

Does Safety Really Come First? - Case of an employee injured at work

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Description of Organization

ABC Packaging is a non-unionized plastic packaging manufacturing company located in the Greater Toronto Area. ABC packaging creates plastic bags and pouches for food, pet food and gardening brands at two different facilities in the GTA. Across both locations, the company has a total of 470+ employees working within seven different departments: Press, Lamination, Converting, Maintenance, Shipping, Quality, and Office. Apart from the office workers (60-70), all the plant employees rotate every 2 weeks between 3 shifts (days, afternoons, and nights). The Office workers mainly work day-shifts.

Each department, except for the office, has a manager, production supervisor, shift supervisor and a lead hand. Depending on their department, each employee has a set of duties for the day. ABC Packaging produces bags by bringing in rolls of plastic, printing information on the plastic rolls, then laminating the plastic rolls, shaping the plastic rolls into bags, compiling the bags according to brand and then shipping those bags out. Employees in the Press, Lamination and Converting, are all responsible for operating or overseeing a machine and detecting any errors along the way. The day-to-day activities of employees in the converting department include setting up the bag converting machine, installing machine attachments, loading rolls of plastic onto the machine using a hoist and performing minor maintenance.

Description of the incident/Problem

Tina is a set-up operator in the Converting Department of ABC packaging. Tina has been working in this role for five years. Tina is a 30-year-old single mom who is 5'1 and 185 pounds. Tina also works as a part-time electrician in a different company, to make ends meet. Tina's colleagues and Supervisor describe her as a positive, competent and an experienced team member.

Recently, Tina took a few days off from work. After her returning to work, Tina's colleague, Jasmine, has noticed that Tina's attitude at work has changed. Tina has stopped wishing anyone good morning, has stopped going out of her way to help others, has started taking longer breaks and has stopped taking overtime shifts. Jasmine was not sure how to best

approach Tina, so she informed the supervisor, Morris, regarding Tina's change in behaviour. Morris had also noticed a change in Tina's behaviour from the past two weeks. She had started to make more errors, call in sick more frequently and ask for additional help for tasks which she had previously done independently.

Morris scheduled a meeting with Tina to address these concerns. In the meeting, Tina informed Morris, that she has been experiencing intermittent low back pain while performing her duties at work. Tina's muscle pain started two weeks ago, after she manually steered the finished plastic roll (on a hoist) into the machine. Initially, Tina thought the pain would improve if she took some days off to rest and treat the area with ice, which it did. However, when she returned to her normal duties at work, the pain returned. Tina has no history of back pain or any occupational injury, which is why the sudden back pain caught her by surprise.

At first, Tina was unsure of what may have led to her lower back injury 2 weeks ago, as that day she did not perform any task/activity that was not a part of her daily routine. However, after observing her job tasks and discussing her condition with her colleagues, Tina believes that her injury may be due to size/weight change of the plastic rolls. As a set-up operator, Tina uses a hoist to lift the plastic rolls, but to steer the rolls from left to right, she needs to manually push and pull the rolls into their position on the machine. Tina believes this action of pushing/pulling heavier load than usual may have led to her back injury. Two of Tina's friends, who are also experienced set-up operators, have told Tina they have had similar issues with the heavier rolls, which they had reported to management, for which no action had been taken.

After the meeting, Tina's supervisor filled out an incident report, informed the health/safety specialist and HR manager regarding the injury and referred Tina to the disability management program. The concern about heavier rolls has also been brought up to the HR manager and health and safety specialist in the past by injured employees in the other departments. However, the employer does not want to return to smaller sized rolls, as it will decrease the production rate, increase product quality errors/variations, and require more warehouse space, which the employer does not have.

How do we solve this problem?

1. What steps could have the health and safety specialist, supervisor and HR manager taken to prevent injuries like Tina's?
2. What reasons might have prevented Tina and her colleagues from reporting their health concerns to management? How can ABC packaging become a psychologically healthy and safe workplace?
3. Using the hierarchy of risk control, list ways ABC packaging can control this hazard (bigger/heavier sized rolls) at their facility? From these, which control method is the most attainable?
4. What signs of struggle did Jasmine and Morris use to recognize that Tina was in distress? Apart from informing the supervisor, in what other ways could have Jasmine helped Tina?
5. How can ABC packaging help with Tina's accommodation and recovery process? Who would be the stakeholder in Tina's disability management?