Scott Fowler

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Case for Safety Podcast. I'm your host, Scott Fowler. Glad to have you with us today for a conversation about improving your ergonomics program. As we wrap up National Ergonomics Month here in October, we wanted to take some time to share how you can help reduce the pains and strains that your team experiences on the job.

And here to share their insights on that. I'm very happy to welcome Heather Ritz and Ryan Urick. Heather is program manager for ergonomics at Briotix Health, and Ryan is senior EHS manager at Curtis Wright. Heather Ryan, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Ryan Urik

Thanks for having us.

Heather Ritz

Thank you. Yeah, thank you for having us.

Scott Fowler

Excited for the conversation. This is a really interesting topic. So excited to dive in. And as we get started, I want to kind of take it take it from the beginning. You know, for the safety professionals out there looking to, you know, make improvements to their programs, you know, you gotta know where you're starting from first. Kind of get a handle on, you know, the current status of the ergonomics at your facility.

So I thought we could start there and talk about, you know, how you can get a handle on that and you know, what the elements are of an effective ergonomic assessment. So, Heather, if you'd like to kick us off.

Heather Ritz

Sure. Yeah. All right. thanks, Scott. I think most companies when they start to look at an ergonomics program and measuring ergonomics, they look at injury history. And unfortunately, you don't start to look at ergonomics until we have injuries. so that's like where most of start. You know, you could also go by discomfort, but those are both injury history and discomfort are both like lagging indicators. It's already, you know, the fire has already started inside the body.

So the most effective way to go about an ergonomic program is to measure your risk. measure ergonomic risk at all your workstations and doing ergonomic risk assessments. And so and I know the other question, the other part that you asked, Scott, was what are

the elements of effective ergonomic assessment? So, an ergonomist, my toolbox, I you gotta have the right tools.

And it's really simple, a camera, and a tape measure and a pen and pad of paper are like my most important tools. you could also go with like force gauges and scales and whatnot to measure forces and weights, but those are really important.

And then to me, the other part of an ergonomic assessment is having the soft skills, is having the ability to speak to the employees that are doing the job because they are your number one most important source of information and for in terms of, you know, how do you how do you make improvements to the job and cause the ergonomic assessment process is just the beginning, right?

If we if we want to make change and improve ergonomics in the workplace, we implement solutions. So being able to talk to the people that do the job because they usually have really good ideas for improvement. And also if you have ideas while you're watching their work, you know, they do a really good job of saying, yeah, that might work or no, it won't. So yeah.

Ryan Urik

I think that's those are all excellent, Heather. I mean I would just build on some of those things. It's that it's really understanding risk and there's lots of ways to kind of start understanding that. I know Heather alluded to some of the lagging indicators like OSHA rates and OSHA logs, but all that's like back to communication, like getting employee feedback, getting supervisor feedback, and understanding where kind of the you know the pain, strains, discomforts are occurring.

And once you start gaining that knowledge, it's about building on those tools. And Heather mentioned some of those tools. There's rebound rule assessments, there's you know snook tables, nylon lifting indexes. It's about identifying the tools and going to that workplace to start surveying those things. And then it's then prioritizing where you wanna go first, right?

You gotta start somewhere, so making sure you prioritize based upon that subjective data. And then you want to gather that data and other insights you gain, you know, the equipment you have, that worker feedback, environmental conditions, hot, cold, things of that nature, lighting. And once you have all those kind of gathered together, it's about doing that improvement plan. So all those elements create an effective program. So I think Heather was we agree Heather on all that.

Scott Fowler

Sure. you both mentioned just there the importance of employee feedback. When you think about that aspect of it, you know, how can EHS professionals best go about that? And as you mentioned that, like what kind of questions should they be asking to get that kind of feedback that's really gonna be valuable to improving your program?

Ryan Urik

Yeah, I think those things are really a great question. So it's really about taking your safety management system you have and just applying ergonomics to it. So we all have our own organizational cultures and norms. So whatever those cultures are, it's you know, whether you have a safety committee, s safety observers, there's frontline employees that are meeting with employees and coming together monthly, quarterly, whatever that is, and just providing feedback into a leadership group.

It's through direct know, layers of command, going from employee to supervisor to leadership. It's about being as safety professionals, being able to engage with our workers on a on the on the shop floor or out in out in the workplace.

And with all those, having a anonymous reporting system to just kind of report things in to people. And it's really just asking, you know, what's going good, what can we improve? Are there something that we can make better? It's really about just listening to the actual workers doing the work, to provide that feedback back to us is where I would say employee feedback's important.

Scott Fowler

Heather, thoughts on that, your experience with getting that employee feedback?

Heather Ritz

Yeah, I think I think employee feedback is critical to an ergonomics program. And like Ryan was saying, listening to the employees is important. I think follow through with employees, you know, they, you have a discussion on the plant floor about some solutions and following through with them whenever you can and letting them know like, hey, yeah, we can move forward with this or no we can't and here's the reasons why and here's what we think.

So I think relationship building is critical to ergonomic programs and I because I don't think I don't think you can get good feedback without a good relationship. So yeah, but also what Ryan said, anonymous reporting system, a way to get anonymous feedback if, you know,

people don't feel comfortable sharing or don't want to or worried for one reason or another. I think having an anonymous system, reporting system is beneficial.

Scott Fowler

And that could be online surveys, tools like that to help get that feedback anonymously from your team.

Ryan Urik

There's a variety of ways organizations can manage that anonymous feed feedback, whether it's surveys, some drop boxes in a work area that people can write things down, some SharePoint things. Those are all g great examples of just being able to report things anonymously and then being able to respond those on to onto those anonymous you know concerns.

Scott Fowler

Something you mentioned earlier that, I mean, there there's so many different tools, you know, safety professionals and ergonomists can use, you know, you mentioned tape measures, cameras, and you know, so many other things. So there, you know, there's a lot of little ways you can have an impact.

And, you know, how would you encourage organizations to realize, you know, you don't have to, you know, overhaul your entire safety system to be effective? So what are some ways that that they can go about that?

Heather Ritz

Yeah, I think that's a good question, Scott. I do I do think people are sometimes organizations and management as worried about that. And because it can I mean, I've seen it. I've worked with clients where ergonomics is a big you know, we have a few injuries and all of a we realize we're spending a lot of money on you know, ergonomic high risk areas, with awkward postures and high forces and all that.

And so, I've seen companies spend a lot of money and focus on ergonomics and then it becomes a flavor of the month and then, you know, six months, a year later it really dies out. So Ryan, I think Ryan will speak to this a little bit too, but embedding ergonomics into your current system and not making it like an additional thing that people have to do or an additional thing they have to worry about. I think that's critical, without overhauling the entire safety system.

And I think it's important to focus on low-hanging fruit, implementing the low-hanging fruit because ergonomics can get expensive. It can. But to be completely honest with you, I the most impressive ergonomic solution I've ever seen in my entire career was it was in this steel yard and this employee was really, really excited to show me this ergonomic solution that a group actually from my company a month earlier they were there and implemented and he got all excited and he took me over to his to his building to show me to his shop to show me this solution.

I got really excited thinking it was going to be something fancy. And honest to goodness, it was an eight out eight inch cutout of his work area so he could stand closer to the work. And it was like it was for me, I was very eye-opening because I just, I don't know, I had a lot of thoughts going in my head as we were walking over there about what he was about to show me because he was so excited. It was so it was such an impactful solution for him. But all we did was cut out the work table.

And so I think that sometimes a lot of companies think ergonomic lifting equipment, you know, or robotics or those kinds of things. It just, you know, the dollar signs fly and when you focus on low-hanging fruit like that, and then also communicate your successes, it can really have a snowball effect. The low hanging fruit can really be impactful.

Ryan Urik

Yeah, I like to build on that. I know there's a lot of times people think of a a new policy or procedure or process as some overhauling of the system. ergonomics is just an element of a safety management system.

It's not an initiative, it's not a bolt-on action that goes on to what you do as a company. It's just part of what you do. It's just understanding and recognizing hazards. So we as companies, organizations, professionals need to be going out and recognizing hazards and then identifying those hazards and understanding the risk with those hazards.

And then with that you can start identifying low hanging fruit like Heather suggested, some simple, easy solutions, you know, low dollar effect type things. But there are some things that are you know process driven that can create not only ergonomic roost risk reductions, but also efficiency gains that come about when some of these things occur as well.

And then it's really providing training and understanding. It's training on the tools we use to assess, it's training on the equipment, it's training to understand hey, I don't feel real well at the moment, my back hurts, or my arm hurts, or I just uncomfortable. training and educating people on that that shouldn't be occurring.

And then given the empower to report that in. And once you start kind of identifying those and you get them, it's about prioritizing. You know, some will be some of the priorities will be those low-hanging, low-cost, very efficient, fast things that are done. And some other things you'll prioritize will be that will be a more cost you know it will cost more to the organization. So it's about just really looking at it at a high level saying what can we implement today, tomorrow, next month, next year.

And then once you do all that, it's really about understanding how's you know, hierarchy of control. Can we eliminate it? Can we reduce? can we, you know, do things around that. And it's all the tools that we all have as professionals we should be utilizing, but it's really just ingraining it into the cur current culture that we have.

Scott Fowler

Let's talk a bit more about that. You know, y mention the you know, initiatives and maybe but you know, how can organize what steps can organizations take to, you know, show their team like, you know, this is something that we're doing organization wide and thinking long term, that the you know, that this isn't a one off like as you mentioned Heather, like flavor of the month kind of thing. How can, you know, organizations demonstrate, you know, we're committed to improving ergonomics and, you know, driving down those ergonomic injuries?

Ryan Urik

I mean I can take that to start here, Scott. I think one of the first things you want to do is really start understanding your key performance indicators. This it's your leading and lagging indicators. You take those leading and lagging indicators and you are very transparent with your organization. Here's what they are and here's what we're gonna do about it.

And then it's really about doing all the things that you normally do in your organization, whether it's you know, daily tier meetings or toolbox talks, discussing, you know, what we're doing with the KPIs, what we're doing with ergonomic risk, what we're doing to improve. The good and bad associated with that.

It's about empowering your employees and your supervisors to take action. Now that action could be they fix the problem or that action could be they report it to somebody and then we go about trying to create a solution. So it's really about gaining that empowerment, to take action. then taking all those things, your KPIs, your things you're doing well, things you're not doing well, and having leadership understand what's going on and take ownership to improve and then having them engaged in, you know, you know, solutions of that nature.

And it's with all that, you're gonna have success at times and those are really things you wanna go high five each other. But you're also gonna have some times where the bad happens and we have an event. And it's being about transparent, it's about understanding the root cause. It's about, you know, taking action on those root causes, making sure that you share you share the lessons, not only with the employee, but the employees themselves and if you have a larger organization sharing that out beyond your site as well.

And then I think one of the big things I think what makes a very good organization is just being humble and having the willingness to listen. often, you know, and I you know, we all have, you know, are guilty of a story where we had some a delivery system where things were brought in on a box truck and we had people like lifting down, bending over and picking these heavy seventy five, eighty pound boxes up.

And I went and got leadership approval to spend a fair amount of money to create a loading system to bring this off and I had a company coming in to give me an estimate on what the cost and you know, basically give us a bid and one of the employees walks up and is just like why don't we just have them pull in on this other door over here and we can just unload it at our waist height.

And I was just standing there like, that is probably the most simple, easy solution that I'm gonna have to go say, save the money and just give him, you know, give him all the recognition on it. So there's sometimes just being humble enough to listen is where you need to be. So, that's what I would say.

Heather Ritz

Yeah, so I think companies, you know, organizations, t other initiatives that organizations t can take to drive down ergonomic injuries. I would actually say some sort of incentive program for implementation of ergonomic solutions. I've seen that. I've actually gone Ryan and I got to go to AEC conference, applied ergonomics conference this past spring, and we presented there together actually what we've all the ergonomic stuff that we've done, the success we've had. But what was incredible was seeing all the companies and all their individual teams present on their solution that they've implemented in their plant.

And what I learned too was that a lot of these companies do an internal competition first and then they send the winner of that competition to the AEC. so it's really cool. The Ergo Cup competition is really cool part of that conference, but on the flip side I think that companies can really benefit from doing an internal incentive program for ergonomic solutions. And I had the opportunity to be an ergonomist for Walsh construction a few quite a few years ago actually. but I was their ergonomist.

I did ergonomics for a construction company and we had this like cool tools competition and it was a lot of fun. And it was it was kind of neat to, you know, they gave some prizes. I think they got like an engraved leather man as like the number one winner. It was kinda neat.

But some of the solutions they came up with, you know, it was just innovative and simple and smart and so then, you know, those kinds of things can be fun ways to encourage people to think on their own, right? And come up with ideas on their own. And so incentive programs I think also I think health and wellness programs can really supplement and ergonomic initiatives.

Scott Fowler

When you say health and wellness programs, just w what what kind of things have been involved in those in your experience?

Heather Ritz

We get involved a lot in stretching programs actually. Like yeah, pre pre-shift stretching, middle day stretching, micro brake stretching. and I am actually my background's an engineer. And Ryan about a year, year and a half ago or so, Ryan asked I've done a lot with Ryan and Curt in their Curtis Wright facility here in Pittsburgh, because we're both in Pittsburgh.

But Ryan asked me to lead his group through some more ergonomic training, a particular group that was having difficulties in his plant, through some ergonomic train additional ergonomic training, but also stretching at the end. And I was like, Well, I've never done that. But you know what? Okay, we'll do it. You know, I'm an engineer. I want to fix things. I want to install something in the work area. I want to change, like I want to do that. And I said, well I don't normally do this, but I will do it. And w we literally didn't have a ton of sessions, but every single session we did have.

It was a twenty minute session at the end of the you know, training class and I heard many employees say, I feel better already, you know, so those types of overall health and wellness. I think mental health is becoming more of an issue globally. But you know, yeah. Overall health and wellness programs I think can really support people.

Scott Fowler

You've both talked about the importance of training. I know we started talking about the you know, what goes into an effective assessment. What, in your mind, goes into effective training? 'Cause I mean, you've got you folks you've they've done things a certain way for a really long time and getting to, you know, to potentially you know break some of those

habits and you know as we've talked about, learn new ways of doing things. So what has in your experiences been effective ergonomics training for your teams?

Ryan Urik

So I would say, you know, for us effective training is really several different parts. One is just an awareness training. You say ergonomics or musculoskeletal disorders, people like act like you're speaking a foreign language. So it's really about educating like what is it, what does it mean, what how does it interact with what I do? Like, you know, what I'm you know, I'm an I'm an adult, what does this have to do with things? So it's really about just e educating them first on what it is, then it's about educating them on proper and neutral positioning.

We do that yeah, you can either do that in person or sometimes through computer based training and it's really about understanding neutral positions, understanding you know, power points with near body and away from body and getting giving that base understanding and then taking that knowledge with a person that's trained in assessing and going out to the workplace and saying, when you do this task and it's far away, you put yourself at risk.

How can we now train ourselves and educate ourselves on doing that differently? And so all those skills kind of provide help provide the initial training of identifying ergonomic what is ergonomics, what the risk is, and some of the mitigations. And something that we have felt important with at least within our organization is about kind of doing what we call the we refer to as dynamic warm-ups. we have positions where we have people that have a rest to do work and when the machine is now available they have to get up and go.

So we want to give them the knowledge to how to warm their body up to engage the work. So that was one of the real keys when Heather came into our and in and provided his training was about how to get ourselves warmed up for the day to do the work after, you know, coming in on their on their shift or coming off a break or coming off a rest period. we don't need to go engage hardcore right away. We can warm ourselves up prior to doing that. So those are the elements that we have implemented to try to understand the training around ergonomics.

Heather Ritz

So in terms of training and specifically for ergonomics, I I think it's an incredibly important element of an ergonomic program for any organization. and I you know, you can call me old school, but I f I have and I've actually myself like I don't know, done thousands of trained thousands of people in l thousands of classes probably.

But there's something really tangible and warm and you know, we do about doing a training class in person because ergonomics is all about the people, right? It's all about reducing the risk to the person and preventing injury to the person. I mean there's lots of other you know, business reasons why we might look at ergonomics, you know, because it's more efficient to remove the awkward postures and high forces, right?

There's also usually wherever you have your highest quality defects, you also have your highest ergonomic risk. There's all sorts of other business impacts of it, but it's all about the people. And so I've done a lot of in-person ergonomic training classes and I just I feel and I've taken a ton of training classes online.

I've developed online training classes, but think there's something really value added to get a group of people together in a room and talk about it and understand and provide real life examples or to stand up and use your own body to understand, you know, when we're talking about, you know, w working closer to your body than further away, it's I I just I like in person training.

Scott Fowler

Makes sense. Now, thinking about, you know, there could be, you know, companies of there's companies of, you know, all sizes out there, you know, facing different ergonomic risks. And, you know, Heather, you t mentioned, you know, starting with low hanging fruit, things like that. But when you think about how companies, you know, can scale and strengthen their ergonomics programs, you know, gradually over time, you know, they could start with that low hanging fruit, but you know, how do they how do they keep that momentum going? You know, to keep improving that program.

Heather Ritz

I think one of the first steps I think in in in improving the strength of a program in a company is broadcasting your success. Getting people naturally get excited, right? That guy that I in the shop with the eight inch cutout, he was naturally very excited. But we took pictures of him before and after. I mean if you can take if you can't take pictures in your facility makes broadcasting ergonomic success harder.

But we took pictures of him and we shared, you know, you can really picture's worth a thousand words. And so I think, you know, people get excited. the word will spread. And then sharing that, broadcasting that locally, within your, you know, your plant, and nationally, within your larger organization or globally if your organization happens to be globally.

But I also think at some point calculating a return on investment is very value added and sharing those results, communication, you know, communicating those results. Injury statistics, you know, we did talk already about they are a lagging indicator, but they're still, right, it it's it, you know, injuries cost companies money. and so they're still a good way to share your success. So this question too makes me think about the work that I did with Walsh construction. It was kind of unique. Construction companies don't normally focus on ergonomics.

But after the first year of our program we saw like a seventy five reduction seventy five percent reduction in ergonomic MSDs. And so we started broadcasting that and we were just working out of Pittsburgh and on the East Coast, but then the rest of the whole company was like, What are you doing? They were asking, you know, what are you doing?

What you know, good I so I ended up going to Louisville. I started going to the corporate headquarters, you know, to share like this is what we're doing, this is what's working or what's not, and you know, it was pretty powerful. We actually got to speak back when ASSP was ASSE. We spoke at the two thousand fourteen conference in Orlando about, you know, what we did. So that was kind of fun.

Ryan Urik

Yeah, I would just kind of build a little bit on that and I just in my experience what has worked in the organizations I've been. It's really about developing a program framework that fits you know again the culture of the organization. So everybody has their own unique you know, culture in a company. So you wanna make sure when you're doing it you start looking at building it with that in mind.

And then I would say, and Heather alluded to this with the construction company was you want to start with a proof of concept. is it a a small site inside of a plant or is it business within the business? so you start with a proof of concept verifying what works and whether that's through a Kaisen event or whatever version of continuous improvement is that that's where I would start. Understanding whether a success is and isn't, then adjust from that point forward before pushing it out into a larger organization.

And then it's just a lot of those framework things. It's about including all levels of employees, from the most senior leader down to the newest hire, giving them that education, base level, and then understanding where they are and what they can do and how they can support the program and the overall safety culture.

And then it was alluded to like some of the lagging indicators. It is c creating those KPIs, and it's often thought about the injuries and time away and so and some of the costs. But there are ways of doing leading indicators, like are you doing assessments, are there

improvements occurring, you know, cost dollar savings. So it's really about understanding those KPIs and being transparent and sharing that.

And then it's really about you know being humble and honest and just sharing success and sharing where you've made misses and then talking about how you're improving on those misses. So I think overall it's really just about being a mature organization, developing it within the system that agrees with you and then finding ways to tr track and indicate a success and you do that often through your KPI. So all that together I think helps companies scale it up.

Scott Fowler

Absolutely. Any final thoughts either of you'd like to add as we wrap up?

Heather Ritz

You know, Ryan actually mentioned Kaizen events at the end there and I think that is a phenomenal way. Like I've been a part of a lot of ergonomic focused Kaizon events and they've been really a lot of fun but also really effective.

Ryan Urik

You know it's really about caring for your employees and providing them ways to succeed and you know having employees go with pain away from work or have injuries only hurts them but also hurts the company. So it's really about giving them the opportunity to succeed in their work create initiatives to create you know process improvement quality improvement and safety improvement and I think it all builds into providing like safe, efficient operations. And I think this is just an example of something that fits into that web of you know, better work conditions and better work products in the end.

Scott Fowler

That's what it's all about. well thank you both so much again for coming on. Ergonomic injuries are, you know, some of the most common in common injuries that that workers are experiencing out there. And I really appreciate you coming on to share how EHS professionals can help prevent those and create safer conditions in their workplace. So thank you so much again.

Ryan Urik

Appreciate it.

Heather Ritz

Thank you, Scott. Thanks for having us.