

The case on repetitive strain injuries (RSI)

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Background about the organization :

Polar Ltd. is a footwear manufacturer and distributor company located near Hamilton, Ontario. The company consists of approx. 60 employees including 25 employees on salary and 35 employees on hourly wages. The employee's major role is to mold boots and bases, stitch the upper part of the boot, stitch liner, insert a liner into boots, pack boots and distribute to the wholesale customer and end user customer.

Rita works with the company for 39.5 years and in the role of human resources for 23 years. As she has spent her whole life with this company she has come across many health and safety challenges. However, when she tries to summarize the issues and challenges, she focuses on repetitive strain injuries.

Description of the incident :

One day Sally who works as a stitcher brought in a doctor's note saying that she will be off work due to repetitive strain injuries in her wrists because of her job. Rita ensured with the supervisor to compete for an investigation and filed WSIB(Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) claim so that the worker can get benefits. Rita checks periodically medical reports to verify if Sally can return to work with modified duties. However, Sally submitted a physician's note that she was fully disabled and not able to perform work until further notice. In the end, Sally never returned to work and remained on WSIB benefits up to 65 years of age.

Rita included that they face this issue couple of times. Most of the job activities are repetitive in nature like stitching the upper part and liner, inserting a liner into boots, packing, etc. It's difficult to pinpoint whether the injury is caused by the job they perform or other activities outside of the workplace. Repetitive strain injuries are not immediate injuries like fall, it occurs over a long time. Thus, management takes extra attention to it. Management encourages employees to take a proper break and stretch their bodies when required. Management provides annual training to both employees and supervisors on ergonomics and MSD (Musculoskeletal disorder)

prevention. Management also educates the employees to report these injuries when occurs the first time. If reported early, management can work with the employees to see if the work can be modified or place the employees on a different job temporarily or reduce their working hours. modification of work if an employee complains about pain. The solution becomes so difficult if the injury is reported late, the pain becomes unbearable to the point where the employees need to be off work. Rita concluded that they haven't had success to bring back employees suffering from repetitive strain injuries.

Discussion questions :

1. What are the symptoms of repetitive strain injuries?
2. How can the company create a safety climate that supports a safe working environment?
3. What engineering control and administrative control can be implemented in this case to reduce repetitive strain injuries?
4. What kind of hesitation do you find from employees' perspective that they would not prefer to return to work?
5. Describe the various work accommodation that can make a return to work possible for employees suffering from repetitive injuries.