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CREATIVE ACCIDENT PREVENTION – A SAFETY PLAN WORTH BORROWING

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

Customers sometimes ask us what other firms are doing to prevent accidents and control losses. This month's Update will share an innovative approach being used by a customer in the moving and storage industry. Our hats are off to Golden North Van Lines, with two locations in Alaska. Golden North has taken accident prevention basics and added creative practices to make their program work. You may find you can adapt some of their ideas to your operation. At least their approach may inspire you to look at your accident prevention program in a new way.

The moving & storage industry may seem rather routine but it can be one of the more hazardous industries SeaBright insures because it involves extensive manual material handling. Among the many challenging risk factors that this industry faces are employee muscle injuries and the need to hire seasonal workers. Firms that underestimate the following hazards risk an increase in accidents and industrial insurance costs:

HAZARD--MUSCLE STRAINS AND SPRAINS: The most common causes of injury in this industry are slips, falls, sprains and strains. The most frequently injured body parts are backs and knees. But this is not terribly different from many other operations where workers lift, carry, push and pull. Muscle strains and sprains are the number one cause of time loss claims in *all* physically demanding jobs.

RISK--SEASONAL WORKERS: A well-trained packer/mover is not always easy to find, particularly during the peak moving season, the summer months. This is especially true in Alaska, where seasonal work is common, but it's true in other regions as well. Both families and companies tend to make their moves when school is out and the weather is favorable. SeaBright insures a variety of seasonal operations such as construction, seafood production and logging, and they too are challenged to find skilled workers for only a season. So the moving and storage industry is not alone in this problem either.

GAMBLE—EMPLOYEE RELIABILITY: Are employees who work only part of the year dependable? How do you know you have hired someone you can count on for the job? Applications, interviews and thorough reference checks are good ideas, but aren't foolproof. Besides, tight schedules at peak season often leave little time to complete all these steps. No matter how you cut it, you may not know if your employees are stable and loyal, until after they've been with you for a while. You can never be certain they will use good judgment until they've proven it.

So how do you avoid hiring an employee with less skill than needed for the job? How do you assure the new worker has adequate strength and stamina for physically demanding tasks? And how will you know in advance that your employee can follow directions, use common sense and work safely?

GOLDEN NORTH VAN LINES HIRING STRATEGIES

- **Work Simulation and Ability Tests:** Jim Anderson and the staff at Golden North believe you should test a potential employee's ability, to ensure they are capable of performing the job. Testing will not only tell if they can do the job, but also helps determine if they can perform without risking injury. Mr. Anderson has constructed a mock work environment to simulate physical situations that are faced during residential moves. The mock-up includes a kitchen, living room, moving van and an overseas shipping container. When hiring new employees, Jim has them perform basic packing and moving tasks. This helps

demonstrate what experience level they bring to the job. If they have never done this kind of work before, it also gives the applicant a good idea of what tasks will be required of them.

- **Identify Training and Placement Needs:** Workers who lack skill can be identified for an individual training plan which instructs them in proper methods of packing and moving. Those who demonstrate a lack of stamina, a limited range of motion, or who experience pain during the test may be in need of work hardening or specific placement. A physician's recommendations may be necessary under the Americans with Disabilities Act, if a candidate is to be placed in a restricted duty position.
- **New Employee Orientation:** After a hiring decision has been made, orientation is the next step. Employees are given the company operations manual and safety program to read. This clearly defines what expectations the firm has for them and provides an opportunity to discuss procedures they may not understand. An orientation checklist ensures that hiring procedures for all employees are uniform and complete. The employee signs an acknowledgment of having received the orientation, a copy of which is kept in the company files.
- **Follow-up Reinforcement:** The last step in the hiring process is to follow up on the initial orientation. An essential element of any comprehensive safety program includes taking the time to be *certain* that safety instructions have been understood. New employees often suffer from "information overload" the first several days. This review reinforces what they know, and clarifies what was not understood. New employees are also initially assigned to longtime workers who understand company procedures and can serve as coaches.

TRAINING HIGHLIGHTS FOR MATERIAL MOVERS

The following safety tips for manual material handling are used by many of SeaBright's moving and storage customers, but these ideas apply to a variety of other industries as well. This brief list doesn't include every hazard to be faced, when lifting and carrying, but provides an example of how safety training can be customized to the job, whatever work is to be done.

- √ A mover with a back strain is pretty much off the team. Proper lifting must be learned and practiced until all bad habits are overcome. The most critical rules to remember are (1) keep the load as close to the body as possible, (2) avoid bending or twisting when lifting, (3) team-lift heavy objects.
- √ An extra box placed under dish packs or cartons being packed help avoid unnecessary bending and lower back strain.
- √ Back support belts can help maintain correct standing and lifting posture, but they should be loosened when not lifting or when driving. Belts that are always worn tightened can weaken muscles and cause back problems, according to some studies.
- √ Plan ahead and organize the moving of goods. Having to work through an obstacle course while carrying objects is a sure road to loss of balance, a slip, trip or fall, and an injury.
- √ Strains and sprains tend to happen during the early hours of a work shift. Stretching exercises every morning for five minutes help reduce the risk of muscle strain. When jobs are physically demanding, workers should take a tip from professional athletes—s-t-r-e-t-c-h, to improve blood circulation and loosen joints and tendons, before putting muscles to the test. This few minutes can greatly reduce the risk of injury.
- √ Inspect walk boards regularly for defects, and be sure they are firmly secured to the truck or van. Serious injuries often involve walk boards that have slipped. This is especially true during winter when water or ice is present.
- √ Be cautious when using hand trucks on stairways. *Pulling* a hand truck up a stairway places the spine in an unsafe position. The static muscle activity associated with this task, combined with the jarring experienced on each step, can create a formula for disaster. Carrying boxes up stairs manually may take longer, but sometimes it is a much safer approach.
- √ Continuous packing, lifting and carrying can lead to heavy fatigue, and is a major problem for movers. Most companies now realize that the "static" muscle activity associated with the standing and packing phase of a move tends to exhaust leg and back muscle groups because blood flow is reduced in those areas. Loading out a move may *seem* more strenuous, but because workers are moving, blood circulation is good and muscles have an opportunity to rest between exertions. Heavy loading out at the end of the day, after standing for hours can exhaust and strain leg and back muscles. For this reason, moving firms often plan for one day of packing, with heavy lifting and loading to be conducted the next day, after a good night of rest.
- √ Feet take a beating in this type of work, so comfortable, well-fitting footwear is important. Work boots that provide adequate ankle support should be worn—tennis shoes are not acceptable. Footwear should also have heels and soles that reduce the chance of slipping and falling. A tread that provides good traction is essential when ascending or descending walk boards, stairs or ramps.

- √ Slippery walking surfaces, especially when not expected, can cause serious injury. Winter conditions require constant attention. Snow should be plowed before the move commences. A product like Ice Melt should be applied to icy surfaces once in the evening before a move, and again the morning of the move.
- √ Casual standing water can also be a source of slips and falls. Standing water must be removed whenever possible--especially on painted surfaces, such as driveways and decks.

CREW MEETINGS STRENGTHEN THE SAFETY MESSAGE

For all industries, safety meetings not only reinforce previous instruction, but also provide a time for employees to discuss recent accidents, near misses, problems with equipment or any other concern they may have. This is a good time to brainstorm ideas with co-workers. Once a problem area has been identified, employees often come up with the best idea for correcting an unsafe condition or dangerous procedure.

Monthly safety meeting may be better than none, but short weekly crew meetings are a better way to maintain safety awareness on everyone's part and to help prevent accidents and injuries.

COULD YOUR SAFETY PLAN BE MORE CREATIVE?

Manual material handling is common to all industries. It takes place on every construction site, machine and repair shop, warehouse, foundry—you name it—things have to be moved and people often have to move them.

But how do you increase the odds of hiring workers that are skilled enough and strong enough for your jobs? A work simulation plan may be helpful, to show your candidates in action before a hiring decision is made. Your safety-training program will be more effective if you target individual needs. And never assume that new employees remember everything they were told the first day of employment--a follow-up contact makes sure that safety instructions were clearly understood.

Does job simulation fit into any of your hiring practices? Can you borrow any of the above ideas for your loss control program? Why not do some brainstorming and see if you can come up with more creative ways to promote safety for your employees and protect your company's assets.

And by the way—if you have creative accident prevention ideas to share, pass them on!