FITTING WORKERS TO JOBS AND JOBS TO WORKERS

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Musculoskeletal injuries cost companies millions of dollars every year in reduced productivity, replacement wages, medical costs, lump sum payments and performance-based workers compensation premiums.

The 'JobFit System' is a tool that can be used to reduce these costs. The 'JobFit System' is a task analysis database that can be used to facilitate an early return to work for injured workers, as well as assist in the risk management process of pre-employment screenings.

Therefore, this system has the potential to not only reduce the costs of musculoskeletal injuries but also the number of them.

What is the 'JobFit System'?

The 'JobFit System' is a database program containing easy-to-understand objective information about the physical demands of work-related tasks and the physical capabilities of workers.

The two databases can be compared to provide a variety of reports indicating matches and mismatches for particular tasks and individual workers.

The reports provide readable and practical information, without medical jargon, that can be applied immediately.

In response to industry requests, the 'JobFit System' now also contains a medical database for recording pertinent information such as assessment scheduling and plans of action.

How can the 'JobFit System' save me money?

The 'JobFit System' has a number of immediate applications:

- screening tool in the selection of new workers
- facilitates an early return to work for injured workers
- manages worker's health and wellness
- easy identification of manual handling risks
  Planned future applications include an export function for statistical analysis and comparative reporting for monitoring injured workers' progress.

Assistance in the pre-employment process

Employers have a responsibility to ensure, as far as reasonably practical, that each employee whilst at work is safe from injury and risks to their health (Worth, 2000).

Much of the focus has traditionally been on designing/altering the demands of a job to better match them with the capabilities of the workforce.

Sometimes however, there comes a time where further changes in a job are either cost-prohibitive or technically infeasible at that time.

An alternative approach is to consider matching workers to the job demands on the basis of their physical abilities (Anderson, 1999).

To ensure that a pre-employment functional assessment (PEFA) will truly assess an individual's ability to do a job you need a thorough job analysis with clear, objective and detailed data of the key physical requirements of the job for which the applicant is applying, from which to design your assessment and make your final decision.

The 'JobFit System' database contains this information and is transferable across sites thus saving companies valuable time and money.

The emphasis of a PEFA should be on objective information such as an individual's ability to perform the job rather than speculative conclusions such as risk of injury that may occur in the future (Anderson, 1999).

For a worker to be judged capable of safely performing the required tasks, their capabilities must be equal to or greater than the job demands.

This is determined by matching their capabilities against the chosen job demands using the same range of values (Worth, 2000).

The 'JobFit System' achieves this by matching two identical sets of data values and indicates a match if the worker's abilities are either equal to or greater than the required physical demands.

The displayed information is broken down into manual handling tolerances and postural tolerances so that the operator can clearly identify where the mismatches lie to determine if further action, such as physical conditioning, can be applied to enable the worker to safely perform the desired tasks.

Both management and workers benefit from pre-employment functional assessments in the form of increased productivity and improved safety (Rice, 1999).

Rehabilitation benefits

An appropriate and detailed job analysis, such as the 'JobFit System' database is needed to enable the comparison of a worker's functional capabilities with the physical demands of a job. From this comparison, it is then possible to:

- set goals for a graduated return to work
- identify needs for further intervention
- determine what modifications to the process

methods or equipment may enable the worker to participate in the job safely

- identify a range of jobs within the worker's safe current abilities (Rankin, 2000).

The comparative reports also enable the workplace to monitor the injured worker's progress.

This enables an earlier return to work resulting in decreased replacement costs and a reduction in the overall cost of the claim.

Effective claims management means that employers can increase their savings by reducing the duration of a claim as much as decreasing the incidence of others (Grant, 2000).

The 'JobFit System's' objective determination of a workers abilities in comparison to the task requirements supports the employers decision regarding the availability of suitable duties, as well as demonstrating their ability or willingness to provide them to both their workforce and the insurer.

The system's methodology also changes the focus from the workers incapacities (eg can't lift more than 10kg, no bending) to one of capacity - focusing on areas of ability rather than those of inability or disability.

This changes the worker's and employer's overall outlook from a negative one of 'the glass is half empty', to a positive, proactive one of 'the glass is half full.'

The operator simply enters the worker's medical restrictions and the 'JobFit System' extrapolates the data to display the worker's safe postural and manual handling tolerances at various frequencies based on the Strength-Endurance Continuum (WorkHab Australia, 1998) for comparison with their job demands.

The objective data matching of the 'JobFit System' also takes the 'guesswork' out of the hands of people with decreased knowledge of the worksites, such as offsite medical personnel and rehab co-ordinators that do not have prior 'hands on' experience.

It also provides a baseline for the return to work process and gets the issue of physical ability out of the way so that we can perhaps deal with other issues that may be hindering the early return to work process such as previous work performance difficulties, conflict with supervisors, personal difficulties, psychological and social difficulties (McKie, 2000).

Efficient health and wellness management
Due to industry demand, the functions of the 'JobFit System' have been expanded to provide medical assessments and screening schedules at the operator's fingertips.

The 'JobFit System' monitors the workforce's schedules for industry medicals, health surveillances and checks (eg hearing, vision, lung function, skin cancer) as well as keeping a record of wellness factors such as fitness level, exercise and smoking habits for statistical research.

Risk Management Tool
The 'JobFit System' task summaries allow key stakeholders to rapidly identify components of an individual's job that have a high manual handling risk. This is the first step in implementing risk management control measures in the reduction of manual handling injuries.

How does the 'JobFit System' work?
Practical demonstration

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Jenny Legge is a registered physiotherapist with seven years experience in occupational health and injury rehabilitation both in Australia and overseas. She has been involved in the coal mining industry since 1998.

Based in Mackay, North Queensland, Jenny is a registered provider of the 'WorkHab Australia' Functional Capacity Evaluation enabling her to assist industry with their rehabilitation and injury prevention activities through the performance of objective tests and worksite assessments, the establishment of suitable duties plans and the presentation of the popular 'Fit.2.Work Manual Handling & Injury Prevention Program.'

This exposure has allowed her to see the difficulties that industry faces with selecting the right workers for the job and returning injured workers to suitable employment.

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