

# Get the Facts:



The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) is a great source for information regarding aging workers in the labour force. As the number of aging employees in the workforce is steadily increasing (thanks to the aging Baby Boomer generation), it is more important than ever to make sure there are systems in place to accommodate this significant community of workers. In 2011, Statistics Canada reported that nearly one in four people in the labour force is 55 years old; and between 2001 and 2009 the proportion of people in the workforce who were 55 and over rose seven per cent, from 10 to 17 per cent.

The need to accommodate aging workers is steadily growing as people are choosing to stay at work longer and later into their lives. While any given workplace must be accommodating for all employees, there are specific health and safety concerns—outlined by CCOHS—that pertain to aging workers. According to research, older workers tend to have fewer accidents, but when an injury does occur they are more severe and require more time to recover. The nature of the injuries also tends to differ between younger and older workers, with older workers sustaining more repetitive motion injuries, back injuries, and musculoskeletal injuries than their younger counterparts. Accommodations to prevent such injuries are as straight forward as making sure everyone is fully trained and suited to undertake the tasks at hand, this includes not being pushed or encouraged to work harder than is safely possible. The CCOHS recommends adjusting work stations and work patterns to make

## Accommodations for Aging Workers

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workers as safe as possible.

As our bodies age, there are physical changes employers need to consider when making workplace accommodations. Muscular strength and range of motion decrease as people age, this increases the risk of muscle strain, injuries from lifting or carrying, even loss of balance. Long-time employees who have been doing the same tasks for many years may have to adjust the types of activities in which they engage to reduce the risk of preventable injuries. Our bodies also react to sleep differently as we age, and restful sleep is harder to achieve. This can be dangerous for older workers employed in shift or night work situations, where a lack of sleep can result in poor focus, slowed reaction times, diminished cognitive abilities, memory loss, as well as increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and depression, which can all have a negative effect in the workplace. The accommodation recommended by the CCOHS is the use of shift rotations that are the least disruptive to sleep patterns.

In addition to physical changes, cognitive or learning functions also change with age. Research on cognitive functioning shows that, as we age, it may take longer to learn new skills and the ability for dual-task activities decreases; however verbal tasks and vocabulary skills remain, and even improve. Simple accommodations for creating a conducive work space can include, maintain a quiet location free from distractions such as loud noises and bustle of activity. By eliminating disruptions, workers are able to focus on tasks and prioritize work, resulting in fewer workplace accidents and higher productivity from employees.

Different age groups learn in different ways and therefore require varying methods for training

and receiving new information, with each method focusing on each group's strengths. While younger workers may be asked to use a computer program, older workers may first need to be taught how to use the program before training can begin. Studies show that training may take longer than with younger

workers, but once a skill is learned there may be no difference in how well someone works. The CCOHS suggests that older workers benefit from an emphasis on the logic behind the information, or "why you're doing what you're doing." Studies have shown that intolerance or resistance to learning often correlates to a lack of previous formal training; meaning workers may find it hard to take in new information or to learn new ways of doing things. In these situations, it's

important to offer several options for learning to find the solution that best fits the employee and his or her learning style.

Older workers provide invaluable experience and insights into the workforce that cannot be duplicated by their younger counterparts, which is why accommodation efforts are not only important but imperative. One common factor in all age-related workplace injury studies is that the recovery process for older workers lasts longer than with younger workers. With this in mind, it makes sense for employers to focus their accommodation efforts on preventative measures, such as re-training and environmental changes. By maintaining a positive, safe, and accommodating workplace, employers can reduce illness, injury, and workplace absenteeism and foster a positive environment full of happy, healthy workers of all ages. ☺



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