

ENHANCING WORKPLACE SAFETY FOR AN AGING WORKFORCE

By Bill Spiers, CSP

The American workforce is getting older. Baby boomers are re-drawing the line at which they plan to retire. For most of them, it's no longer at age 65, maybe not even 70.

Ann Smith, a 73-year-old retired school cafeteria manager, was an outstanding deli associate at ABC Grocery Stores. She had a lot of energy and decided to supplement her retirement and Social Security income by returning to work. One hectic afternoon, Ann headed toward the swinging doors opening to the kitchen at the same time another employee was barreling through them from the opposite direction. Ann was struck by the doors and knocked to the floor. She sustained a fractured hip and left arm, along with nasty superficial cuts and bruises. Given her health conditions (osteoporosis, circulatory system deficiencies and diabetes), her treatment and recovery were longer and more expensive than would have been expected for a healthier worker involved in a similar accident.

This true story is not an isolated incident and points to future challenges in creating and maintaining a safe working environment for a large segment of the U.S. workforce that is in their 60s and soon-to-be 70s. Whether your older workers are deli employees, manufacturing assembly line workers, construction laborers or vehicle drivers,

now, more than ever before, controlling injuries and their associated costs means taking into account older workers when developing safety strategies. In the story above, the two-way swinging door could be dangerous for employees of all ages and steps taken to prevent this type of accident should benefit both the deli's employees and its bottom line.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

The dynamics of the U.S. workforce are changing as more workers close to or at retirement age remain employed in either full or part-time positions. According to a case study by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), "The Business Case for Workers Age 50+" by Deborah Russell, Director, AARP Workforce Issues, nearly 70% of workers who have not retired report that they plan to work into their retirement years or never retire. In the same study, almost half of workers aged 45-70 indicate that they envision working into their 70s or beyond. U.S. life expectancy lengthened from 62 years in 1940 to 76 in 2000. Between 2000 and 2020, the U.S. working population in the 55-64 year-old segment will grow by 73%, while the 65+ segment will grow by 54%. Older workers already constitute a significant portion of the workforce filling a wide variety of jobs, and they will continue to do so for years to come.

This issue of *You Should Know* is one in a series of brief articles designed to keep our clients abreast of significant breaking news in the claim and loss control areas that could affect their operations or exposures. Additional information about this and other topics can be obtained from your Regional Strategic Outcomes Practice Associate.



The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics announced in December 2009 that total employment is projected to increase by 15.3 million, or 10.1%, during the 2008-18 period. This announcement was tempered with a reminder that there would be a relatively slow growth at the beginning of this 10-year period due to the recession, which began in December 2007. The bottom line is that projections of increased employment opportunities will begin within the next several years with a notable steady shortage of U.S. workers for available jobs beginning 2011. A driving factor for the job growth is in the increase of baby boomer-generation workers becoming eligible for retirement. (Boomers are considered those born between 1946-1965, and the first of wave of these eligible retirees will hit in 2011), combined with a smaller pool of young workers entering the workforce. However, as noted above, while many boomers will retire, a substantial number now plan to work indefinitely. The result is two-fold: retirement age workers help solve the employers' need for staffing, and they bring unique risks and potential costs associated with older employees. As indicated, retirees often return or stay in the workforce and many employers do not want to lose the knowledge accumulated by longtime employees or their reliable work habits that have a positive influence on the general employee population. Strategies to better protect these valued workers can not only enhance employee safety across the board, but represent a solid business decision as critical job knowledge is preserved.

AGING WORKERS REQUIRE A CLOSER LOOK

The effects of aging on job performance and potential for injury are unavoidable, but enhancing prevention strategies is under your control. Aging brings changes in our physical and mental capabilities that can often create challenges for us as we work. Research has shown, for example, that older workers often experience limitations in the following categories:

- **MENTAL** Cognitive speed or retrieval of information slows, learning and recall of information is slower; there can be more resistance to change
- **CHRONIC MEDICAL** Musculoskeletal degenerative conditions (discs, knees, hips, shoulders), cardiovascular conditions (including high blood pressure), diabetes
- **PHYSICAL CAPACITY** Overall strength decreases with age (human beings enjoy their maximum strength between the ages of 20 and 30), efficient oxygen exchange decreases with age; to keep up, older workers must work closer to capacity and need more frequent breaks to recover/rest

PROTECTING OLDER EMPLOYEES

Depending upon the physical and mental demands required by the task, specific strategies can reduce the risks faced by older workers and the potential cost of injuries. Tasks that require continuous and rapid cognitive speed should be assessed and closely monitored. When training older workers in new jobs, be mindful of the speed and clarity of the presentation of the material. While some older workers might learn new information at a slightly slower pace than their younger colleagues, overall long-term retention is fine. Finally, matching older workers with appropriate tasks can be critical due to general decline in physical capabilities (decreased strength, dexterity), possible chronic medical issues (respiratory diseases, vision or hearing impairment, etc.). These can, of course, also appear in the younger employee population but occur with greater frequency/severity as people age. For manual jobs, implementing powerful ergonomic principles (job rotation, well-designed work stations, physical capabilities assessments/job assignments, flexible work schedules) can be beneficial for all employees, but especially for older workers.



In a 2007 press release, “American Society of Safety Engineers (**ASSE**) Suggest Business Design Now for an Aging Workforce and a Shrinking Labor Pool,” the Society recommended that employers:

- Improve illumination
- Eliminate heavy lifts, elevated work from ladders and long reaches
- Reduce static standing time
- Reduce noise levels
- Install skid-resistant material for flooring, especially on stair treads
- Provide hands-free volume-adjustable telephone equipment
- Increase task rotation to reduce strain of repetitive motion
- Lengthen time allotments between steps in a task
- Increase time allowed for making decisions
- Consider necessary reaction time when assigning older workers to tasks
- Provide opportunities for practice and time to develop task familiarity

Older employees bring experience, seasoned judgment and stability to the workplace. Thinking through processes and making necessary accommodations that lead to a safer workplace for employees of any age is a wise investment.

CONTACTS

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