

Assessment matches physical abilities to the job

Saturday, June 07, 2008- Des Moines Business Record – By Joe Cardyasz

■ Iowa Health offers test to employers as part of pre-employment screening

Depending on which operating company they work for, employees of Seneca Cos. might spend their workdays installing gasoline pumps, assembling car-wash systems or working at an environmental cleanup site or a warehouse.

Those types of strenuous duties are why the Des Moines-based business requires each of its candidates for jobs requiring physical labor to take a Physical Capacity Profile (PCP) test as part of their pre-employment screening.

The machine used to conduct the assessments looks much like a multifunction workout station you'd find at a gym, but is programmed to measure the force an applicant is able to apply and compare that with minimum capabilities needed for the position they're seeking.

Seneca is one of about 30 companies that have enrolled with Iowa Health - Des Moines to have job candidates screened with the test, which provides a 28-point assessment of all the major muscle and joint groups. Iowa Health began offering the program last fall after installing one of the systems at its Outpatient Therapy Services office in West Des Moines.



Chad Suiter, an occupational therapist at Iowa Health - Outpatient Therapy Services, administers a Physical Capacity Profile test for a job applicant. Photo by Duane Tinkey

Last week, Iowa Health installed a second machine at Outpatient Therapy at Penn Medical Place, 1301 Pennsylvania Ave. in Des Moines, to serve companies on the east side of the metro area.

"The PCP test provides companies with a comprehensive evaluation of a potential applicant's physical abilities and fitness level to safely and effectively perform the requirements of the job they seek," said Dr. Robin Epp, medical director of Iowa Methodist Occupational Medicine. Epp reviews the test results in conjunction with those applicants' pre-employment physical examinations.

Lowering risk

Improving employee safety can pay dividends in lower workers' compensation costs and potentially lower insurance premiums as the risks of injuries are reduced.

The manufacturer of the devices, Occupational Performance Corp. in Salina, Kan., has sold the systems to eight Iowa hospitals and has placed systems in five Midwestern states over the past 12 years, said Brian Richardson, the company's chief executive officer.

"We are seeing insurance companies giving discounts to employers that are using this system, because they're lowering their risk," he said. "That varies significantly, but it's anywhere from 5 to 20 percent discounts on their workers' compensation coverage.

"The other savings for the employers is not as much lost time, because you don't have as many injuries," he said. "And to just not get an employee who doesn't have the strength to do the job, that savings is just huge to employers."

The company has documented savings as high as \$12 for every dollar spent on the testing, with most companies averaging from \$6 to \$8 in savings per dollar spent, Richardson said.

Some of the larger employers using the system in Iowa for pre-employment screening include Deere & Co., Sysco Food Services Inc. of Iowa in Ankeny, Fort Dodge-based Smithway Motor Xpress Corp. and

Jensen Builders Ltd. of Fort Dodge and Ames.

Mercy Medical Center - Des Moines considered purchasing such a system about four years ago, said Terry Tripp, Mercy's director of employee health. However, she said, an employee suffered an injury while testing the equipment, which, ironically, resulted in a workers' compensation claim.

"We did get cold feet when there was that injury," Tripp said, adding that she didn't recall whether it was an Occupational Performance machine. "We are continuing to look at possibly using a machine," she added. "We are not opposed to looking at it again."

Behrends said Iowa Health reviewed the safety record of the PCP machine prior to its investment and is satisfied with its safety performance.

Objective test

Prior to conducting a test for a specific position, Iowa Health performs a complete job assessment at the work site to determine the strength needed to perform each task safely. The position is then assigned a level from one to five; the applicant's overall score must reach at least that level to pass.

"It's very objective, and every person doing the test has been certified and has a minimum number of hours," said Denise Behrends, director of therapy services. "Whereas previously we had a lift test, which had some subjectivity to it. The therapists have found that this is just more objective."

The cost of the service is built into the fee that companies pay Iowa Health for pre-employment screenings, she said.

An important aspect of the test for employers is that it establishes a baseline of the person's physical abilities when they're hired, Behrends said.

"In the past, from a workers' compensation standpoint, employers really had nothing to go by," she said. "The Iowa workers' compensation law says employers aren't responsible for any kind of impairments or illnesses that somebody walks in the door with. But we've never been able to measure that before."

For instance, if an employee injured his or her back and was judged to have an 8 percent impairment but began the job with a 4 percent impairment, the employer would only have to pay for a 4 percent impairment.

Max Schott, a Des Moines attorney who specializes in representing workers' compensation claimants, said he doesn't see any red flags that would cause employees to challenge the tests.

"From a workers' compensation standpoint, I'm not spotting anything that could be problematic," he said, "and it could help people to avoid injuries."

Schott questioned whether any screening test provides uniform results, but "it may eliminate a lot of other factors that we see on the back end (when a person undergoes a functional capacity examination) after a workers' comp claim, he said.

Matt Puffer, Seneca's human resources director, said he's impressed that Iowa Health's physical therapists have coached his employees on proper lifting techniques in the course of performing the evaluations.

About 25 of Seneca's new hires have been given the assessment so far, Puffer said. It's too early to tell whether the test will have a measurable effect on reducing injuries, but if it prevents even one injury, "that pays for a lot of tests," he said.