

Innovative solutions to worksite modifications

By Robert Williams

When we search for worksite modification tools and equipment that will help preferred workers do difficult job tasks within their limitations, on rare occasions we have not found the needed equipment. We either find the available equipment will not do what the task requires in the way that the worker needs or sometimes we can't find any solution at all. Some jobs (a very small portion) just don't have quick-to-find, easy-to-buy solutions that will enable injured workers to do that job within their limitations.

The Preferred Worker Program consultants research numerous solutions. Consultants know that if we don't come up with solutions, workers may lose their jobs. We stay current with multitudes of tool and modification sources. We maintain libraries of modification equipment and lists of vendor experts we can go to for expertise. When we do run across a job task for which no accommodating equipment has yet been invented, we may try to invent or design a totally new solution from scratch.

The Preferred Worker Program has a rule that provides up to \$3,500 equipment feasibility rental evaluations or to purchase consultative services necessary to

recommend or design a worksite modification. The great thing is the cost for rental of worksite modification items and consultative services does not apply toward the total cost of a worksite modification. This means our development process does not use up the modification budget.

In the following case, we designed a new worksite modification tool that didn't exist in the commercial market. The worker is a heavy-duty mechanic doing large diesel bus maintenance and repair. Three years ago, this worker had a severe shoulder injury resulting in a 35-pound exertion limit, reduced range of shoulder motion, and a restriction from repetitive use of the injured shoulder. The employer at injury was very committed to bringing this highly experienced and knowledgeable employee back to as many regular mechanic duties as possible. Several hard job tasks required unusual solutions not often seen in a heavy-duty bus garage. However, the worker, his co-workers, and the employer were willing to keep an open mind and look at using new tools to do the heavy tasks that the worker could no longer do.

There was one task we could not find an off-the-shelf solution that would do everything necessary to accommodate the worker's needs when lifting and handling the very large iron brake drums. These drums weighed from 110 to 140 pounds and were a frequent replacement task for the bus mechanics. With a large fleet of city buses doing a lot of stop-and-go driving, the mechanics have to replace the brake drums on several buses daily. To do this task, the worker had to remove a steel wheel and tire weighing at least 160 pounds and then work in a low crouching position to reach, unbolt, and pull off the heavy brake drums.

The brake drum repair requires five steps:

1. Take off tire and wheel (at least 160 pounds). There are very good wheel dollies that we can get to help with this step.
2. Unbolt and manually pull off the brake drum (140 pounds). Usually, two mechanics teamed up to do this manually but with his injury, the preferred worker could no longer share half the weight with a co-worker. In

Continued on Page 3

Questions and Answers

by Kerry King

Q Why do I get the Preferred Worker Adviser newsletter?

A The Preferred Worker Adviser newsletter is delivered to preferred workers to showcase the benefits available to them. We provide details of success stories and different benefits available to help you with employment. If you no longer have your Preferred Worker Identification Card or are interested in more program information about your benefits, contact us at 800-445-3948.

Q What is premium exemption?

A It is workers' compensation insurance protection for you up to three years with an employer. It is a great benefit that can be used multiple times throughout your employment career. Unlike other preferred worker program benefits that have a limit of one or two uses, premium exemption can be offered at the start of a job at every new employer. Remember to keep in mind that you have 90 days from the date you start a job to share the benefit with your employer. Instructions for your employer are on the back of your card.

Q Can I offer preferred worker benefits to a business owner who does not have any employees?

A Yes, however, the business will need to purchase a workers' compensation insurance policy before you start working. The fee for obtaining a policy is approximately \$180 a year. It takes a little time to

set up the policy, so contact us as soon as possible and we'll send you the necessary information to get the special preferred worker policy.

Q When I started my new job, I needed different clothing and the Preferred Worker Program approved the purchase of work clothing. I just recently accepted a promotion after a year of employment and I need different clothing. Will the Preferred Worker Program buy me more clothing?

A Yes, you have a limit of two uses of the clothing category benefit for different jobs. The maximum clothing category limit is \$400. You will need to complete the Employment Purchase Agreement form again with your employer and list the necessary clothing for your new job. The form is available online or we can e-mail it to you or your employer.

Q I live in Portland and work in Washington. Can I use my benefits for employment in Washington?

A No. The benefits through the Preferred Worker Program are for employment with Oregon employers, in Oregon only. This is because the Workers' Benefit Fund provides the funds for the Preferred Worker Program. These funds come from you, the Oregon worker, and your Oregon employer through a payroll deduction; it's called the "cents per hour assessment."

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Worksite modifications, *continued from Page 1*

this step, they pull the drum in its usual vertical orientation, then lift it from knee height to above waist height to place it on a transport cart, tipping it face down in a horizontal position. We found modification tools that could mechanically hold and pull off the brake drum, but none of the tools could lift it high enough to put it on a cart or tip it down so it rested securely on the cart (horizontal). The heavy lifting and changing the orientation (vertical to horizontal) was the essential part of this step and the worker could no longer do it, even with a co-worker's help.

3. After it is on the cart, the drum is taken to the lathe to machine cut it back to a perfect round shape or to determine if it is repairable. The drum is lifted with an overhead crane off the cart in a horizontal position and manually turned back up to vertical to be put on the lathe. Once turned on the lathe, the drum is taken back off with the crane, which accommodated the worker just fine.



4. From the lathe, the drum is put on the cart and carried to storage shelves that range from ankle to shoulder height. Even though a drum weighs up to 140 pounds, mechanics were accustomed to individually lifting a drum, then bending and reaching to place it on high or low shelves. This task was clearly beyond the worker's limits and we could find no commercial device that would easily grab that kind of weight, move it to different shelf levels, and put it on or pick it off the shelf.
5. If the old drum cannot be repaired, the mechanic takes a new drum off the storage shelf, lifts it onto the cart, and takes it back to the bus. He



then goes through the reverse of steps 1 and 2, lifting the 140-pound drum off the cart and turning it to a vertical position so it can slide back onto the bus wheel hub, holding and pushing it back on while working in a low position requiring arm extension.

We needed a brake drum handling device that could do several important things. It had to reach from knee height, where the drum is on the bus, up to the top storage shelf. It also had to allow an easy, low force changing of position from vertical (like on the bus) to horizontal (when placed on a cart). Lastly, it had to rotate several degrees (like a wheel) to line up the wheel studs with the holes in the brake drum.

By carefully defining the job tasks, we developed a clear list of actions the modification device had to perform and how it should be made. The Preferred Worker Program staff used the consultative services benefit to hire a fabricator that designed a single tool that mechanically did all of the lifting and handling tasks required to change out the heavy brake drums. Now the preferred worker can single-handedly make brake drum repairs without exceeding any of his reaching or lifting limits.

The newly invented drum-handling tool lifts, rotates, mounts, and unmounts from the wheel hub, picks and places on a shelf, and carries the 140-pound brake drums without making the worker manually lift, exert, or reach beyond his injury-caused limitations.



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