



WHY SAFE LIFTING PROGRAMS FAIL

5 PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE INJURY REDUCTION

Let's be really blunt: most safety training programs do not work.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 1 million workers suffer from back injuries on the job every year. Improper lifting techniques account for 3 out of 4 back injuries in the workplace. Back injuries are responsible for 1 out of every 5 workplace injuries or illnesses. The annual cost of back injuries to employers is counted in billions of dollars. 25% of all compensation claims are for back injuries. And we haven't even begun to count the cost of the pain and suffering that employees experience. Nor have we considered the wider impact that an injury can have on the relationships, family, and friends of the injured person.

While the above statistics focus on back injuries, other parts of the musculoskeletal system are not exempt. 34% of all lost-workday injuries and illnesses are related to musculoskeletal disorders, many of which are caused by improper lifting. These incidents occur despite the implementation of safety and lifting programs.

So how do you make safety training stick?

1

STOP WITH THE ONE-AND-DONE PROGRAMS.

The ineffectiveness of most programs is built into their nature. By nature, programs are temporary and finite. They have a defined beginning and a definite end. Programs are typically “one-and-done” affairs. And they are generally ineffective at producing long-lasting, meaningful results when it comes to lifting and material handling. A safety program often fails because once the initial thrust of a program is over, people revert to what is familiar. And for us human beings, that which is familiar is almost always the easier path to take.

For many companies, a safety training program’s lifespan goes something like this:

- Corporate, concerned about the detrimental effect of poor lifting habits on the bottom line, chooses the program du jour.
- They implement the program in Operations through Safety, often with much publicity and hype.
- Employees participate in the program.
- Overnight, illustrated safety posters featuring large, friendly fonts appear magically around the workspace. The atmosphere buzzes with chatter about the new safety initiative.
- Fast forward a few weeks. The safety program has now become an event, based on a nice idea.
- Corporate check the safety program off their list of priorities.
- Posters lose their shine and become part of the background clutter.
- The safety training program is now lost in the drift of old lifting habits.
- Safe material handling returns to the status quo.
- Statistics show a temporary decrease in injuries, but the decrease is just a blip in a line of blips that follow every safety training. And will likely follow the next one. And the next one.

The problem is that, once the program loses its newness and novelty, interest - and adherence - wanes. A good example of this is the ‘squat’ method of lifting. Almost anyone who has had to learn how to handle heavy materials at work has been taught the following:

- Keep your back straight.
- Place your feet shoulder width apart.
- Squat down.
- Lift with your legs, not your back.
- Keep the weight near your torso.

Yet, we still injure our backs. Because most of us learned to lift incorrectly from the time we were young. And, once the training program is over, we do what is familiar - and therefore easier - to us. Most programs don’t equip us to deal with our own habitual lifting behaviors once the program is over.

By the way, the ‘squat’ method is not the most effective way to lift. Squatting causes most people to rest on the balls of the feet, which requires muscular strength to maintain. That strength is now no longer available for lifting. Also, placing the feet shoulder width apart means that the knees can easily get in the way of the load to be lifted, putting additional stress on other areas of the back and joints.

Another problem with programs is that they do not factor in our natural ability to *forget*. People forget what they’ve learned at an astounding rate. Just as there is a ‘learning curve,’ there is also a ‘forgetting curve.’ The Forgetting Curve predicts that retention of new information drops to 40% within 2 - 3 days. As retention declines, the pull of familiar habits increases. Combatting this tendency toward the familiar requires the implementation of a system that extends beyond the scope of a program.

A safe material handling success story begins with a commitment to train your employees *over time*. Effectiveness comes with ongoing training. Incorporate positive feedback, incentives, coaching, reviews, and audits as part of the daily routine. Correcting poor lifting habits then becomes an opportunity, rather than a scolding. Once we get away from program-based training, safe material handling has the opportunity to become a value, rather than a priority.

2 PUT THE OWNERSHIP OF SAFETY TRAINING SQUARELY IN THE HANDS OF THOSE WHO USE IT THE MOST.

Who owns your safety program? If the answer is “corporate,” or “the safety department,” chances are that any success you have is marginal - and temporary - at best. Peggy, the safety manager for a global automobile manufacturer, says, “If corporate owns it, it’s not sustainable. A safe material handling system must be owned at the operations level.” Peggy knows what she’s talking about. 3 years ago, she empowered her operational staff to take on a ‘train-the-trainer’ approach to safe material handling. The results? 1 lifting-related injury at her local plant in the past 6 months. Prior to implementing the safe material handling system, lifting-related injuries were happening several times a week.

Safe material handling - and safety itself - are personal to each of us. What seems like a simple twist of the torso can result in chronic back pain, with life-long impact. The effects are far-reaching: chronic pain, a life of limitations, depression. Which then leads to damaged relationships, and damaged lives. No one ever goes to work intending to be injured. Period. Your employees know that their security and safety is at stake. Place the safe material handling system in their hands. Allow them to take ownership of it.

So what does it mean to ‘train-the-trainer?’ It means giving your employees the training. And then having them train their co-workers. To foster ownership of your company’s safe material handling training systems, create trainers among peers and local team leadership and management. These individuals become, in a sense, ambassadors of the safety system. Make sure these individuals are recognizable as ambassadors for safety. In day-to-day operations, these men and women are your coaches for others on the line. They are also the classroom trainers for the more formal aspects of the trainings. These individuals are also trained as mentors and coaches. They can - and will - provide feedback, and review what does and doesn’t work, as they observe their peers and work alongside them. They will notice when their peers *are* using safe lifting techniques and provide acknowledgment and compliments to reinforce safe material handling. Notice that the system is incentive-driven, rather than punitive in nature. The best news is that the consequences of poor lifting techniques - injury - are greatly mitigated.

3 APPRECIATE AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR COMPANY AND WORK WITHIN IT.

Let’s face it: there exists in most companies, an “us against them” mindset between operations and corporate levels. Which means that, if corporate hands down a safety training program, it won’t stick. Because the average worker will feel like the training is being done *to* them. There’s an innate human resistance to being dominated by *them*, whoever ‘*them*’ happens to be. A safety training program that is being imposed by the corporate levels of management will certainly be experienced as a form of domination from “*them*.” Says Peggy, whom we quoted earlier, “if it comes from Corporate, the program has no chance. If it comes from the Safety Department, forget it. No one will do it.”



The solution? Train the trainer. Offer the safety training to a “first wave” of employees from all levels of the company. Include line operators, team leads, supervisors, and even various levels of management. Upon completing the training, these people become your safety trainers, coaches, and mentors to their peers. As their co-workers see the positive difference that safe-lifting techniques make, adoption is likely and effective in both the short- and long term. What starts as a safe-lifting training becomes a safe-lifting *habit*.

In the meantime, schedule the training for each operational employee and make it clear that everyone will, at some point, participate in the training as part of their job. Most importantly, make it known that each employee has the support of their peers to ensure their success. Peer-to-peer training succeeds where corporate-to-operational training fails. Operational staff respond to each other far more readily than to someone who is perceived as distant or disengaged.

“The best trainers are those who have had a back injury. Because they know what it’s like to feel the effects, and the benefits of avoiding them,” says Kevin, Ergonomics Manager for an international heating and cooling corporation for over 15 years. “When management and their employees are both engaged in safety concerns, those concerns are brought to light. Then we can work on maximizing efficiency and minimizing injury. [Safety is] no longer a priority. It’s a value.” - PowerLift Client

4 BUILD SAFE LIFTING INTO THE SAFETY CULTURE OF THE COMPANY

“Culture is a living thing, powered by, and kept up to date by the people who are encouraged to be, in a meaningful way, part of it.” Micah Taylor, Forbes

Peggy, whom we quoted earlier, said that her success is the product of 3 years of training, review, and ongoing participation of her operations and line employees in safe material handling training systems. It took an intentional and concerted effort, combined with a strategy and plan. And it took time.

Patience and commitment to a culture that invests in safe material handling is key to impacting the culture of a company. Once again, a ‘one-and-done’ program approach is ineffective. It bears repeating that programs are temporary in nature. And the tendency for most people is to go back to habits that are familiar, undermining any benefit that a program might have had.

An effective safety training system is one that is self-sustaining. A good place to start is with new hires. Incorporate safety training into the orientation or initial training of every new employee. As new hires are trained, and as they practice the safe-lifting techniques they learn, their training becomes ‘baked’ into their experience of the company. It becomes a case of ‘that’s just how it’s done at my workplace.’ Couple the training with that of existing employees and the peer-mentor structure discussed previously, and you begin to have an effective, lasting impact on the safety culture of your organization.

As new hires move up through the ranks and take on greater levels of leadership, they represent the training system and effect their work environment at each level, further establishing and reinforcing safety as a value for all employees. These staff members also serve as mentors for newer, more junior employees. Eventually, an employee who was once a new hire will become a team leader, supervisor, or area manager. The safety training system, now an integral part of the individual’s company identity, manifests itself in every interaction with their employees and with their peers.

A directed, deliberate effort to reinforce the training is also part of creating a culture. Periodically and frequently review the training with your employees. This can be done with minimal disruption: for instance, you can hold 5-minute Safety Talks at the beginning of each shift, and allow different peer-trainers to lead each session. Reviewing safe lifting techniques periodically serves to strengthen good habits. For instance, if you hold a review once every 2 weeks, have different employees demonstrate the correct lifting methods that they use on a daily basis. In addition, debrief the employees regularly: have them share what works and what does not work regarding the lifting methods they employ. From the standpoint of health and safety, reinforce what works, and correct what does not work. Hold a monthly audit with your employees, focusing specifically on effective and efficient ways to lift. This would mean having employees demonstrate the correct lifting methods that they might use to accomplish a task. This is also an additional opportunity to correct what does not work. Although it seems like this takes time and attention away from the work that needs to be done, it actually is an insignificant amount. Peggy reports that a 5-minute safety talk at the beginning of each shift, and a 20 minute-audit a month serves to achieve her results of 1 injury over the past 6 months. While she initially faced some resistance to the safety talks and the audits, she now finds that employers and managers are eager to have them and that the safety talks and audits increase the level of job satisfaction and productivity.

Baking safe material handling into the culture of a company also means celebrating the good news. Over time, as favorable results accumulate, acknowledge the employees for the outcome of adhering to the safe material handling system. Highlight the training, and the differences it has made to date. Allow employees to share results from outside the workplace if any. Safe material handling technique is not just limited to the workplace, as we’ll see in the next section.

5 TAKE THE BENEFITS OF SAFE LIFTING TECHNIQUES BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE WORKPLACE.

Why limit safe lifting practices to the workplace? Good lifting habits are a lifestyle and have global impact. That is to say, the habits aren't left at the workplace after the shift is over. At work, the employee benefits from the peer-trainer relationship. He or she adopts and practices safe material handling methods, and stays healthy at work. The employee trains others to lift correctly. So, as the adoption of safe and effective lifting techniques catches on, expect to see a decrease in injuries. This translates to a reduction in the number of sick-days or injury-related time off. With that, expect a noticeable increase in both efficiency and productivity. In the long-term, the benefits at the workplace become naturally apparent. The greater difference, however, might be more visible for those who are directly impacted by a safety training system that works away from work. Kevin tells the story of an employee who became a peer-trainer and safety coach:



"[The employee] came to me in tears one day. Her mother had suffered from back issues for decades and was unable to lift any weight without severe pain and discomfort. Because the employee was trained to coach others in safe material handling, she taught her mother how to lift in a way that was safe and effective. As a result, her mother lifted and cradled her infant grandson for the first time since he was born. She had previously been deprived of this experience due to the pain." - PowerLift Client

An effective material handling system is universally applicable and transferable. One of the best ways to create success around your safety training is to encourage employees to use the techniques in their lives. Consider: our daily lives are full of opportunities to practice lifting safely. A full gallon of milk weighs about 10 lbs. And most of us bend to reach into the fridge to get it. Grocery bags are designed to hold up to 38 lbs of groceries, and we reach into either the trunk or the back seat to load and unload the car. Trash bags can hold anywhere from 15 to 40 lbs, and we lift and lower those on a regular basis. Then there are the truly precious opportunities: to carry our children in our arms. A 3-year-old child can weigh between 25 and 35 lbs.

The more your employees practice the techniques they learn, the more they reinforce a lifting habit that supports them, both on and off the job. As employees become aware of the wide-ranging benefits to healthy lifting habits, and they're given an opportunity to share them with others, they naturally gravitate toward advocating for those kinds of trainings and systems. And your company naturally develops a culture that pulls for safety and safe lifting methods and techniques.

Traditional safety programs are simply ineffective in the face of a lifetime of poor lifting habits. Implementing a system which views safety as a value and incorporates safety into the culture of the company is a far more valuable investment. What works really well is a system that works *with* the human body - in other words, one that allows the body to perform lifting, pushing and pulling tasks naturally - in order to accomplish the tasks that are required on an operational level. Lifting techniques that employ the principles of ergonomics are easier to learn, and retain, than actions which go against years of bad lifting habit, and may feel unnatural. For instance, if the knees are bent at an angle of less than 100°, more power is available to the muscles of the legs. Combined with a stable stance, and a more effective hold on the load, lifting is safer and thereby more effective. The back is naturally protected from injury.

PowerLift is lifting training that has worked for over 30 years and empowers you and your employees to make safety more than just another item on a checklist. **PowerLift** works with you to create a system that positions safety as a value within the company culture, producing winning results that have a long-lasting effect, both for the individual employee and the company as a whole.

BY THE NUMBERS

No system is a guarantee against accidental or emergent injuries. Life has a tendency to happen to us human beings without permission. However, an effective material handling safety training system goes a long way in protecting employees, and by extension the company's productivity and bottom line. These results, taken from actual case studies of **PowerLift** Clients, track organizations from various industries. They outline injury incidents, costs, and expenditures from before and after implementing a specific training system according to the principles discussed in this paper.

1. Two Road Construction Companies; \$1M+ vs. \$325K in losses.

These 2 companies are owned by the same parent company and operate as separate entities. Company A engaged in a program that taught the traditional squat lift, while Company B implemented a comprehensive system that followed the principles outlined in this white paper. Over a period of 13 years, Company A reported back injury-related losses of \$1,308,000. Company B built safety into its value system and over the same 13 year period reported back injury-related losses of only \$325,000.

2. US Postal Service; 69% average reduction in injuries.

210 facilities received safe material handling techniques as part of a value shift within the USPS. Over the course of several years, and as safety was embraced as a value, 14 facilities across the US were tracked. Results varied from a 100% reduction to a 17% reduction in reported sprain/strain and back injuries, with an average of 69% reduction across the 14 locations.

3. Manufacturing Plant; 90% reduction in injury-related costs.

With 900 employees on the line, this organization reported 18 cases of back injuries in the year before initial training took place. This cost the company over \$219,000 in workers' compensation. In the year that the initial training took place, 14 cases were reported, with costs dropping to just under \$62,000. Following the implementation of the safe lifting system, and the subsequent incorporation of safety as a value, the company reported only 11 cases over a period of 4 years. The average workers' compensation cost dropped to an average of less than \$6,000 per year, a staggering 90% reduction in costs.

4. Grocery Retail and Distribution Chain; 0 manual material handling injuries in a year.

Operating 9 union-run distribution centers nationwide, this grocery chain experienced a 70% decrease in manual material handling injuries in the years following the initial training and the implementation of their safety training system. This translated into a 90% average decrease in related incurred costs. One of its distribution centers brought its average injury incident rate to 0, reducing their injury-related costs by 100%.

SAFE MATERIAL HANDLING: A CULTURE OF SAFETY

Priorities don't last; Values do.

For too many companies, safe material handling training is a management or administrative priority: it's a thing to check off. Safety training - as a priority - may satisfy a standard. Or it may temporarily provide basic protection for its operational employees as they lift and move loads as part of their everyday job.

Safety training treated merely as a priority, does not effectively and efficiently protect employees against injury. For an appreciable, ongoing difference to be made, safe material handling must be a company value.



This table compares the nature of priorities with that of values.

PRIORITIES	VALUES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an ordered checklist of items. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a structure for a lifestyle.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are rule-based. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are based in the culture of the organization.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are driven by fear of negative consequences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are driven by the norms of the organization.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are impersonal; for the good of the company. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are personal; for the good of the individual.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are relatively easy to establish, and easily forgotten. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time to establish, and become part of daily life.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are temporary in nature; they shift. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are fundamental; more stable.

1. Build it in: Make Safe Material Handling an integral part of training new hires.

Every new hire begins with the understanding that “this is the way we do things here: safety is one of our (core) values.” As your new hires move up in seniority and rank, they will carry the training with them and continue to share it. Over time, safety becomes baked into the leadership structure of the operational staff and management.

2. Simultaneously create the “first wave of ambassadors for Safe Material Handling.”

Provide the safety training to a “first wave” of current operational employees, as well as team leads/ supervisors and managers. Make it known that eventually, everyone will be trained on safe lifting techniques.

3. No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

Correct poor lifting techniques out of concern for health and well-being, rather than for the bottom line. Poor lifting techniques are injuries waiting to happen. It’s not question of if - it’s when - an injury will happen when employees practice poor technique and bad lifting habits. Correct techniques are demonstrated and suggested, then practiced together, thereby reinforcing the benefit to the individual. With a concern for the health and well-being of the individual, correction sticks.

What you can expect from an effective safe material handling training.

The benefits of effective and efficient safe material handling training will be felt both ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream.’

‘Upstream,’ management and administration are impacted as costs from injuries go down and productivity increases. This is the realm of the bottom line. And the proper training will produce concrete results that management and administrators can see and appreciate. The upstream effects tend to be more long-term in nature, as it takes time for results to show up.

‘Downstream,’ results are experienced rather more immediately. Team members who take on the training will notice that they stay healthy, are injury-free and less tired at the end of the shift. Their productivity increases as they work smarter, rather than harder. Plus, they carry the training and its benefits into their lives beyond their 40-hour week. This creates a powerful backdrop for employees who have yet to receive the training. They will find themselves inspired - rather than required - to be trained.

