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A person with narrow vision has a restricted horizon; a person with wide vision has plentiful opportunities

Learning, leading, and innovating: Reimagining manual handling and musculoskeletal disorders as critical risks

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Introduction

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) account for 30% of workplace harm in Aotearoa New Zealand[1]. Traditional manual handling training often fails because it focuses on individual behaviour rather than system design[2]. In 2025, Foodstuffs South Island (FSSI) challenged the status quo by giving manual handling the same priority and attention as their critical risks, noting it represented 64% of their injury claims. Moving beyond a 'tick-box' compliance exercise, FSSI partnered with ProErgo+ to apply a systems-thinking, ergonomics approach to risk management.

Methods

A 10-member Manual Handling Task Force participated in four sessions jointly facilitated by FSSI and ProErgo+. We used a structured musculoskeletal risk management framework to identify, assess, and control risks. Data was gathered through discomfort and risk factor surveys, capturing both physical and psychosocial risks. To quantify physical demands, the New Zealand Manual Handling Assessment Charts (NZMAC)[3] was used for the five highest-risk tasks. Findings and proposed controls were then presented to senior leadership.

Results

Of the 207 workers surveyed, 75% reported discomfort. The data revealed distinct psychosocial risks between Ambient and Temperature Controlled distribution centres. The NZMAC assessments successfully pinpointed specific high-risk task elements, allowing for targeted risk reduction rather than broad, ineffective interventions.

Conclusion

Managing work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMSDs) requires understanding the complex interactions of physical, psychosocial, environmental, organisational, and individual factors. This project succeeded by combining forward-thinking leadership with a collaborative co-design approach. By empowering workers as 'experts' and applying ergonomics principles, FSSI began moving from a reactive approach to proactive prevention. This model provides a transferable roadmap for any New Zealand business committed to reducing harm and improving worker wellbeing through better work design.

References

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