

Supervisors: Encourage Young Workers to Speak up About Safety



It's clear that young workers are one of the most vulnerable segments of the workforce and so more likely to get hurt on the job. So how do employers ensure their safety? According to a new study, supervisors can help by encouraging young workers to speak up about safety issues.

The study, co-authored by Dr. Sean Tucker, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Regina, shows that teens—even those as young as 15 and 16 years of age—have suggestions for how to improve workplace safety but usually only speak up 'under certain conditions,' says Dr. Tucker.

'We found that teens were more likely to speak up and share safety-related ideas with their supervisor when they also had an emotional attachment to their workplace.'

Dr. Tucker worked on the study with Professor Nick Turner of the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary. The work was published in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology and was funded by the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba. They surveyed 155 people aged 15 to 19 in Manitoba, most of whom worked in restaurants and food service operations, grocery and retail stores.

'A key finding from our study is that when young workers are speaking up at a high rate and they have a supervisor who, in the young worker's mind, is genuinely interested in hearing about their ideas for how to improve safety, the young worker experiences fewer future physical injuries,' says Dr. Tucker.

As to the teens in the study who expressed safety concerns at a high rate to a supervisor perceived to be indifferent or hostile to safety suggestions, unfortunately for that group of teens, their level of injuries was statistically higher than the group that had an open supervisor and were speaking up at a high rate, noted Dr. Tucker.

Young workers often want to impress their employers, especially when it's their first job. They might feel they're just being a nuisance by expressing concerns about safety, if that's the signal they're feeling from their employer.

To overcome this reluctance, Dr. Tucker recommends that supervisors frequently encourage and reward (with praise or a simple thank you) employees for voicing safety concerns.

Other suggestions for employers from the study:

- Build loyalty among young workers.
- Explain how their work relates to the overall work done in the organization. You want to make young workers feel important to the organization.
- Treat employees fairly and, wherever possible and within reason, make the work interesting.

Watch a recording of our recent webinar to learn more on managing the OHS risks as to new and young workers.

And visit the OHS Insider's New & Young Worker Compliance Centre for resources that can help you better protect these vulnerable workers, including:

- A young worker orientation checklist you can download and use to create a young worker safety training program
- An infographic on new and young workers you can display in your workplace
- Recorded webinars on young worker safety training and how to effectively provide safety training to 'generation Y' workers
- An example of how one workplace improved its young worker training program
- Safety posters geared toward new and young workers.