

Aging and Workers' Compensation By Cynthia Roth

The U.S. workforce is aging and the percentage of older workers is increasing. Are your jobs and training programs keeping pace with changing needs?

In the US, our workers' compensation claims have reached \$54 billion dollars. Some of the issues that cause people to become injured have varied over the years. Very few have taken into consideration aging as a risk factor to our workforce.

The workers' claims associated with the aging are more expensive and require more time to return to work.

As we age, it becomes more difficult to perform the same as when we were younger. Our strengths diminish but not our job requirements, our joints become a little more achy but the tasks are still not changed and we continue to reach, bend, lift, carry, work on computers and do all of the things we need to do to continue working.

How do these responses affect our "at work" performance? How can we assist our employees in feeling good while being injury free and still productive? How can we reduce soaring lost work time and workers' compensation claims for the aging worker?

Let's take a look at the tasks, tools, equipment and assess what our employees capabilities and limitations are at various stages of their working life.

While older workers as a group tend to be more experienced and therefore have fewer accidents and injuries than younger workers, when older workers are injured, their injuries are often more severe, and it usually takes them longer to return to work than younger workers.

So it's important to be sure that older workers get all the same training provided to other workers—whether that's refresher training about ongoing hazards or training on new hazards.

Key Safety Issues for Older Workers

Ergonomics, if the jobs are designed correctly, any age employee will be able to perform tasks without risking soft tissue injuries

- * Strains, sprains, and repetitive motion injuries are common among older workers.
- * Back injuries and chronic back conditions are of special concern among this age group as well as chronic shoulders.
- * Lifting and carrying heavy objects as well as performing other tasks that require a lot of exertion may become harder as muscle strength declines. This may require adjustments in the way older workers approach these tasks.

Slips, Trips, and Falls

- * Falls from the same level account for a significant number of work-related injuries suffered by older workers.
- * Falls on stairs and from ladders are another risk common to older workers.
- * Falls account for one-third of all injuries sustained by workers aged 65 and over.

Vision and Hearing

- * Both vision and hearing often decline with age, making it harder for older workers to use these senses to protect their safety on the job. And remember office workers who wear bifocals or trifocals need to have their workstations adjusted to meet their visual needs.
- * Poor vision could lead to mistakes and accidents.
- * An employee who does not hear well might miss critical safety instructions or fail to hear a co-worker's hazard warning.

Driving

- * Death rates for work-related motor vehicle crashes steadily increases beginning around age 55.

- * Declining vision and slowing reflexes may affect driving safety for some older workers.
- * Older drivers may take longer to react to dangerous situations.

Heat and Cold

- * The body becomes less able to maintain internal temperatures as it ages.
- * Older workers might find heat more difficult to deal with than younger workers. They may become overheated and suffer from heat stress.
- * They may also be less able to cope with cold work environments.

Wellness

- * Changes in fitness, flexibility, and overall health due to age can affect workers' safety and contribute to accidents and injuries.
- * Carrying excess weight, a variety of medical conditions such as heart disease, and other health problems can also have an impact on workers' safety on the job.
- * Disrupted sleep patterns can leave some older workers tired as they begin the workday.

Taking medications might also affect an employee's performance. This is something to consider for all employees of any age.

Aging is inevitable, but it doesn't have to compromise the safety of your employees. By recognizing effects of aging that have an impact on older workers' safety on the job, you can take appropriate measures to change jobs through administrative or engineering change and to train workers to compensate for the changes that come with age and prevent workplace accidents and injuries.