What a High-Performance MSD Prevention Program Actually Looks Like in Canadian Workplaces



The Gap Between Having a Program and Having Control

If you were to ask most Canadian organizations whether they have a program for preventing musculoskeletal disorders, the answer would almost always be yes. Policies exist, training has been delivered, and in many cases, ergonomic assessments have been conducted at some point in time. From a structural standpoint, the elements of a program are present, and on paper, the organization appears to be addressing the risk.

But the presence of a program is not the same as control.

Control is reflected in outcomes, in consistency, and in the alignment between what the system is designed to do and what actually happens in the field. It is visible in how work is performed under pressure, how supervisors respond to emerging strain, and how quickly the organization can identify and address issues before they result in injury. When viewed through this lens, many programs reveal a gap between intent and execution—one that becomes increasingly difficult to justify as MSDs continue to persist.

This distinction is critical, because regulators, insurers, and increasingly, senior leadership are not evaluating whether a program exists. They are evaluating whether it works.

Why Most MSD Programs Stall at the Same Point

There is a predictable pattern that many organizations follow in their approach to MSD prevention. It typically begins with awareness and training, often prompted by injury trends or regulatory focus. This is followed by the introduction of policies and, in some cases, targeted ergonomic assessments. For a period of time, there may be a noticeable improvement, as attention increases and behaviours shift.

But then progress slows.

Injuries do not disappear, and in some cases, they begin to rise again. The initial interventions have addressed the most visible issues, but they have not fundamentally changed how work is designed or performed. The system remains dependent on workers consistently applying training in environments that are not always conducive to safe execution.

This is the plateau.

It is not a failure of effort. It is a limitation of approach.

Breaking through this plateau requires moving beyond isolated interventions and toward an integrated system that continuously identifies, evaluates, and controls risk.

The Core Components of a High-Performance System

A high-performance MSD prevention program is not defined by a single initiative or tool. It is defined by how multiple elements work together to create a system that is both

proactive and adaptive.

At its core, such a system begins with a detailed understanding of work itself. Tasks are analyzed not just for the presence of manual handling, but for the specific conditions that create strain. This includes frequency, duration, posture, load characteristics, and environmental constraints. This level of analysis provides a foundation for targeted intervention, ensuring that resources are directed where they will have the greatest impact.

From there, control measures are implemented with a focus on practicality and integration. Equipment is not simply provided, but positioned and maintained in a way that supports consistent use. Workflows are adjusted to reduce unnecessary handling. Layouts are designed to minimize reach and awkward postures. These changes are not treated as one-time fixes, but as part of an ongoing process of refinement.

Critically, the system includes mechanisms for verification. It does not assume that controls are effective because they exist. It actively evaluates whether they are being used and whether they are achieving the intended outcome.

Embedding Ergonomics Into How Work Is Planned

One of the defining characteristics of mature MSD programs is that ergonomics is not treated as a separate function. It is embedded into how work is planned and executed.

When new processes are introduced, their physical demands are evaluated alongside their operational efficiency. When equipment is purchased, ergonomic considerations are part of the decision-making criteria. When staffing models are developed, they reflect not just output requirements, but the capacity of workers to perform tasks sustainably.

This integration ensures that prevention is built into the system from the outset, rather than applied after problems emerge.

It also creates alignment between safety and operations, reducing the tension that often exists when ergonomic improvements are perceived as constraints on productivity.

The Role of Measurement in Sustaining Performance

Measurement is what differentiates a high-performance program from one that relies on assumptions.

In addition to tracking injuries, leading organizations measure exposure and performance. They monitor how often high-risk tasks are performed, how long they take, and how they are executed. They track indicators of fatigue and strain, and they use this information to identify trends and prioritize interventions.

This data provides a feedback loop that allows the system to adapt over time.

When changes are implemented, their impact can be evaluated. When new risks emerge, they can be identified early. This creates a dynamic system that evolves with the organization, rather than remaining static.

Supervisor Capability as a Control Measure

In many ways, the effectiveness of an MSD prevention program is reflected in the capability of supervisors.

Supervisors are the ones who translate system design into daily practice. They observe how work is performed, identify when conditions are creating strain, and make decisions that

affect both safety and productivity.

For this reason, their role needs to be clearly defined and supported.

They need to understand not just what the risks are, but how to recognize them in context. They need to be equipped to intervene when necessary and to escalate issues that require redesign. And they need to operate within a system that supports their decisions, rather than undermines them through conflicting priorities.

When supervisors are engaged and capable, they become one of the most effective controls in the system.

Audit Readiness as a Byproduct, Not the Goal

Many organizations approach MSD prevention with a focus on audit readiness. They want to ensure that they can demonstrate compliance if inspected.

While this is important, it should not be the primary objective.

In high-performance systems, audit readiness is a byproduct of effective practice.

When tasks are well understood, controls are practical and integrated, supervisors are engaged, and performance is measured, the organization naturally generates the documentation needed to demonstrate due diligence.

This includes evidence of assessments, implementation of controls, verification of effectiveness, and continuous improvement.

Rather than preparing for audits as a separate activity, the organization operates in a way that is inherently defensible.

What This Means for OHS Leadership

For OHS leaders, building a high-performance MSD program requires a shift in focus.

It involves moving from delivering initiatives to designing systems. From measuring activity to measuring outcomes. From addressing symptoms to addressing underlying conditions.

It also requires influencing beyond the safety function.

Ergonomics and manual handling are deeply connected to how work is structured and executed. Addressing them effectively requires collaboration with operations, engineering, and leadership.

This can be challenging, but it is also where the greatest impact lies.

Final Thoughts

The difference between an average MSD program and a high-performance one is not the presence of policies or training.

It is the degree to which the system understands, controls, and adapts to the realities of work.

Organizations that make this shift move from reacting to injuries to preventing them in a meaningful and sustainable way.

And in doing so, they do more than improve safety.

They build operations that are capable of performing at a higher level, with less strain, less disruption, and greater consistency over time.