

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

June 21, 2015

Circulation: 226,990 / UMV: 494,559

BUSINESS & MONEY
TBO.COM For headlines throughout the day

MORNING STRETCH

Skanska finds daily exercise regimen helps limit injuries, boost morale



BY YVETTE C. HAMMETT
Tribune staff

TAMPA — A few minutes of stretching and flexing each day before work may not seem like it would be of much benefit. But the largest construction firm operating in Florida has found its daily group exercise sessions have resulted in both physical and mental benefits to its employees, even boosting morale.

In just one year, the Northeast team for Skanska USA saw a 66 percent decrease in back injuries and a 73 percent drop in soft tissue injuries, like muscle tears, bruising and sprains. The company's 50,000 employees in the United States and abroad, including management, start every workday with simple exercises like stretching shoulders, forearms, necks and calves to help them shake off sleep and prepare for a safe day on the job.

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the main terminal at Tampa International Airport, a project that is ongoing as part of the \$1 billion master plan now taking shape.

Such exercise programs, which are becoming more common, not only make for a safer work environment for employees, but from a business standpoint, they cut down on cost and liability for contractors, experts say.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics reports that more than 150,000 construction site injuries occur each year, so reducing injuries has become a priority for Skanska, said Roger Stephan, senior vice president for Florida operations. Skanska has about 25 active construction sites in the state right now, including the airport, UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville and Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida in Lee County.

Each morning as the sun comes up and construction crews head to Tampa International Airport to work on upgrades to the main terminal, dozens of Skanska employees and subcontractor crew members line up for Stretch & Flex, a program the company developed to

reach its goal of an injury-free environment. Since it started in 2005, the program has morphed into not only a healthy way to start the workday, but an opportunity for project managers to go over the day's schedule and prepare the crews for any perils that may lie in their path.

"It has become a team sport for us," Stephan said. "We've developed a culture where everyone is responsible for preventing injury to themselves or other team members. Our core belief in the injury-free environment philosophy is that injuries are preventable." Skanska also goes a step further, empowering each individual employee with the ability to shut down a job site if unsafe acts or conditions are recognized, Stephan said.

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Skanska senior vice president for Florida operations

"Skanska has a very good safety program" and record, said David Simmons, owner of Diversified Construction Safety Inc., a Sarasota firm that works with contractors and subs to ensure safe work environments.

"It's just like other exercise programs. It's always good to start out warming up, and in this case, it gets the crew thinking about safety first thing in the morning," said Simmons, who helps train construction employees to avoid danger on the job. He said such programs are the norm for large contractors these days.

Studies about the benefits of stretching are mixed, but according to the Mayo Clinic, one of the nation's top hospitals, stretching may help improve joint range of motion, which in turn can decrease the risk of injury. It not only cuts down on injuries, but also on the cost of worker compensation premiums.

Those aren't the only benefits, Skanska officials say.

"We start with Stretch & Flex, and then the superintendents and project managers address the entire crew and talk about potential risks for the day, things that may not have been on the job site the previous day that they need to know," said Christian Deater, environment, health and safety director for Skanska.

"It also gives us an opportunity to recognize people in front of their peers. We have so many workers on our sites that do great things on a day-to-day basis, and we recognize them in front of the group." So, the program has also become a morale booster, Deater said.

It has become so popular that some of Skanska's subcontractors have adopted their own version of the Stretch & Flex program.

"At first, it was a little bit of a struggle because we weren't used to that kind of a program," said James Gabbard, general superintendent in charge of field operations for Apopka-based Finrock Inc., which constructs parking garages, hotels and student housing.

"But once we embraced it as a culture instead of a contract obligation, it became much easier to sell to our folks," Gabbard said. "We are shaking off the cobweb, and this gives us the opportunity to focus on our daily task, what risks are involved."