decline in active lost-time claims, Liberty Mutual Insurance Co. said Monday, citing a study by its Research Institute for Safety.

The study looked at disability claims filed at a food-processing plant. An intervention group of supervisors received education and training to help them respond better to worker injuries. The four-hour training included suggestions for employee communication and problem solving skills to help get injured employees back to work. Ergonomic issues also were introduced, too.

A secondary group of supervisors served as the control group, and was held out of the training for seven months. During this period trends in disability claims under both groups of supervisors were monitored.

Each group was responsible for 400 employees and the results were dramatic, researchers said.

The intervention group showed a 47% reduction in the number of new workers' compensation claims filed after the supervisor training workshops, while the control group showed a 19% reduction in new claims during the same time.

When the control group finally took the workshop, they experienced a further 19% reduction in new claims -- for a total reduction of 38%.

In both groups, the number of active existing claims remained fairly constant.

"In this study, we saw a substantial reduction in injury claim frequency and disability. Supervisors clearly learned new skills and expressed confidence that they could better deal with these issues," said William Shaw, lead investigative researcher at the Liberty Mutual Research Institute.

The findings are consistent with those of earlier studies done by Liberty Mutual Research Institute. Past studies have shown that how a supervisor responds to reports of work injury influences whether an injured worker has a rapid return to work or prolonged disability. In some cases, the impact of the supervisor's response on disability was more important than either the severity of the injury or the quality of medical care.

"Combined with the new study results, it makes a strong case for company investment in supervisor training," the Liberty Mutual Group reported.

"Companies that improve the way supervisors respond to employees' work-related health and safety concerns can produce significant and sustainable reductions in future injury claims and disability costs," the insurer added.

The study revealed no significant differences in injury type between the groups after the training workshops. More than half of the injury claims were work-related soft-tissue disorders, including sprains, strains, inflammations, carpal tunnel syndrome, and other cumulative injuries. Indemnity costs for new claims, but not older claims, showed more improvement in the intervention group than the control group after the training workshops, researchers said.

The complete study, "Controlled Case Study of Supervisor Training to Optimize Injury Response in the Food Processing Industry," was published in the February 2006 issue of WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment, & Rehabilitation (Vol. 26, pp. 107-114)."

Source: Liberty Mutual Group

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One wonders how much of this was the result of the specific training and how much was the result of the Hawthorn Effect. It would have been nice to have had a third group of supervisors who received an equal amount of management attention, say discussing the costs of disability but without any specific strategies, to compare to.

I'm not complaining, mind you. It would just be nice to have a definitive statement on the effectiveness of the training itself.

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Actually, there is also the possibility that more attentive supervisors make for happier employees who are less likely to seek disability leave. Our own WorkPsych data suggests that a negative view of supervisors strongly predicts such adverse outcomes as absenteeism, presenteeism, and desire to change employers. So, another control group might be supervisors who were merely trained to pay attention to their employees.
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