10 Ways to Improve Safety

Does it put your company in an uncomfortable situation when a Route Service Representative cannot run their route due to an injury? How can you save money while reducing the number of days your RSRs miss work? One surprising solution would be to improve the safety of your Route Service Representatives (RSRs).

The most common body parts RSRs injure are the lower back, shoulders and ankles. These musculoskeletal disorders are the leading cause of RSR lost time or days away from work. The average cost of a back injury results in a worker’s compensation claim of between $40,000 and $80,000 per employee. This cost includes:

- Musculoskeletal injuries
- Turnover (cost to hire and train replacement employees)
- Over-time and temporary help
- Days away from work
- Transition duty days
- Sick days used
- Administrative costs of handling the claim

Additional costs, such as employee satisfaction and efficiency, must also be acknowledged. The importance of RSR safety on the job cannot be emphasized enough.

How can you save money while reducing the number of days your RSRs miss work? One surprising solution would be to improve the safety of your RSRs. To assist in preventing injuries and improving safety for your RSRs, we recommend starting with the following 10 steps:
1. **Encourage Your RSRs to Stretch.** Sounds simple enough, but you and your team probably don’t realize the advantages of stretching. Stretching has been proven to prevent injuries, enhance performance, improve circulation and range of motion, decrease muscle tension and soreness, and increase muscle-tendon flexibility. If that’s not enough, stretching also improves one’s ability to relax, increases the amount of oxygen in one’s blood, warms up one’s muscles and enhances one’s overall well-being.

Who knew stretching could be so beneficial? RSRs should be trained to stretch throughout the day, especially before engaging in any manual work and after long drive times or lunch breaks. They should also be encouraged to stretch anytime they feel stiff and after performing heavy workloads.

2. **Improve Nutrition and Dehydration.** RSRs spend a majority of their day in a truck so it’s most convenient to grab food on the go. Eating healthy by avoiding greasy, processed and trans fat foods and maintaining a healthy body weight reduces stress on bones and muscles. Remind your RSRs to avoid alcohol and minimize their sugar intake. Eating lots of fiber and high-energy foods such as vegetables, nuts and beans have enormous health benefits.

Dehydration is another risk for RSRs. Forgetting to hydrate when on the go is easy to do. Thirst is a poor indicator of fluid needs, which means it is important to stay well hydrated. By the time thirst catches up, you are already on the way to dehydration. When you don’t give your body enough water, it causes tiredness, low energy and headaches. RSRs should consume roughly three liters of total beverages a day to remain properly hydrated. It may also help to keep in mind that chilled fluids are absorbed faster and help lower body temperature.

3. **Work/Rest Cycle.** A perfect work-life balance is hard to find but one way to improve function in all areas of life is to remember sleep is an essential part of our lives. Sleep is a natural restorative cycle that allows the body to regenerate itself so that it can function properly. The average adult needs seven to eight hours of sleep each night. This is especially important for RSRs who need to be
well rested in order to perform manual labor and be alert to drive and interact with customers.

4. **Appropriate Footwear.** When leaving for the day, it's easy to grab the closest pair of athletic shoes, but RSRs should take the time to make sure they have proper footwear. Choosing the right shoes can minimize stress on joints and the spine. Making sure shoes are in good condition can prevent slips, trips and falls and in this line of business, slip resistant shoes are always a good idea.

5. **Plan Your Route.** Remind RSRs to always choose the safest and most efficient route when walking to their destination. If possible, avoid stairs and other areas that provide poor footing or obstacles. RSRs should be trained to rest (when necessary) if carrying a load a long distance. It is also important to evaluate a load before lifting. If it is too large or heavy, it should not be attempted. Sometimes RSRs need a reminder that it is better to swallow their pride than face a back injury.

6. **Use Material Handling Devices.** If a load is too heavy, remind RSRs to use a cart, rolling rack or hand truck. Other options include making more trips with smaller loads or ask for help. When possible, push rather than pull an object to reduce strain on the back.

7. **Eyes on the Path.** This may seem obvious, but it is easy to get distracted when carrying a load. RSRs should continually look where they are going and scan the area to ensure there are no hazards in their path. They should watch out for curbs, holes, ice, water and other obstacles.

8. **Proper Lifting.** RSRs have to do a lot of lifting and it is important they are properly trained in order to avoid injury. Teach your RSRs to:
   - Face the object they are about to lift and, if possible, face the direction they want to go. Make sure the load is stable and balanced. Find a firm
base of support. A staggered stance, with one foot slightly behind the other, often aids in providing a firm base of support.

- When lifting, be sure to bend at your knees, not at your waist. Bend down as far as necessary using your legs and not your back. Lean into the object and let your body weight and leg muscles do the work.
- Keep the load close to your body with your head up. Maintain the natural inward curve of your lower back. Stand up straight and carry the load as close to your center of gravity as possible. Allow your more powerful leg muscles, not your back muscles, to do the work.
- Back injuries don’t only happen from improper lifting. They can result from lowering the load incorrectly. Lower the load slowly by flexing the knees and hips. After releasing the load, straighten up using your legs.
- Don’t twist your body while carrying a load. Turn your entire body by pivoting or moving your feet.

9. Maintain 3 Points of Contact. Three points of contact means always having three parts of your body on stable surfaces. This typically means having both feet on the ground and one hand holding on to a third point of contact such as a rail or handle. It provides a firm base of support, and helps avoid hazards such as slips, trips or falls. It also reduces impact and stress on the body – using three points of contact can reduce 55% of force to your body! Using this technique throughout the day is a good rule of thumb for home, work and in the truck.

10. Be Ambidextrous. We are symmetrical, but we choose to have a dominant arm, leg, etc. To reduce wear and tear on your wrists, elbows and shoulders, practice alternating arms. It may seem counterintuitive, but if RSRs use their bodies more evenly, they can help improve safety and reduce their risk of injury. Encourage your RSRs to work smarter, not harder. Train your service team on these 10 steps to lower the number of injuries, reduce lost time expenses and see an increase in employee morale and a healthier team.