Lesson Learned Briefing

No.: LL11-0015

Title: Increased workload or urgent deadlines can lead to harmful work habits

Event: LBNL Event

Event Date: 03/28/2011

Category: ES&H - Ergonomics - office/computer work, Accident/Injury - Office Safety

Lesson Learned Statement:
Changes in employee work habits to meet project deadlines can lead to fatigue and injury, which will likely have long-term negative impacts on an employee's health and productivity. Changes in work demands should always be accompanied by a discussion between the employee and supervisor about safety, which includes setting clear expectations about safe work practices. Consideration should be given to developing process changes that will reduce ergonomic risk.

Discussion:
An employee began to experience discomfort and did not notify the supervisor about the condition. After two weeks, the discomfort eventually progressed into an injury. The discomfort and eventual injury were the result of changes in the employee's work habits that were brought on by an urgent deadline, coupled with an increase in the amount of data entry the employee was expected to perform. The circumstances that contributed to the injury included:
1. The employee stopped taking breaks and used the computer extensively.
2. The employee reported rushing through the repetitive / monotonous computer tasks in order to perform more stimulating / intellectually challenging tasks.
3. A breakdown in communication occurred between the employee and the supervisor. The employee did not mention having discomfort to the supervisor, and the supervisor did not inquire about the employee's safety in their meetings.
4. The volume of data entry had increased exponentially. A discussion about automating the data entry process had occurred, but no actions had been taken.
5. The employee had left- and right-handed mice, but stopped using the left-handed mouse since using the right-handed mouse was 'quicker'.
6. The employee had previous discomfort issues that were not addressed.

In order to meet project deadlines, employees will stop their safe work practices, like ignoring stretch break software and bypassing the use of available ergonomic equipment, such as alternative mice. In addition, there have been no 'safe' limits established for the quantity of data entry an employee can do on a daily basis; this amount will vary depending on the employee. Employees may think that they can tolerate the increased workload, especially if it is only anticipated to last for short periods of time. However, this is not always the case. Overuse, fatigue and injury will likely have

long term negative impacts on an employee's health and productivity.

Actions to take to minimize injury
1. Supervisors should inquire about their employees' comfort and safety at regular meetings, and whenever job duties are changed or urgent deadlines are established.
2. Ergonomic equipment should be used.
3. Stretch break reminders should be set to at least 5 minutes of break time for every hour of computer use, more frequently if the employee is in discomfort.
4. Employees should contact their supervisor at the first sign of discomfort. Employees should not work in a state of discomfort when there has been no attempt to address the source of distress.
5. Employees who are engaged in performing repetitive tasks should be checked frequently to ensure that they are not experiencing discomfort.
6. Process improvements to reduce ergonomic risks should be considered for highly repetitive work.
7. Special considerations should be made for employees with previous discomfort since they are at higher risk for reoccurring issues, especially when exposures increase.

Priority Boxes: ☐ ORPS Reportable   ☐ OSHA Recordable   ☐ PAAA   ☐ Other

ISM Code:

Give feedback for this briefing

For other lessons learned and best practices, go to Lessons Learned and Best Practices Library