Workers' Comp

Sizing Up the Physical Demand Analysis

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The workers' comp industry is always searching for new ways to increase safety in the workplace. But there's one tool that's been available for quite some time that, if used more often, could go a long way to reaching this goal. On today's Inside Workers' Comp, Mike Milidonis, Ergonomics and Employer Services Manager at Genex, tells us about the physical demand analysis and how it can play a larger role in keeping workers healthy.

Tom Kerr (TK): Mike, thanks for joining us today.

Mike Milidonis (MM): Thank you for having me.

TK: Mike, what is a physical demand analysis?

MM: Basically, a physical demand analysis is a document that outlines the essential functions of a job. It then breaks down the essential functions into job tasks, and then it measures what is physically required to perform those job tasks. Therefore, giving the end user an ADA-compliant document that can be utilized in many instances within an organization, during a pre?hire all the way through an accommodation type of a situation.

TK: When is a physical demand analysis typically performed?

MM: The time frame is really dependent upon the job itself. To give you an example, if I'm looking at an assembly position, and my job entails me to sit at a particular workstation to assemble a part throughout the day, that is a faster job to look at. If I have a cycle time of five minutes, where it takes me five minutes to complete a part, then I would say it would only take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to look at that particular job and take all the measurements associated with it.

If I am in a position that does multiple jobs throughout the day or multiple job tasks throughout the day, then that's going to take an increased amount of time to look at that job because of the various job tasks. The example I can give you there is if, let's say, I'm a construction worker and I hang drywall. Hanging drywall is going to take a longer time to look at because of all the different things that go on with that particular tasks, and the amount of things that they do throughout a period of time to complete that particular job.

When it comes to something like that, that might take two to three hours to look at a job task for a construction worker, where it would only take about 30, 45 minutes for an assembly person.

TK: Is the physical demand analysis something that most employers are aware of? Or do you have to educate them on the specifics?

MM: I believe you get both scenarios. Some employers currently utilize physical demands for their jobs. Other employers, we find, utilize a job posting type of a document as a way to describe a person's job. What we find is, those are the employers that we have to educate on the use of a physical demand analysis.

When we look at a situation where there's, let's say, either a workers' compensation or a disability?related claim, those job postings don't really help describe what that person's job is from an essential function standpoint or from the physical demand standpoint.

Those are the employers that we typically have to educate on the importance of defining those essential functions and physical demands, as it relates to the different positions within their organization.

TK: So, to clarify, when you refer to a job posting, are you're basically talking about a job description for an available opportunity?

Mike: Yes. A lot of employers still utilize that information as a document to describe a position. Usually, those are only about a paragraph long. They don't really tell what the person physically has to be able to do in order to perform their job.

TK: So really, if you're doing the PDA pre-hire, you're giving the potential candidates a better idea of whether or not they can meet the demands of the job?

MM: Correct. The employer during the hiring process can ask an employee if they can perform the essential functions of a job, with or without a reasonable accommodation. In order to ask that particular question, the employer should have the essential functions documented, along with the physical demands associated with those essential functions.

However, just to know, the person does have to be an individual with a disability. Let's say I'm applying for a job and I cannot perform one of the physical requirements, but I don't have any type of disability. The employer does not have to accommodate me for that.

TK: How do you go about performing a physical demand analysis and who conducts them?

MM: The process of performing one is visiting with the employer typically on site, an employer location, reviewing the jobs with supervisors and employees to assist in determining the essential functions. The reason I say “assist in determining,” is because it's up to the employer to decide what is an essential function of a job. We help them when it comes to determining what those essential functions are.

Once we determine those essential functions, we then will break those down into job tasks and actually document the different job tasks in writing while we're on site. At that point, we then measure any physically distinguishable tasks associated with completing those essential functions. Now what I mean by that is if there is a lift involved, we will measure the heights, the frequencies, the distances that somebody has to lift an object, if a carry distance is involved, any of that type of physical requirement associated with a task. That includes pushing and pulling, that includes climbing stairs, climbing ladders, gripping, or any type of positional task that the person has to be in, like accessing a confined space.

We utilize force gauges, scales (to take push?pull measurements) and weights, tape measures for distances, digital cameras to take pictures of tools and equipment. All of that information is then placed into a document that outlines the physical demands.

TK: How long does it take to do a PDA?

MM: The time frame is really dependent upon the job itself. To give you an example, if I'm looking at an assembly position, and my job entails me to sit at a particular workstation to assemble a part throughout the day, that is a faster job to look at. If I have a cycle time of five minutes, then I would say it would only take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to look at that particular job and take all the measurements associated with it.

If I am in a position that does multiple jobs throughout the day or multiple job tasks throughout the day, then that's going to take an increased amount of time to look at that job because of the various job tasks. The example I can give you there is if let's say I'm a construction worker and I hang drywall. Hanging drywall is going to take a longer time to look at because of all the different things that go on with that particular tasks, and the amount of things that they do throughout a period of time to complete that particular job.

When it comes to something like that, that might take two to three hours to look at a job task for a construction worker, where it would only take about 30, 45 minutes for an assembly person.

TK: Do you need special certification to conduct a PDA?

MM: Currently there's no special certification to perform a physical demand analysis. What we do internally is we actually pick individuals that have either a vocational background or nursing background. We then put them through a training on ADA, how to determine essential functions. We train them on how to utilize the equipment, how to measure jobs, and basically teach them how to perform a physical demand analysis.

It's something that is slightly different than creating a job description, because you have to look at a job, look at all the tools and equipment within an area, and be able to really ask the questions and figure out with those employers what is essential, and what are the physical demands associated with it.

TK: What separates a good PDA from an ordinary one?

MM: A good PDA will really define what is essential versus what is marginal. It will include all the necessary demands that are associated with it, so all the measurements.

A lot of people will still go on site, they look at a job, and they fill out a checklist that will say “occasional,” “frequently,” “continuous.” They will choose frequencies like that, and then they will actually guesstimate on the weight. They will say, "Well, that's about 20 pounds, so we're going to say the worker lifts up to 20 pounds."

We're trying to get away from that. That's your downgraded version of a PDA, where a legally defensible PDA will actually take frequencies, and measurements, and heights from actual weight versus a guesstimate.

TK: Do you often face challenges in performing these evaluations? If so, what are they?

MM: The only challenge to performing a physical demand analysis will come when you have a job that you're looking at that performs different tasks throughout different times of the year.

The best description I can give you, again is if I go back to that construction worker. There might be things that they do differently if they're in an area that has heavy snowfall or ice during the winter, and nice weather during the summer. Your frequencies are going to be different because the work you perform in the different seasons might vary.

That same exact job title, if you're down South, might be slightly different when it comes to essential functions because of the weather itself. Sometimes you'll run into jobs like that, where you actually have to wait and look at a particular job depending upon the type of season.

TK: What type of comments or analysis do you receive from the employers once you complete the PDA, and they look over the results? Are they sometimes surprised?

MM: If an employer has not utilized a PDA prior to us performing one, typically, if we go out and perform one for a claim as an example, a lot of employers will turn around, love the information, and want us to provide the same service for more of their positions within their facility. That's what we usually find because they didn't know something like that was available.

A lot of times, employers at that point will have us come out on a yearly basis to make sure that their physical demands are the same, and to continually update them so they can use them within their day-to-day processes of return to work and accommodation.

TK: Are PDAs something that need to be utilized more in workers’ comp? If so, why?

MM: Yeah. I think they're probably the most underutilized piece in the claims industry, whether it's work or disability. A lot of times, from the onset of a claim, we're asking to return somebody to work. The biggest question when it comes to return to work is, “what is the job?”

If we don't know what the person's job is, from a physical standpoint, we have no idea when they can go back to work with or without their restrictions. I think it's probably one of the most underutilized pieces or tools in some of these toolboxes when it comes to return to work.

TK: Thanks, Mike. We’ll be back with a new Inside Workers’ Comp in a couple weeks. In the meantime, catch up on some of our “greatest hits” available on iTunes and Stitcher. Until then, thanks for listening.



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