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Safety Consideration for the Aging Worker

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For the first time in the history of American business four different generations are in the work place at the same time. This can cause communication, management and worksite safety issues and increased workers' compensation claims.

It should be noted that "older employees" can be defined from 40 to 55 and over, depending on the agency.

The situation:

According to the Department of Labor the situation will not be changing soon. They estimate that by the end of 2030 25% of employees will be over the age of 55. That translates into 32 million people. The breakdown looks like this:

- 76 million "Baby Boomers" born between 1946 and 1964
- 30.8 million are in the workforce now
- 85% plan to work after retirement age
 - 70% prefer to work full-time
 - Nearly half plan to work into their 70s and 80s
- 32 million workers over age 55 by 2015
 - (US Census prediction)

The reasons for the employees continuing to work include lagging retirement funds, cost of health insurance and/or wanting to stay active. On the part of the employer it is pretty simple- the need for skilled, experienced labor.

While the incidence rate of injury among older workers declines, injury severity increases. Older workers have more lost work days, higher treatment costs and the fatality rate is nearly three times higher than younger workers.

The Effects:

The physical changes affect the entire system of the aging worker.

Changes in the cardiovascular system means older individuals may have more difficulty working in extreme heat and humidity or extreme cold. They will also have more trouble recovering from work.

Musculoskeletal changes mean they lose flexibility, joints get stiff and injuries take longer to heal. This means older adults are more prone to sprains and strains and have a decreased capacity for repetitive work. Reaction times slow down and older workers have decreased balance, making falls a great risk.



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Falls from the same level are the second highest cause of work injury and in the older worker falls can be fatal, due to the chronic health conditions common in older adults. These conditions include diabetes, high cholesterol and obesity. These conditions may also increase the amount of time required for any injury to heal.

The Solutions:

Older workers are a valuable resource to any organization. Their skill and experience is priceless. Good safety practices will keep them as well as their younger counterparts working safe.

- **Job demands analysis:** By evaluating each job demand individuals can perform tasks that actually match their physical capabilities. This makes good sense for workers of any age.
- **Ergonomic principles:** Use sound ergonomics when designing work areas. By limiting the work above shoulder or below knee height one can avoid aggravating age-related changes in those joints.
- **Physical ability testing:** After a thorough job demands analysis is performed the next step is to test new employees to make sure they can perform those job demands. Testing should include job specific tasks such as lifting and carrying or postural demands like kneeling, squatting and stooping.
- **Return to work testing:** These tests are similar to the physical ability testing but are performed after an employee returns to work following an absence for medical reasons.
- **Good Safety Practices:** Clear trip hazards, spills and clutter to prevent slips, trip and falls. Make sure employees are wearing proper footwear and protective equipment.
- **Buddy system:** Pairing older, experienced workers with younger employees. Benefits for both younger employees can help with the physical tasks and knowledge is passed down to the newer employee.

Good planning and practices will keep all employees working longer, more productively and decrease worksite injuries. All of which improves the bottomline!