



‘Stretch & Flex’ Program Reduces On-the-Job Injuries

Improved Communications Is Also a Benefit

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On a mission to proactively reduce strains and sprains at project sites in 1996, Skanska USA Building’s Oregon office, together with Bruce Madsen of Hi-Tech Sports Technology, pioneered a construction-specific, preventive exercise program called Flexible Solutions—more commonly known as “stretch & flex.” The program was gradually introduced to Oregon projects and continues to gain momentum within the company.

The pre-task exercise routine, which involves Skanska project employees as well as subcontractors, is now standard practice at many of the company’s jobsites throughout the country. If you are wondering why a construction firm would spend time and money on an exercise program in an industry where the work is already physically demanding, consider the fact that, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, strains and sprains account for more than 43 percent of non-fatal occupational injuries.

The goal of Skanska’s Flexible Solutions program is to provide a viable method of addressing and reducing the risk and severity of back and musculoskeletal injuries that can occur while doing physical work. For 10 to 15 minutes at the start of the work day, Skanska’s project superintendent leads participants in a set of 12 easy-to-perform exercises to prepare the body for action by increasing blood flow and warming up the muscles. Groups range from as small as 10 people to as many as 300 par-

ticipants. The larger groups sometimes warrant the use of a microphone-led session. Because of the exercises, workers are less likely to experience an incident that results in a strain, sprain or more serious injury during the course of the day.

Over time, the exercises have been shown to raise workers’ energy levels and to improve flexibility, strength and range of motion—all of which enhances a person’s capacity to do physical work without injury. Proponents of “stretch & flex” contend that taking time to stretch also helps employees prepare themselves *mentally* for the tasks they are about to perform—another important factor in reducing the potential for a work-related injury.

While the initial benefit on Skanska

jobsites was injury prevention, it became evident as the initiative evolved that it added value in several other areas:

- **Team-Building**—Workers from different trades and companies have the opportunity to interact and build relationships. During the exercise routine, good-natured banter and laughter is the norm.
- **Communication**—Project superintendents have the opportunity to address the entire team for a few minutes immediately following the exercises to touch base on relevant topics that facilitate scheduling and coordination between the various trades. It is a prime opportunity for project leadership to address job-site issues while leading the team in their daily exercises.



Skanska employees start their day with exercises that increase blood flow and warm up muscles. Photo courtesy of Skanska USA Building.

• **Planning**—Crews also use the opportunity to begin planning their scope of work for the day. When Flexible Solutions was first rolled out, initial impressions on the part of project teams ranged from very positive to uncertainty. Those who may have resisted at first, based on fear of lost productivity, now buy in to the program because they see its obvious value. The adoption of the “stretch & flex” program increased awareness and vigilance about co-workers’ safety, and improved communications, which has helped reduce injuries at Skanska significantly—perhaps by as much as 50 percent during the last eight years. The process has endured not only because of the project teams’ leadership, encouragement and persistence, but also because the program works.

In a very short time the benefits were clearly evident. Reducing injuries saves money and enhances productivity.

How expensive is it to run the program? Based on the “train-the-trainer” concept, once the in-house instructors have been trained in leading the exercise routine, the program becomes self-administering.

“Skanska’s superintendents initiate ‘stretch & flex’ on the project sites,” said Arguedas. “The program continues to gain energy so that employees look forward to communicating and bonding with their teammates on a daily basis.”

If you want to know more about starting a “stretch & flex” program like Skanska’s at your company, contact Al Arguedas at al.arguedas@skanskausa.com. **UC**



Skanska’s “stretch & flex” program encourages team-building among workers from different trades and companies. Photo courtesy of Skanska USA Building.