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AGC 5 STAR SERVICE

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With America's construction workforce aging and millions of "baby boomers" beginning to move toward retirement age, the industry will need to prepare for the impending skilled-worker shortage and the need to keep employees in the workforce longer. It is estimated by 2030, people 55 and older will make up 40% of the adult population. Given the demographic data of an aging workforce and a pending scarcity of workers, employers need to be educated on strategies to reduce the potential impact. Recruiting and training new workers for the construction industry will help eliminate the shortfall, but it will be necessary to enact retirement and pension policy changes designed to raise the effective age of retirement. The aging of the workforce will require the employers to become better educated on disability management programs structured around older workers. Employers who ignore comprehensive disability management and the needs of their older workers may lose the ability to retain this critical segment of their workforce.

Older workers tend to have fewer accidents, however, when older workers do get injured, their injuries are more often severe. The main causes of occupational injuries are from repetitive motion and overexertion. The main types of injuries recorded are sprains and strains, and the body part most often injured is the back. Although data supports the premise that younger workers are more likely to injure themselves while at work, the susceptibility of the aging workforce to injury is a concern. Older workers, due to the natural process of aging, are at a higher risk of sustaining soft tissue injuries, especially injuries to the back. The aging workforce experience more severe and disabling injuries, resulting in higher workers' compensation costs per claim.

As we age our bodies encounter changes. The physiological and psychological consequences of aging include changes in:

- Maximum muscular strength
- Range of joint movement
- Regulation of posture and balance
- Sleep regulation
- Body temperature regulation
- Vision
- Hearing
- Cognitive and mental functioning

Inevitable loss of muscle mass with age finds the older employee working closer to their maximum strength level. Also the loss of some "range of motion" and "flexibility" may present difficulty in situations requiring unpredictable or unusual movements.

Continued

The Aging Workforce

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With aging, the worker may find it more difficult to maintain good posture and balance. Accidents can happen as a result of one losing their balance. Work that requires precise adjustment, strong muscular effort, joint movement at extreme angles, or those done on a slippery or unstable surface can be affected by increasingly poor posture. This can place the older worker at higher risk for injuries due to deficits in posture.

Sleep regulation can become a problem for the older worker. This can impact the amount of recovery time required between extended shifts. In addition to difficulties regulating sleep, older workers may experience that their bodies have less tolerance to temperature change. The older worker may find the heat and cold more difficult to deal with than when they were younger. They may also experience overheating during strenuous manual labor.

Vision and hearing can also diminish with age. Generally the older worker will notice that they cannot read from certain distances as well as they used to. Also changes may occur in depth perception, peripheral vision field and sensitivity to light intensity. The older worker may have difficulty hearing at the higher frequencies creating problems deciphering speech and sounds in a noisy environment.

With the inevitable decline in physiological abilities, certain changes in the mental/cognitive functioning may also occur. The older worker may not think as quickly and clearly as they once did. It may take longer to master new job related skills and require modified training techniques.

How do we accommodate the aging workforce and continue to maintain a high level of productivity? An approach to this challenge is to properly evaluate and modify the workplace. Repetitive motion injuries develop over time. It is important to make sure a person is well suited for a particular task and able to complete it safely. The employer needs to develop a comprehensive disability prevention program. A key factor in workplace safety is the ability to sustain a safe posture while performing a work task. A full-service program will include developing

transitional and light-duty assignments before injuries occur. It will also include assessments for risk factors associated with the tasks of the job. The results can be that the worker will be able to return to productive work sooner and chances of future injuries are greatly reduced. As the workforce continues to age, the traditional focus on unsafe behavior may contribute to ineffective management of ergonomic hazards that are more likely to impact older workers. Employers will have to consider adapting job duties to accommodate age-related conditions. A job rotation schedule would prevent employees from overworking a certain part of the body, especially important to older workers who may fatigue faster and require a longer recovery time.

Employers should encourage employees to participate in a home or gym based exercise program. Implementation of an onsite, supervised fitness program can help promote worker wellness and pay dividends in the form of reduced injuries and lower workers compensation costs. A comprehensive program can utilize external health care providers to lecture on wellness topics such as nutrition, weight control and disease prevention. Other topics could focus on age related conditions such as arthritis.

Innovation in hiring, appropriate training and workplace evaluation, and a comprehensive disability management program are key tools in keeping workers of all ages safe, healthy and productive. The employer must address the issue of an aging workforce now to meet the challenges of the future.



Note: The October 12 meeting in Berkeley of the AGC Safety & Health Council will feature Helen Chandler from the State Compensation Insurance Fund speaking on the Aging Workforce.

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