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A safer workplace

Businesses making ergonomic fixes to save their employees the pain

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Texas business owners and legislators are wringing their hands over rising workers' compensation costs. But several South Texas business owners have found ways to cut their work injury expenses — usually through ergonomic changes.

Cursed during mid-1990s when the Department of Labor approved a national ergonomics standard, ergonomics is showing its worth in everything from workplace design to job assessments.

With workplace injuries already above average in its industry and rising, Block Distributing in Schertz decided four years ago it was time to do more than just have experts make the occasional walk-through inspections, pointing out safety concerns on the fly.

The liquor distributor hired occupation and ergonomic specialists to help analyze the health hazards in how employees loaded boxes, trucks and storage shelves at its warehouse.

They determined they could significantly reduce back strains and knee injuries by raising conveyor belts from knee level to hip level. It's the centerpiece of



PHOTOS BY WENDI POOLE/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Tom Tobin, a partner with Adamson, Tobin and Associates, made ergonomic changes at Block Distributing that led to an 83 percent drop in workplace injuries.

Block's new warehouse.

With routine training, early treatment of aches and pains, regularly modeling good work practices and postures to employees, the company saved almost \$400,000 because workplace injuries dropped 83 percent. Block went from a handful of injuries each month that required time off to more than two years without a lost day.

Buy-in wasn't immediate from existing employees. It took a little ribbing at times

to get compliance, ergonomics consultants said.

"I would say (to employees) 'If I can do it and I don't know your job, then surely you can do it,'" said Tom Tobin of Adamson, Tobin & Associates.

Tobin and company garnered widespread support by working side-by-side with employees on every shift and offering to treat them in onsite clinics regardless of whether injuries were work-related or acquired at home, Block officials say.

"Buy-in came when people realized they were not here trying to determine if an employee were really hurt at work or just malingering," said Steve Hughes, Block's director of operations. "When people are getting attention their attitudes are better."

Local businesses find that the fix often requires minimal expense. When Frito-Lay Inc. workers began reporting wrist pains from

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having to turn large knobs while labeling bags, it fixed the problem by having maintenance workers attach \$3.45 cranks onto the knobs, said occupational therapist Keith Adamson. Today the San Antonio Frito-Lay plant has the highest OSHA rating for its voluntary ergonomics and safety strategies.

Workplace injuries often occur when muscles have insufficient blood flow.

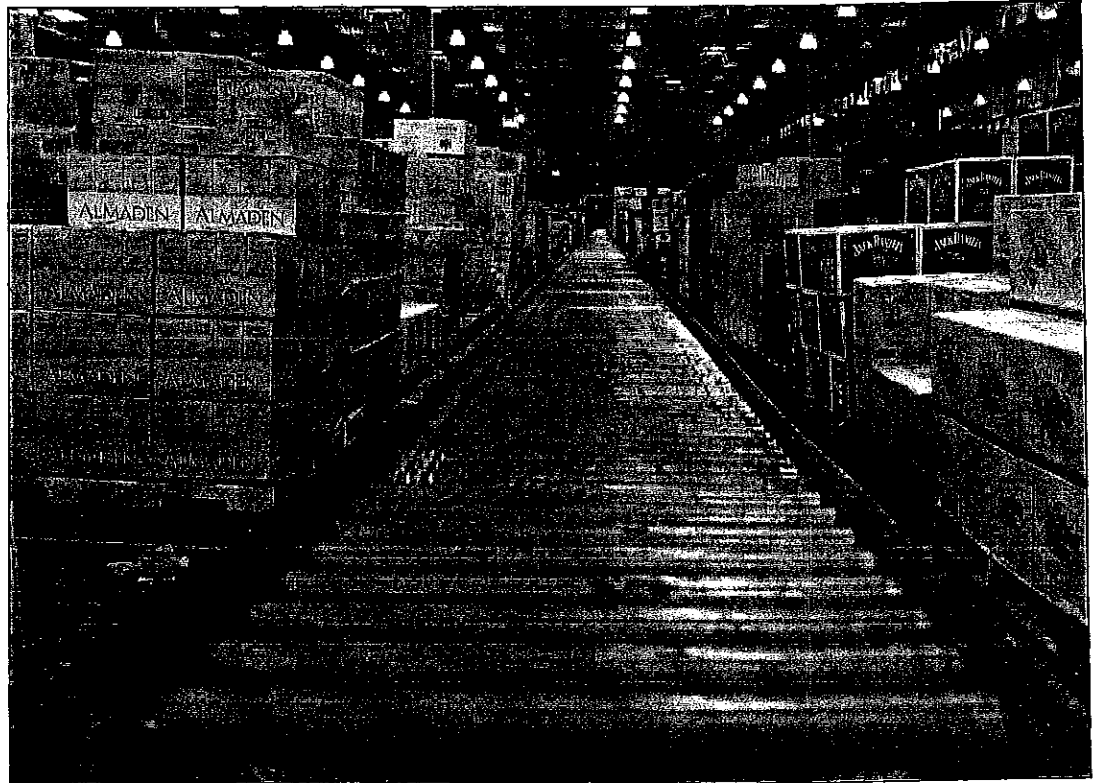
Cfan, a San Marcos manufacturer that makes fan blades used in a Boeing jet, requires its shop-floor employees take two stretch breaks per shift. Just after each work team arrives, an employee who's volunteered to be stretch captain after training with the occupational therapists calls each team together to spend 10 minutes loosening and warming up muscles. They usually stretch a second time after lunch.

It's a midday pick-me up that also enhances morale, company officials say.

"We get employees involved in more leadership roles," said Don Vigil, Cfan's environmental health and safety manager.

San Antonio Water System has found that ergonomic assessments can generate savings even in the hiring phase.

For about \$250 per job, SAWS hired HealthSouth



Changes at Block Distributing in Schertz, such as raising the height of the conveyor belt, cut the amount of injuries. The company went from a handful of injuries each month that required time off to more than two years without a lost day.

Rehabilitation Center to design tests to simulate the pulling, pushing and lifting of each job, including the work crews and meter readers.

"The assumption was that meter reading was an easy job until they took me to Olmos Park where readers had to climb 6- and 8-foot fences and fend off dogs to get to the meters," said Craig Caya, industrial program coordinator for HealthSouth Rehabilitation Center.

Caya's research pinpoint-

ed not only what levels of exertion are required for each task but also what the heart rate typically should be when doing each task.

SAWS agreed to pay HealthSouth an additional \$100 per job applicant to conduct extensive physical exams with equipment that monitors muscle usage, nerve conduction and heart rate. It's a far cry for the vision and reflex tests that it had used for years.

Since April, SAWS has been able to weed out job applicants who were physi-

cally too weak to do the work and, in a few cases, who had undisclosed back injuries.

"A back injury can cost \$100,000," said Naira White, SAWS human resources manager. "If we can prevent one back injury, that pays for three years of this program."

With a few years of decreased injuries, ergonomics consultant Tobin said, employers have been able to buy cheaper workers' compensation insurance.