

Work & Life Award Winner:

Electrix

Video Link <https://vimeo.com/104578614>

Electrix developed a fitness programme to help reduce injury to its 'lineys' - and has benefited from the greater staff engagement, energy and cooperation that came with it.

In 2009 and 2010, Albany-based Electrix saw a rise the number of musculoskeletal injuries to linesmen, caused by the awkward positions they adopt above and below ground as they fix power problems. The shoulders, knees and spinal areas were most commonly affected.

Until then, says Graeme Johnson, Technical Manager for the company's Distribution Services Division, 'lineys' were sent to a GP for assessment, and put on sick leave or light duties for three days while they recovered.

It was a no-questions-asked, reactive approach typical of the industry that didn't help productivity, he says - and probably wasn't the best way to help them heal. Although the company had been spending more than \$4 million a year maintaining equipment and about the same on training and compliance, he says, very little had been dedicated to employee health and wellness.

There was another issue causing concern: Although new hires had medical checks on eyesight, hearing, lung function, drug use and the likes, there was nothing to confirm they could cope with the physical demands of the work - which meant the company discovered, too late, that some new hires weren't able to do the work without risking injury.

Finding solutions

Enter Productive Biomechanics director and chiropractor Keith Hammond, who visited sites to observe linesmen and also explain spinal biomechanics to them. Those injured were sent to Keith for assessment and from this, he developed an injury severity matrix to help guide rehabilitation decisions.

Keith also reported that some of those assessed needed core strength conditioning - that is, improving the strength of flexibility of back and abdominal muscles. His trawl of overseas research showed a correlation between poor aerobic fitness and work-related injuries.

It became clear, says Graeme, that a preventative wellness programme was needed to reduce injury, help recovery and provide a way to screen potential hires. Staff were filmed undertaking a variety of line-related tasks both above and below ground, and with the help of a personal trainer, a strength-conditioning programme was developed to strengthen areas where linesmen are susceptible to injury.

A 60 sq m gym was set up in a corner of the Electrix warehouse, and Graeme was one of the 18 guinea pigs who tested out the activities using simple equipment such as free

weights, filled bags and Swiss balls. As a result, two programmes were developed, both implemented in 2010.

The pre-employment assessment

Every candidate for a linesman's job takes a PEPA, pre-employment physical assessments. Carried out by Productive Biomechanics in the Electrix gym, they involve timed events or exercises to failure - until no more repetitions can be done.

Candidates also undergo spinal x-rays and a full musculoskeletal exam, which leads to a recommendation whether to employ. Some candidates may be offered work on the condition that they attend the second programme that was developed, lineFIT, which is available to all staff.

The lineFIT programme

LineFIT is a voluntary, a 12-week challenge of six to 12 people, supervised by a trainer that builds in intensity. It starts with a Saturday-morning session outside of work hours to bond the group and set expectations.

The other sessions also take place outside normal work hours, with many staff coming in early to do their workouts; nutritional and health advice is also on offer. "A lot of the guys haven't done significant exercise for number of years," says Graeme, "so the programme is designed to ease people into exercise - weeks eight to 12 are fairly intense."

Some employees were initially sceptical about the programme, says Graeme - before they started seeing the benefits enjoyed by their fitter, newly glowing colleagues. "It's the group dynamic that gets people through" says Graeme.

Says participant Grant Robinson: "I get there in the morning at 5.30 and I don't wanna be there, but at the end of it I quite enjoy it ... and I'm determined after it is all over [the lineFIT course] I'm going to carry on. I feel a lot better in myself. I wondered if the ladder was getting lighter, but it's not, it's just me getting stronger, I think."

The results

So far, more than 72 field staff have competed or are taking part in lineFIT, and the company now has a defined pathway to help rehabilitate those who are injured.

Electrix says it has saved more than 60 lost-time injury days so far, and those with back injuries are now getting tailored treatment to help strengthen problem areas and develop core strength.

An unexpected but welcome side-effect has been a positive culture change. Says Electrix General Manager Robert Ferris: "LineFIT started off as an exercise in injury prevention, but what I've noticed over time is it's become also a means of ... changing the culture in the organisation.

“Sure, individuals have lost weight, they’ve improved their strength, wellness and nutrition on an individual basis, but what I see is that the team, and particularly the greater group within the distribution area, there’s a whole change, there’s a greater level of energy, positiveness and cooperation.”