A Better Way to Onboard

Defining the Problem

In a 2013 webinar former, OSHA administrator David Michaels said, “We have known for decades that new workers, when they first start at a new job, are at greatly increased risk of injury – and we know why: New workers are often not adequately trained in the potential hazards at the new jobsite and the measures they can take to protect themselves.”

And yet, according to the Toronto-based Institute for Work & Health, only 1 out of 5 new workers receives safety training. Training – especially new employee orientation or onboarding, and reinforcement – is paramount to protecting new workers.

Risk Overview

In a 10-year study by Institute for Work & Health, the risk of injury for workers with shorter job tenure has consistently remained higher compared to those employed at a job for more than one year.

Risk is particularly elevated among those in the first month on the job, with over three times the risk of a lost-time injury as workers with over a year’s job experience.

Several other studies have found similar results:

- Bentley et al. (2002) reported that 32 % of injuries on logging skid sites occur within the workers’ first 6 months of employment.
- McCall and Horwitz (2005) reported that 51 % of the 1168 trucking accident claims they examined were made by drivers with less than one year of job tenure.
- Chi et al. (2005) found that 80.5 % of the 621 fatal occupational falls in the Taiwanese construction industry which they analyzed had occurred in the individual’s first year on the job.
- Jeong (1998) examined national statistics on industrial accidents in the construction sector in South Korea in the years 1991–1994 and found that 95.6 % of the 120,417 non-fatal injuries and 92.5 % of the 2,803 deaths examined had occurred in the employees’ first year on the job.

In addition, the IWH study found the risk of work injuries among new workers is greater among older workers, men and those in the goods sector, which includes construction and manufacturing, among others.

Risk Factors and Reasons

Risk factors:

- Lack of experience
- Age
- Lack of training/retention of training
- Turnover

With respect to experience and age, IWH Scientist Dr. Curtis Breslin, who led the IWH study, says the risk of a lost-time injury is highest among workers over 45 years of age compared to all other age groups.

“The key risk factor is newness, not youth,” says Breslin.

In addition to the outright lack of training, another risk organizations face is retention of training. Overloading your new worker with every process, step-by-step instruction, safety rule, and HR policy they are expected to know is not the best way for them to learn and retain the information. Our brains simply aren’t designed to handle that much information at one time.

Without reinforcement, learners lose 70% of what they learn within 24 hours of learning it.

Job change is becoming more the norm rather than the exception. People just aren’t staying with companies for a lifetime anymore. With each change, or turnover of an employee, comes the increased risk of “newness”.

Other reasons:

- New workers are unfamiliar with tasks, processes, and the work environment.
- New workers are often afraid to speak up or ask questions if they have safety concerns or aren’t sure how to perform a task.
- Workers new to a job are simply faced with a greater number of hazards due to their lack of experience.
- Risk perception isn’t as developed in a new worker because they don’t have the existing knowledge and awareness that comes with time and they simply underestimate the risks.

Making Work Safe for New Workers

New workers need training before they start working and continue to need training on an ongoing basis during the first 6-12 months of starting a new job. Training should focus on:

- Safety and emergency procedures
- Site and job-specific procedures
- On-the-job, hands on, and a demonstration of skills and competencies

Take time to learn what workers have been trained on, their experience, and their overall safety knowledge.

Follow-up initial onboarding training with safety talks, safety meetings, and work with a mentor.

Incorporate other types of training and reinforcement based on your organization’s specific requirements and needs.

Finally, don’t assume new workers know all their safety rights or feel comfortable voicing their concerns, asking questions, or pointing out hazards.