

The Ageing Worker

For perhaps the first time in our history the number of older workers in the employed population is growing.

Worldwide, as the baby boomer generation ages, they would perhaps in the past have looked forward to a comfortable retirement. However, many have chosen to carry on working. In NZ by 2011 it is expected there will be over one million people aged > 55 years of age and 46% of them will be in paid work.

While this may create additional risks or demands on the workplace, it can be a win-win situation for both employer and employee. Older workers bring many benefits to the workplace. Their skills and experience gained from many years of working can:

1. Help reduce the impact of labour and skills shortages
2. Be valuable in mentoring and training roles, and
3. Assist with safety and health management because of their wealth of knowledge and expertise.

Employers have a general duty of care to address potential age-related factors. While certain risks are associated with ageing, these should be considered in the context of safety and health management for all workers. Occupational health and safety should not be used as an excuse for excluding older workers from the workplace. Older workers are often unfairly stereotyped; ill health and increased injuries are not always inevitable with age. Everybody ages differently, thus we cannot generalise about older workers and assume they will have certain characteristics in relation to potential health and safety risks at work.

There are some age related factors that can affect an individual's ability to work safely and in some cases may include age related wear and tear and degenerative changes to the body and ill health.

There are different types of long term physical conditions associated with older age groups, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and arthritis or osteoporosis, which may impact on a person's ability to work safely.

Changes in performance capacity may arise from:

- Age related reductions in muscular strength, which can reduce an individuals' capacity to perform physical heavy work. However many of us know older people who have kept themselves physically fit and this is less likely for them.
- Reduced elasticity in body tissues, leading to decreased range of movement, which could have implications for tasks that involve work at extremes of posture.
- A decline in information processing capacity including changes in hearing, vision and sometimes thought processing. However this is not inevitable and is often balanced out by improved decision making ability, expertise and experience.
- Older workers may have some difficulty working at extremes of temperature, i.e. Very cold or hot temperatures due to a change in their body's ability to control temperature.

So what can we do as employers to maintain the wellbeing of our older workers so we can hold on to that wealth of expertise? Good workplace planning and redesign may assist not only to accommodate the older worker but all employees. Here are some suggestions.

1. Identify hazards appropriate to the age of the work force. Review accident and incident reports to identify any potential age related trends that can be easily addressed.

WELCOME TO OUR WINTER NEWSLETTER



Dr Simon Ryder-Lewis

Welcome to our winter newsletter! We always aim to keep you up to date with the latest developments in Occupational Health and Safety. If you have any questions about the articles here, or if we can help with any issues you have at work, please give us a call.

Our Services

- Individual Work Site Assessment
 - Walk through surveys
 - Hazard identification and management
 - Noise, lighting and air quality (dust) monitoring
 - OOS hazard identification and management
 - Health and Safety Compliance
- Pre-employment Medical exams
 - UKOOA / OGUK exams
- Training for Staff and Management
 - Use of personal protective equipment
 - Stress and fatigue
 - Understanding the HSE Act
 - Influenza pandemic planning
 - Manual handling
- Health Monitoring
 - Work site clinics
 - Absenteeism management
 - Accident investigation
 - Hearing and respiratory testing
 - Injury management and rehabilitation
 - Gradual return to work programmes
 - Influenza vaccinations
 - Drug and alcohol testing
 - Occupational vaccinations
 - Travel medicine
- Healthy Workforce Programme
- Independent Medical Opinions

The Ageing Worker cont.

2. Ongoing consultation and communication inclusive of your older employees- they can tell you what they need to stay safe and well at work.
3. Review work intensity and scheduling, if possible reduce physical demands. Introduce flexible working arrangements to retain the skills, expertise and knowledge of those employees approaching retirement.
4. Allowing time to adapt to new tasks or equipment. Consider also your training programmes. Older workers have different learning styles from younger staff. Provide them with separate training taking into account their learning styles. They may require more regular training updates.
5. Eliminate hazards that may cause slips, trips and falls, including adequate lighting in stair wells and corridors, and good housekeeping to quickly remove spills and objects on the floor. Look at the work environment and put in place good falls prevention strategies.
6. Alter shelving height.
7. Protective clothing for workers working at extremes of temperature and ensure regular breaks for these people.
8. Modifying information displays e.g. using larger screen and font sizes, improved task and environmental lighting.
9. Minimise background noise as much as possible to enhance the individual's hearing.
10. Use both auditory and visual warnings e.g. flashing lights with sound as well as warning signs.
11. Provide vibrating cell phones and show employees how to set these up.
12. In some cases after an injury, allowing the older employee a gradual return to work plan can be beneficial. Their rehabilitation time may be longer or to prove they can keep up with the "young ones" they may try to return to work too soon.

13. Offer phased retirement opportunities to extend the working lives of valued employees. This may also include inviting them to undertake project work of use and benefit to the company.
14. Incorporate regular wellness programmes for all employees which will help support the older worker and assist them to handle certain job tasks.
15. Maintain and update equipment regularly.

Gradual Retirement

Traditionally, older workers have retired and ceased to work abruptly. This brings with it a number of down-sides such as the "shock" of moving quickly from a position of authority to a position where a worker may feel undervalued.



There are also effects such as financial disruption and a change in the social structure at home. The concept of *gradual retirement* is slowly being introduced into some workplaces. This allows people to remain working longer and at the same time can open up employment opportunities for younger workers. It also has the added benefit of retaining experienced staff within the organisation who can be involved in activities such as training of new workers.

Gradual retirement involves a reduction in work hours, rather than a reduction in "work effort". There are a number of benefits to gradual retirement but despite this there is evidence that it is not widely practised.

While many older workers can continue working as long as they want, in some industries and situations we recommend more regular health checks in order to detect the early signs of ageing and its effect on fitness for work. This of course does not necessarily mean medical retirement but may in some cases require a change in work duties or work hours. The occupational health nurse and occupational doctor can help employers to design and implement a surveillance programme for all workers, but concentrating on the ageing worker and the unique problems they may face.

If you have any questions about the health surveillance of older staff in your workplace, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Change of Fax Number

To all our valued readers and clients: please would you update your records? Work Health Solutions Ltd has changed our fax number. It is now **04 938 7374**. Our contact phone number remains **04 529 7375**.

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