

Healthy Aging for a Sustainable Workforce

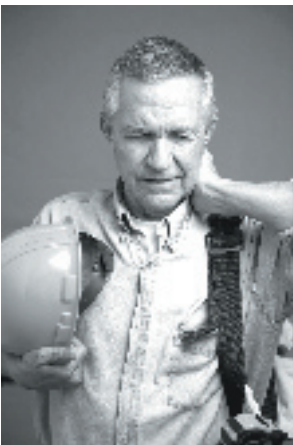
More productive and safer employees, but longer loss time and higher injury cost

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the health and well-being of **all** workers throughout their working lifetime will address the needs of our **aging workforce**; however, due to the rapidly increasing numbers of older workers in the workforce there is an urgent need to give particular attention to understanding and addressing the needs of older workers now.



Workplace injuries and illnesses

Older workers required more days away from work to recover from a workplace injury or illness than did their younger counterparts. Elizabeth Rogers, of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Office of Safety and Health Statistics, reported that work-related injury and illness was more severe for older workers based on census and survey data from her bureau. They took **longer to recover** with a median of 12 days away from work for those ages 55 to 65 and 16 for those 65 and older compared with just seven days for workers overall. Their workplace **injuries were also more disabling**, with more fractures and multiple injuries than seen among

younger workers. Also, similar events (for example, falls) lead to more severe injuries in older workers than in others. An example of the severity of injuries and illnesses sustained by older workers can be seen by looking at the nature of the injury or illness sustained. The nature of the injury or illness is defined as the principal physical characteristics of the injury or illness, such as a cut, a bruise, or a sprain. Sprains, strains, and tears make up the largest single category at all ages.

We need to act now!

Employers must address these health and safety issues for older workers simply because there is and will be more and more of them in the workforce. The older population--persons 65 years or older--numbered

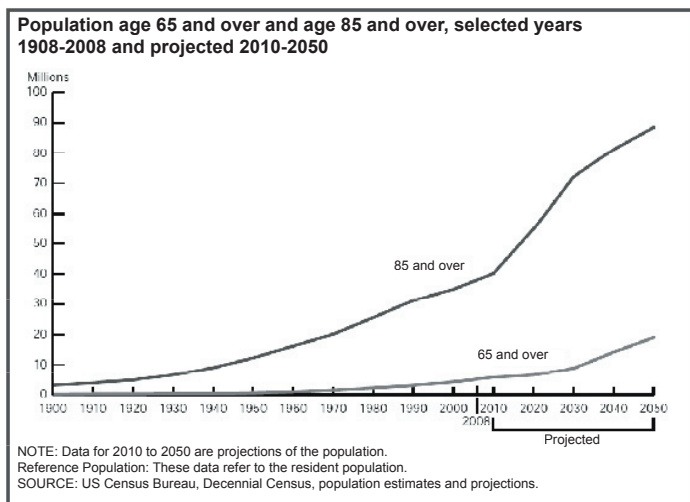
39.6 million in 2009 (the latest year for which data is available). They represented 12.9% of the U.S. population, about one in every eight Americans. By 2030, there will be about 72.1 million older persons, more than twice their number in 2000. People 65+ represented 12.4% of the population in the year 2000 but are expected to grow to be 19% of the population by 2030. Older workers will also be working longer schedules. More than half of all older workers now work full-time, which is up 44 percent since 1995, according to BLS data.

We now anticipate more older workers will remain in the workforce longer because they must in order to survive economically. Baby boomers -- born in the post-World War II years from 1946 to 1964 -- are nearing the cusp of retirement age. But, they already fit into the U.S. Department of Labor's definition of "older" as over 40 in some cases and the Bureau of Labor Statistics' definition of over 45 in injury and illness reporting.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), productivity increases as the percentage of over-55 workers increases, while the accident frequency in the older demographic declines. The BLS also reports that 41 percent of the overall number of work-related injury claims recorded annually come from new employees (i.e., on the job for a year or less). Older workers (64 or older) have the lowest number of workplace injuries, according to the Department of Labor (DOL). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health also reports that younger workers (i.e., under the age of 24) are two times more likely than their older co-workers to be injured. The catch for employers, however, comes into play when these older workers get injured.

Recovery from Injury: Younger versus older workers

For older workers, it takes approximately two to three times longer to recover from an injury than a younger worker, says the BLS. A recent National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI) study found that claims costs for workers aged 55 to 64 are generally 64 percent higher for indemnity claims and 40 percent higher for medical claims (compared with workers aged 20 to 24). Claims costs and days away from work are directly related. For injuries and illnesses, the BLS reports, for workers aged 65 and older the median days away from work is 15 days. For workers aged 16 to 24, however, the median is 4 days.



"Older workers are more productive and have an overall higher workplace safety"

The new work environment

A variety of economic hardships are influencing and changing the age of the workforce. We no longer work for one employer our entire career and then take the company pension. Many employers have terminated or stopped funding defined benefit retirement programs entirely. From the economy deflating the value of 401(k) programs to employees having children (and college bills) later in life, people simply cannot retire, lay back and enjoy their “golden years.” According to a 2008 survey by AARP, one in five people between the ages of 55 and 64, and one in four between 45 and 54, plan to delay their retirement due to the economic turnaround. Employers need to plan and prepare for this expected growth in the labor market.

What can employers do?

Employers can start by revisiting job descriptions and knowing every detail each work task entails in order to help prevent costly and unnecessary workers' compensation claims. Meanwhile, they should continue to promote health and wellness programs for all employees. Because older workers bring many benefits, from their experience and knowledge to their motivation and good work ethic, the advantages of employing older workers will outweigh the possible worker's compensation claims, with preparation and planning.

Companies must utilize and implement preventative safety efforts. Specifically, companies should develop slip-and-fall prevention tactics, considering that slips and falls account for 33 percent of all injuries sustained by workers 65 and older, according to the National Safety Council.

Safety training should consist of more than just scripted lectures, distributed pamphlets and orientation videos. Employees should be taken through the physical movements and tasks that are specific to their job description—a hands-on learning experience. Because younger workers account for the majority of accidents while older workers have longer recovery periods, safety training benefits all employees and the employer. Bring in external experts such as Physical therapists from the community to teach proper techniques and protocols.

Modification of your work environment

Older workers are good for companies so it pays to modify work environments in order to prevent their injuries and limit severity when injuries do occur. The American Society of Safety Engineers urges employers to keep their older workers in mind when designing workplaces so that productivity is maximized and the potential for accidents is minimized.

A well-designed workplace helps new hires and experienced workers, young and old. Options include:

- Increasing task rotation
- Designing work floors with smooth, solid decking and skid-resistant flooring
- Lengthening time requirements between task steps
- Reducing static standing/sitting time and noise levels
- Using high-contrast colors on risers and treads on stairs
- Considering reaction time when assigning tasks, and match work with ability



Ergonomics and wellness programs

Shoulders, backs and wrists are body areas with high musculoskeletal claim severity in older workers. Employers should identify causes of strain and fatigue through an ergonomic evaluation of workstations and workspaces, and apply corrections. Promoting and implementing health and wellness programs at work have a positive and productive outcome as well.

“A company does not need to overhaul their entire structure to suit older workers, but adjusting job tasks and tools to fit the employee are good best practices to follow--**no matter the employee's age.**”

Exercise and the Industrial Athlete approach

Employers can either develop on or off site exercise and strengthening programs around the body parts most likely affected (based on injury and illness data) to prepare the employees for changes in their body due to age. This direction, also covered in previous articles such as the Industrial Athlete™ approach has proven to be an effective way to minimize future injury. Always approach outside expertise to validate the protocols and exercise plans prior to implementation.

Return to work accommodations

Employers can work to contain medical and indemnity costs associated with a worker's compensation claims for their older workers through an aggressive return-to-work program. This includes modifying work duties and transitional assignments for the injured older worker. When a worker becomes injured or ill, concerns are raised over loss of income and how and when the person can return to work. With an older worker, these issues can be intensified by worry surrounding the ability to remain productive and employed.

Studies connect the amount of healing time to the age of the worker, so a highly responsive and vigorous return-to-work effort can benefit the employer and increase healing time. Not only are these overall good risk-control practices for employers—and an injured employee of any age—but being aware of older workers will benefit companies' bottom lines as our workforce continues to age over the next 10 to 20 years.

Rehabilitation and return to duties

Just as we have developed work environment changes, we also need to ensure that rehabilitation directives are job specific and if possible include essential or high risk task simulation as part of the Physical Therapy treatment continuum. Secondly we need to have a validated return to duties assessment that accurately reflects the demands of the job thus providing a safe and sustained return to work. You have the choice of your care providers and you need to qualify them such that you are making the best choice for your employee and of course your expedited return to work directive. *A simple point of interest is if they do not ask for a copy of your job demands analysis and yet purport to offer job specific care, then how is this possible?*

Preventative Maintenance Programs “prevent Injury...maintain worker on the job”

Looking ahead, many employers are now implementing regular on the job strength and range of motion measures for those employees in high risk jobs in an effort to monitor patterns of degradation. If the employee decreases in physical abilities then this is a trigger to introduce them to exercise and even rehabilitation outside of work hours.

In conclusion

All workers are aging, but those that are older continue to grow as a proportion of the population and as the available worker population



changes, many employers have jobs for which they want to attract and retain more experienced workers. American workers are living longer than ever before and many are staying in the workforce past age 55. The current economic crisis has placed great pressure on workers' families and their retirement plans by forcing older workers to postpone retirement and stay longer in the workforce. Both older and younger workers have similar frequency of work-related injury and illness, but the consequences of injury are, on average, more severe for older workers. Older workers more frequently sustain severe injuries than younger workers and require more days away from work to

recover and it is also known that older workers die as a result of work-related injury at higher rates than younger workers.

Current knowledge about keeping older workers safe and healthy at work is insufficient, yet enough is known to mount campaigns to protect the health and well-being of the current and growing numbers of aging workers. Reports presented at the February 17-18, 2009 Conference on "Healthy Aging for Workers" validated the recommendations of the earlier 2004 National Academies of Science panel report on "Health and Safety Needs of Older Workers" and made recommendations for more research to understand how to prevent work-related injury, illness and fatality among aging workers. It is no mystery that knowledge gaps need to be filled to better understand the physiochemical, biological, biomechanical, and psycho social factors that affect aging workers. Evaluation research is needed to determine the aspects of policies, programs, and intervention techniques and strategies that are effective and those which are not effective in addressing the health and safety of aging workers.

A sustainable workforce

As a whole we need to ensure that those workers who choose to work longer are able to do so in work environments that enhance their work ability, safety, and health. It is our role as employers to understand our challenges and prepare for the future through implementation of strategies now that will positively affect both injury rate and loss time. The old cliché that we are only as good as our employees is an important one to ponder on. Our experienced and talented aging workforce is an important asset to our companies and an integral component to our success. It behooves us to begin to look at ways to care for them today in a way that will secure a healthy and sustainable workforce in the years to come.

The information noted above is a summary of one of the components of Fit2WRK by USPh. This integrated model is available through USPh in close to 400 facilities and 44 states nationally. For additional information on how the Fit2WRK Model could help your organization, visit; www.Fit2WRK.com or call 1-877-Fit-2WRK.

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Links

1. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality <http://www.ahrq.gov>
2. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services <http://www.cms.hhs.gov>
3. National Center for Health Statistics <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs>
4. National Institute on Aging <http://www.nia.nih.gov>