

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of December 9, 2013 – Our Aging Workforce

It is a fact of life – along with “death and taxes,” we all get older (with the exception of Peter Pan and Benjamin Button!). In the U.S. this fact of life presents an array of challenges within the field of occupational safety and health. Life expectancy is increasing. The unusually large “baby boom” population is graying. The number of young people now entering or close to entering the workforce is smaller than the number of older people who have reached or are about to reach traditional retirement age. As a result, the workforce as a whole is growing older.

It has been reported that there are 93 million people in the U.S. age 45 and over. This group represents 44 percent of the population over age 15. By 2050, it is predicted that the number of people age 45 and over will grow to 170 million, representing 53 percent of the population over 15 (and 19.6 million of these workers will be 65 and older! That will be 19 % of the total US workforce). As further evidence for the graying of the workforce, 85 percent of unretired baby boomers have indicated that they would continue to work beyond the traditional retirement age of 65. Many of the respondents said they planned to continue working out of financial necessity. All this information suggests that the age group of people that would normally be retired will be making up the fastest growing segment of our population. Yet, many people may feel compelled to continue working when they would rather be retired, and many others may wish to continue working but will be challenged to do so for various reasons. These dynamics raise questions for safety and health that ordinarily would not be of concern for a younger working population, or at least not in the same ways. These are not abstract questions. They involve challenges that employers, workers, and workers' families will face on an average day on the job when an older worker punches the time clock at a construction site, takes the night shift at a nursing station, or staffs a phone bank at a call center:

- What are the physical effects of a strenuous job for a person over 45 who lifts heavy loads or performs repetitive movements?
- What difficulties do older workers face in adapting to new technologies and new ways of doing business?
- What challenges are posed for older men and women who come into the workplace with diabetes, hypertension, and other age-dependent conditions?
- What work-and-family conflicts exist for workers 45 and older who have responsibilities both for elderly parents and for children in school?
- What measures are needed to help people maintain good health and physical capability throughout their adult lives, reducing cumulative wear and strain as they enter their 50s, 60s, and 70s?

Because of the many older adults opting to remain in the U.S. workforce, many studies have been conducted to investigate whether the older workers are at greater risk of occupational injury than their younger counterparts. Due to the physical declines associated with aging, older adults tend to exhibit losses in eyesight, hearing and physical strength. On the other hand, data shows that older adults have low overall injury rates compared to all age groups, but are more likely to

suffer more than younger workers from severe occupational injuries. Of all fatal occupational injuries in 2005, older workers accounted for 26.4%, despite only comprising 16.4% of the workforce at the time. Age increases in fatality rates in occupational injury are more pronounced for workers over the age of 65. Along those same lines, older workers experience a greater median number of lost work days and longer recovery times than younger workers. Some common occupational injuries and illnesses for older workers include arthritis and fractures. Among older workers, hip fractures are a large concern, given the severity of these injuries. Older workers are nearly twice more likely to suffer an injury due to a slip, trip or fall than any other category of workplace injury. Almost half of all workplace injuries to workers 65 or older are the result of a slip, trip, or fall.

Yes older workers may be more susceptible to certain types of hazards as well as having a slower recuperation rate, but this trend of an older workforce has advantages. There is value in having work performed by someone who has years of experience from which to draw. There is value in having mentors who can teach the ropes to younger colleagues. For the person who likes the regularity, economic benefits, and camaraderie of going to work, a job can be stimulating - even fun. Older workers have better attendance records, tend to be more flexible with time, and have a lower turnover rate. And while senior workers may not recover from an injury as fast as younger workers, they do have fewer workplace incidents.

So, what can an employer do? First, we need to understand the limitations that come with age. Tasks which require significant strength may not be appropriate for older workers. Significant repetitive tasks (due to reductions in endurance) may require more frequent rotation of jobs, or breaks. Beware of noisy environments in which older workers are unable to hear instructions as clearly. Address slip, trip and fall hazards with good lighting, handrails and keeping walkways clear.

There is also a misconception that older workers will reduce average productivity. This is not true and may be fueled by the perception that the aged are less healthy, less educated, less up-to-date in their knowledge, and more fragile than the young. While all these images of the elderly are accurate to some degree, they do not necessarily describe the people who choose to remain employed at older ages. Research shows that there are enormous differences between the labor force participation rates of older Americans depending on their level of schooling. People with limited education have low employment rates in old age. People with college and advanced degrees tend to remain in the workforce longer. If less productive workers selectively exit the workforce at younger ages, the average productivity of the older workers who remain may compare favorably to the average productivity of the young. A surge in the percentage of the potential workforce that is old may simply increase the proportion of the workforce that consists of comparatively skilled older workers.

IT ALWAYS SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE UNTIL IT IS DONE

Nelson Mandela (1918 – 2013)