

Take 4 Steps to Improve Protections of Older Workers



In workplace safety, a lot of focus is on young workers, who studies have shown are particularly vulnerable to injuries. But older workers may also face increased risks on the job.

For example, although older workers may be injured less frequently than their younger counterparts, studies show that when they *are* injured, their recovery tends to take longer. (Here's additional information on some of the health and safety issues raised by older workers.) And as people delay retirement, the overall workforce is getting older. So practically every workplace has older workers who may need additional safety protections.

In a 2009 report from the Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety, researchers recommended that employers take these four steps to keep older workers safe, healthy and productive:

Step #1: Evaluate your aging workforce and analyze age-related injury trends.

First, companies should determine whether they have an aging workforce. Although definitions of 'older worker' vary, a good basic rule is that companies with 50% or more workers above 55 years of age should evaluate the frequency and severity of injuries among that group.

Companies should also identify age-related injury trends and determine which types of injuries are occurring among older workers and what's causing these injuries. Use this information to determine the best controls to put into place.

Step #2: Implement appropriate ergonomic controls. As people age, there are physiological changes'such as decreased strength and flexibility'that may impact the way they perform certain jobs and require ergonomics-related adjustments. So workers in their 60s may have different ergonomic needs from those in their 40s and different again from those in their 20s.

Ergonomic needs are especially likely to change with jobs involving high physical demand, such as manual materials handling. For example, a worker who could transport a 50-pound box easily in his 20s might need a cart to move the same weight in his 50s.

It's important that companies provide the appropriate controls to properly fit the job to the worker and realize that these controls might vary or change over time, as age and corresponding physical abilities change. (Watch this recorded webinar on ergonomic design for the aging workforce.)

Step #3: Strengthen return-to-work practices. Companies that accommodate injured workers and offer flexibility in terms of job location, assigned work tasks and work hours can get workers back on the job faster and decrease the costs associated with disabling injuries. In addition, a solid return-to-work (RTW) program shows that employers care about and value their employees. Some good practices include:

- Identifying in advance how jobs can be modified
- Having a RTW policy statement and coordinator
- Providing training for all managers, supervisors and workers on the RTW program and policies.

Step #4: Implement a wellness program. With the 'graying' of the workforce, preventing worker injuries is more important than ever. Taking a long-term view toward improving and maintaining workers' health can help offset the development of serious health conditions, such as chronic illnesses. And an effective and comprehensive company wellness program can be an important means of improving safety outcomes and have positive effects on morale, employee loyalty and productivity as well as overall health.

Here are some additional tips for preparing your workplace for an older and healthier, safer workforce.