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The Aging Workforce

Overview

Researchers, demographers and policy analysts alike have been contemplating for years the graying of the workforce and its potential implications. Increasingly, companies have been asking and preparing for what the aging workforce means for workplace safety and health.

The number of workers aged 55 and older has been growing twice as fast as the total workforce, as the baby boomer population matures and life expectancy increases. The participation of this group in the workforce has been increasing and representing a larger share of the working population. Many older workers are not choosing early retirement and are remaining in the workforce, both as full-time and part-time employees. Many policy makers advocate a balance between older workers and the need to retain their experience and skills to help fill the skilled labor gap driven by the shrinking pool of younger workers. Older workers are said to offer invaluable experience, a strong work ethic, loyalty, reliability and low turnover.

While many studies have been exploring some of the issues of aging in the context of workplace safety and health, many experts say that the limitations of older workers are more perceived than real and that businesses will need to remove barriers and adopt a pro-work environment for older Americans.

Many companies have made the shift and are focusing on the "workability" of older workers and the availability and use of various interventions to address the physiological and cognitive changes of older workers. In the 1999 report "New Opportunities for Older Workers," authors discuss the need to replace "older worker" stereotypes and promote longer working lives. In general, promoting longer work lives means "leveling the playing field for older workers rather than signaling them out for special treatment," say the authors.

Questions raised around the relationship between aging and workability focus on issues such as muscular strength, range of motion, equilibrium, vision, hearing, sleep and thermo regulation, medical conditions, and cognitive changes, among others. All of these vary by individual. Most of the literature is optimistic about the ability to address the factors and accommodate older workers.



Injuries

Studies suggest that older workers have fewer accidents than younger workers. This is often attributed to younger workers' lack of experience, which often leads to carelessness. However, while the

frequency of injuries is lower among older workers, the injuries tend to be more traumatic, and recuperation and absences are longer. Thus injuries tend to be of a higher severity, ultimately leading to increased recovery times and higher claim costs. Injuries resulting from slips, trips, and falls are most common among older workers. Older workers also report more repetitive motion injuries, such as back strain, generally due to repeated musculoskeletal motions over many years at the same job or tasks.

> 100 years of building relationships of trust



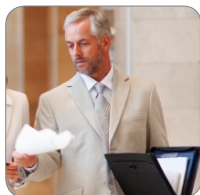
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Fatalities

On the fatality front, the Bureau of Labor Statistics conducted a 17-year fatality study and found that workers aged 55 years and older accounted for less than 25 percent of the occupational fatalities annually. However, their rate of fatality was almost double that of workers under 55 years of age. Despite this, the mean economic cost to society, calculated as lost earnings (1980 - 1997) over a life-time, was considerably less for older workers than younger, \$298,951 and \$935,562 respectively. Additionally, fatalities were distributed unevenly across industry. Industries with higher fatality rates seem concentrated in a few, including agriculture/forestry/ fishing, mining, construction and transportation/ communications/ public utilities.

Driving

Many studies have addressed and continue to address the relationship between aging and driving. Motor vehicle-related and machinery-related incidents are said to be leading causes of death for older workers. While older drivers have higher rates of crash fatalities than all age groups except the youngest drivers, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration indicates they also are in the fewest accidents overall. Their fatalities are believed to be due to susceptibility to medical complications, associated with growing older. Other contributing factors in vehicle accidents among older workers include slower reaction times and diminished vision.



Workplace Strategies

Personal and workplace strategies, such as good ergonomics, continued training, sensory aid-devices (glasses, hearing aids), the organization of work and work schedules, and medications are some ways to help promote the continuing workability and safety of older workers. Many experts agree that properly designed workstations and job tasks matched to the needs of older workers will become increasingly important. A report on older workers by the Committee for Economic Development (CED) urges companies "to prepare for the new era of employment by removing barriers for Americans who wish to extend their careers." CED believes that employers, older workers and the nation will benefit from an effective pro-work plan for older workers. Laws, such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act

(ADA), which requires certain accommodations in the workplace, play into that plan. Some academicians believe that ADA has not yet been tested by the aging workforce and that it "could become an important catalyst in creating more flexible schedules needed to suit ailments associated with older employees."

Companies also have a duty to provide a safe and healthy workplace for everyone, including older workers, under OSHA's general duty clause. OSHA's Office of Occupational Medicine suggests that companies review their OSHA 300 logs to determine any trends among older workers and identify the risks and interventions to promote the productivity of older workers.

Resources

The Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety provides information about safety and health concerns for older workers and accommodations.

http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/aging_workers.html

OSHA provides a presentation on Safety and Health Issues in an Aging Workforce.

http://www.osha.gov/dcsp/smallbusiness/forums/aging_presentation/index.html

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration offers online publications targeting medical conditions in older populations and driving tips.

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/portal/site/nhtsa/menuitem.31176b9b03647a189ca8e410dba046a0/>

The American Journal of Health Studies has published an article "America's Aging Workforce: Ergonomic Solutions for Reducing the Risk of CTDs."

<http://ajhs.tamu.edu/15-4/1.pdf>

The Employment and Training Administration Office of National Program/ Older Workers Program is offering two online publications for employers and supervisors on older workers.

http://www.doleta.gov/Seniors/html_docs/docs/owm-2-01.cfm