Aging Workers – Fact Sheets

WHY SHOULD A WORKPLACE LOOK AT ISSUES CONCERNING AGING WORKERS?

The large number of ‘baby boomers’ born after World War Two are now aging. The ‘baby boom’ population has an impact on both the age distribution in the workforce and the size of the retired population.

Regulators states that “Nearly one person in four in the labour force projected to be 55 or more: The aging of the baby boomers, which is largely behind the projected decline in the overall participation rate, has had a major impact on the aging of the labour force. Between 2001 and 2009, the proportion of people in the labour force aged 55 and over rose from 10% to 17%, an increase of 7 percentage points in nine years. The first baby boomers reached the age of 55 in 2001. This increase is projected to continue from 2010 to 2021, when the succeeding cohorts of baby boomers in turn reach 55. By 2021, according to three of the five scenarios, nearly one person in four in the labour force (roughly 24%) could be 55 years of age or over, the highest proportion on record.”

In addition to individuals leaving the workforce, the number of older people who work part-time or have other flexible work arrangements is also increasing.

Many studies are looking at the effects older workers have on the workforce. They are also looking at the effects different types of work have on older workers’ bodies, and how to keep them safe and free of injury.

Who is considered to be an older worker?

There is no exact, commonly recognized age at which someone is considered an older worker. Some studies have focused on people older than 55, while other studies examined those 45 years or older.

Do aging workers need any special accommodations?

Yes and no. A well-designed work place benefits everyone. Workstations and job tasks that are matched to the needs of the individual employee are always best. Different conditions for different workers may be needed to meet the needs of any employee, not just one that is older.

However, that being said, there are some things older workers may need to work safely and comfortably.

Are there any specific health and safety concerns related to aging workers?

A few. Most studies say that older workers tend to have fewer accidents, but when an older worker does get injured, their injuries are often more severe. They also may take longer to get better. Plus, the types of injuries can be different. Younger workers tend to get more eye or hand injuries, while older workers who have been working for many years report more back injuries.

Many workplace injuries are the result of doing the same things again and again. Repetitive motion injuries, for example, develop over time. An older worker, then, may report more musculoskeletal injuries since they've had longer for the condition to develop.

When anyone, no matter how old they are, is pushed to work harder than they safely can, there is a risk for injury. Because older workers tend to have more severe injuries when they do happen, it's important to make adjustments to work stations or work patterns to make them as safe as possible. It's also important to make sure a person is suited for a particular task and is safely able to do it.

Are there any concerns about older workers' work performance?

In general, studies report that older workers exhibit lower turnover, more dedication to the workplace, and have more positive work values. Absenteeism is less frequent, although it is longer when it is due to injury or chronic illness.

Studies have not shown there is any consistent relationship between aging and performance at work. The main reasons for poor work performance are:

lack of recognition and feeling as if their work isn't valued;

- not getting along with supervisors;
- high job stress;
- lack of support.

It is important to remember that these situations which may lead to poor work performance can happen at any age.

Some studies noted that older workers work slower and can't easily make quick decisions. However, this change is balanced because older workers often tend to be more accurate in their work and make more correct decisions than faster, younger co-workers.

What physical changes occur, in general, as a person ages… and how can this affect their work?

Our bodies change as we age. People reach full physical maturity or development at around the age of 25 years. Then after a period of relative stability, our bodies begin to show signs of aging. Most of these changes are first noticed at ages 40 or 50, but changes can occur (or start) as early as 20 or 25. These changes include:

Maximum muscular strength and range of joint movement: In general, people lose 15 to 20% of their strength from the ages of 20 to 60. However, every person is

different and there is a large range between individuals. However, most jobs do not require a person to use all their strength. Older employees may be able to perform the same tasks as a younger worker, but they may be working closer to their maximum level. The musculoskeletal system weakens over time, resulting in a decreased capacity for load-bearing work. Keep in mind that, for example, highly repetitive motions – doing the same thing, over and over again – can cause physical problems at any age.

As we age, the body loses some 'range of motion' and flexibility. People may be used to certain range of movements at one task or workstation. Being less flexible or able to reach could cause problems in some unpredictable situations that require unusual movements.

- **Cardiovascular and respiratory systems:** The ability of the heart, lungs and circulatory system to carry oxygen decreases. Between the age of 30 and 65, the functional breathing capacity can reduce by 40%. These changes can affect the ability to do extended heavy physical labour, reduce the body's ability to adjust to hot and cold conditions.
- **Regulation of posture and balance:** In general people may find it harder to maintain good posture and balance. When seated or standing still, this may not be a problem. However, accidents that happen because someone loses their balance do happen more often with age. Work that requires precise adjustments, strong muscular effort (including lifting and carrying), joint movements at extreme angles, or those done on a slippery or unstable surface, will be affected by poorer posture. Unexpected bumps or shocks may cause a more serious problem than with a younger worker.
- **Sleep Regulation:** As we age, our body is not able to regulate sleep as well as it used to. How long a person sleeps, and how well they sleep, can additionally be disrupted by changing work hours or by light and noise. The impact on employees is especially a concern for older shift or night workers. They might need more recovery time between shifts or extended workdays. Use of shift rotations that are the least disruptive to sleep patterns are preferred.
- **Thermoregulation (Body Temperature):** Our bodies are less able to maintain internal temperatures as well as less able to adjust to changes in external temperature or due to physical activity. This change means that older workers may find heat or cold more difficult to deal with than when they were younger. It also means that if they are doing hard manual labour, they may get overheated more easily.
- **Vision:** Vision changes with age. We will notice we cannot see or read from certain distances as well as we used to. This reduction in the "amplitude of accommodation" (the ability to see or adjust focus in certain distance ranges) is normally corrected with prescription glasses. Changes also occur in the peripheral visual field (how well you can see in the areas to the side of you, that you're not directly looking at), visual acuity (how exact, clear, and "unfuzzy" things appear), depth perception (how far away things seem), and resistance to glare, and light transmission. These changes are normally not noticed by a person unless there is poor lighting or there are sources of glare. Someone might also notice that they can't see as well when they're reading something when text size is small, or when there is poor contrast between the text and the background. Brighter lighting (that is suitable for the task) and well laid-out documents which avoid small print are important.
- **Auditory (Hearing):** Hearing also changes. We may not be able to hear as

well at higher frequencies (high pitch sounds). Most often, this change is noticed as the inability to listen to a particular voice or sound in a noisy environment. As well, people who work with a lot of background or noise may have difficulty hearing verbal instructions.

What changes occur with learning or cognitive functions?

Changes in mental capacity also occur as a person age. Older people may not think as quickly and clearly as they once did. Also, it may take longer to learn new skills. Much of the research on cognitive functioning (how people think and how quickly they do it) has been done in laboratory settings. As a result, there is information available on how individuals score on specific tests or tasks. However, there has been little testing to see how these results apply in the "real world". In particular, at work people naturally develop different habits to match or suit their learning and working styles.

Generally speaking, fluid intelligence (such as inductive reasoning, selective attention, 'dual-task' activities, and information processing) declines with age, while verbal tasks and vocabulary (talking and expressing themselves) remain constant or improve. Tasks that depend on short-term memory usually take longer. Older workers tend to use experience and expertise when working and may find it hard to work with complex or confusing stimuli. This means they might find it hard to do tasks in which they have to do (or think) a lot of different things quickly or at one time. They may also find it tricky to work in a busy environment where lots is going on. They may be less able to focus attention only on information relevant to the task at hand, especially in "new" situations. This means that there may be so much going on in new situations that they aren't sure what to prioritize, what to pay attention to, and what to ignore.

Are training requirements different for older workers?

Training requirements may be different for older workers. Since learning is based on previous experience, training may need to be more "practically" based. New skills need to be explained in a way that fits into what they already know. Justification and the logic behind the information – why you're doing what you're doing – are more important. Training may take longer than with younger workers. There may also be a need for more assistance or practice. However, several studies show that there may not be a difference in how well someone works once the learning curve has been reached.

Everyone, at every age, thinks and learns differently. These cognitive functions – how someone learns and thinks – are very dependent on the individual, and the experiences they have had during their lifetime. People who have had a lot of training or education over their lifetime, or who have had to carry out a variety of tasks, are experienced learners. They are typically able to learn new skills well and improve the ones they have with ease. People who may be more resistant to learning as an older adult include those who have little formal training or who have carried out relatively simple or repetitive tasks for many years. They are used to doing the same thing, the same way, and may find it hard to take in new information or ways of doing things.

How can a workplace help?

Long-term health issues increase with age. At the same time, mental and physical

fitness are closely linked. Workplaces can help by providing a safe work environment that reduces the chance of injury or occupational illness. These steps include, for example, having equipment in good working condition, training, safe work procedures, low chemical and hazard exposure, supportive management styles, risk assessments that take into account aging factors, etc. Workplaces can also help by having workplace health promotion initiatives (active living, healthy eating, stress awareness, violence prevention programs, etc.).