You Trained Them to Lift, So Why Are You Still Getting MSD Claims?

The Compliance Illusion Around Manual Handling

If an inspector walked into most Canadian workplaces and asked about manual handling, the initial response would sound strong.

- Yes, workers have been trained.
- Yes, there are policies in place.
- Yes, lifting procedures exist.

On the surface, the system appears compliant.

But when you look deeper—when you move beyond what is documented to what is actually happening in the field—a different picture often emerges.

1. Workers are still lifting awkward loads.
2. Tasks are still repetitive.
3. Equipment is available but not consistently used.
4. Supervisors are aware of strain but not acting on it systematically.

And MSD claims continue to come in.

This is the compliance illusion.

The organization has done what it believes is required. But the system is not producing the outcome it is supposed to.

What Regulators Are Actually Looking For

Canadian OHS legislation does not require perfection.

But it does require that employers take every reasonable precaution to protect workers.

In the context of MSDs, this goes beyond providing training.

Regulators are increasingly looking for evidence that employers have:

1. Identified manual handling risks in specific tasks.
2. Assessed the level of exposure and strain.
3. Implemented controls that address those risks.
4. Verified that those controls are being used and are effective.

This last point is where many organizations fall short.

It is not enough to say that a mechanical aid is available. The expectation is that it is used where required and that barriers to its use have been addressed.

It is not enough to say that workers were trained. The expectation is that training translates into safe execution under actual working conditions.

This shifts the focus from provision to performance.

The Gap Between Policy and Practice

The most common failure point in MSD programs is the gap between policy and practice.

Policies are written at a high level. They outline expectations and general principles.

Practice is where those expectations are tested.

If the policy says to use a mechanical aid, but the aid is not readily accessible, workers will not use it. If the policy says to perform team lifts, but staffing levels do not support it, the policy becomes aspirational rather than operational.

Over time, these gaps become normalized.

Workers adapt. Supervisors accept the reality. The system continues to operate, but not in the way it was designed.

This is where risk accumulates.

Why Training Records Don’t Prove Control

One of the most common pieces of evidence organizations rely on is training records.

They can show that workers attended sessions, completed modules, and received instruction on proper techniques.

But training records do not prove that risks are controlled.

They prove that information was delivered.

From a due diligence perspective, this is only one part of the equation.

If injuries continue to occur, regulators will look beyond training and ask:

1. What was the nature of the task?
2. What controls were in place?
3. Were those controls practical and used?
4. What supervision and verification occurred?

If these questions cannot be answered clearly, training alone will not be sufficient to demonstrate compliance.

Auditing for Exposure, Not Just Presence

To close this gap, organizations need to rethink how they audit manual handling risks.

Traditional audits often focus on presence.

- Is there a policy?
- Is there training?
- Is equipment available?

These are important questions, but they do not capture how work is actually performed.

More effective audits focus on exposure.

1. How often are high-risk lifts performed?
2. What conditions make those lifts difficult?
3. Where are workers deviating from ideal technique and why?
4. What constraints are influencing behaviour?

This approach provides a clearer picture of where risk exists and how it is being managed.

The Role of Observation in Effective Audits

Observation is one of the most powerful tools in MSD prevention, yet it is often underutilized.

Watching how tasks are performed reveals information that cannot be captured in documentation.

It shows where workers are compensating for design limitations. It highlights inefficiencies and strain points. It exposes gaps between expected and actual behaviour.

But observation needs to be structured.

It should focus on specific tasks, identify patterns, and be used to inform corrective action.

Without this structure, it becomes anecdotal rather than actionable.

Accountability Beyond the Safety Department

Another common issue is how responsibility for MSD prevention is distributed.

Safety teams may develop policies and conduct training, but they do not control how work is executed on a daily basis.

That responsibility sits with operations and supervision.

For MSD prevention to be effective, accountability needs to be shared.

Supervisors need to be responsible for ensuring that tasks are performed safely and that controls are applied. Operations leaders need to be involved in redesigning workflows and addressing constraints.

When MSD prevention is treated as a safety function alone, it lacks the authority to drive meaningful change.

What Strong MSD Programs Can Demonstrate

Organizations that are effective in this area can demonstrate more than compliance.

They can show that they understand where manual handling risks exist, how those risks are managed, and how the system adapts when conditions change.

They can provide evidence of task-level assessments, implementation of practical controls, active supervision, and ongoing verification.

They can show that when issues are identified, they are addressed.

This is what due diligence looks like in practice.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

MSDs are often underestimated because they are rarely catastrophic in a single moment.

But their impact is significant.

They lead to lost-time injuries, increased compensation costs, reduced productivity, and long-term impacts on workers.

They also create legal and reputational risk.

When patterns of injury emerge, regulators and insurers take notice. Questions are asked. Systems are examined.

Organizations that cannot demonstrate effective control may face orders, penalties, and increased scrutiny.

Final Thoughts

Manual handling programs often fail not because organizations do nothing, but because they stop at the visible layer of compliance.

Policies are written. Training is delivered. Boxes are checked.

But the real test of a system is whether it changes how work is performed.

Closing the gap between policy and practice requires a different approach—one that focuses on exposure, observation, accountability, and continuous improvement. Because in the end, the question is not whether you trained your workers. It is whether your system actually protects them.