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Older Worker Safety

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During the KING annual meeting in May, it was noted that since 2008, just over 50% of the claims are from those 40 or over. And these claims represent 67% of the claim cost.

Due to the current economic condition within the United States, many workers are finding it a necessity to continue working. With a smaller employee pool of younger workers, many employers are finding themselves at risk and therefore look at the mature employee as an answer to their problem. By some estimates, the U.S. economy will require 58 million workers by 2025. However, based on current birth rates, the number of new workers joining the workforce will make up less than half of the projected jobs. That means the gap must be filled by workers over the age of 65. Therefore business productivity is greatly dependent on the health and safety of older employees. According to an AARP study, Baby Boomers are much less likely to associate retirement with the traditional retirement age of 65.

Challenges

The key to preparing for this ongoing change is to understand the fundamental needs of aging employees. The good news is that the older the worker, the more experience and wisdom he or she brings to the business. To avoid the almost certain increase in injury cost and severity, they need an enterprise-wide system to help them identify and act on gaps between the physical capabilities of their workforce and the current physical demands of their job landscape.

As employees age, their strength and range of motion decreases, thereby making them more susceptible to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Once injured, their recovery time is substantially longer than their younger counterparts. To ensure fewer injuries and maximize employee productivity over the long haul, business would benefit from developing a comprehensive system that catalogues the physical requirements and essential functions associated with every job. This kind of system, along with an understanding of the capabilities and/or limitations of the aging workforce, will enable managers to better understand which jobs are suitable for certain employees to perform. This in-depth understanding of job requirements can also help companies:

1. Better understand job-related risks and re-engineer jobs to reduce risk of injury.
2. Match employees and jobs with greater success and safety.
3. Enhance return-to-work opportunities.
4. Share job- and risk-related information across the organization.

Understanding Job Risks

A full inventory of and classification system for job and task information, including essential functional and physical demand data, is the foundation of this effort. Many times this information is stored on a piece of paper and seldom used. Using available technology, businesses can both collect and analyze detailed job and task data to develop a clearer picture of what it takes to be effective in each job and to categorize risks by body part.

KING recently conducted a physical demands analysis (PDAs) on 13 different elder care jobs and developed corresponding essential functions tests (EFTs). They can be found in the member only section of the KING website www.kingonline.org.



Matching Job to Employee

As important as knowing the risks inherent to each job are having awareness of the work-related medical history of each employee. Employers must keep careful track of their employees' injuries over the course of their employment. With insight into physical demands and essential functions associated with any given job and with comparison to an employee's particular vulnerabilities, managers can ensure a job's demands will not put an employee at risk for injury or re-injury and subsequent injury-related costs, including disability and absenteeism.

This can be extremely valuable during the post-hire/pre-employment phase. For example, let's say a business hires an employee into the Facilities Department and, through the employee's physical demands and essential functions of the job, the hiring manager discovers he has limited range of motion in his shoulder abduction and flexion (i.e., difficulty lifting the arms above his head). By querying the system, the hiring manager could find another job for the employee in the department, in a specific location, that matches the employee's skills and doesn't require excessive overhead work.

When an injury does occur, sharing the essential function of this job with a physician can help him or her understand the exact physical demand requirements of the patient's work and write a more detailed return-to-work restriction -- one that better estimates how long the employee will be out and, once well enough to re-enter the workplace, what the exact limitations might be. This can help the business avoid returning the employee to a job that will cause re-injury.

Improving the Workplace for Everyone, Over the Long Haul

As you can see, maintaining a healthy and effective aging workforce requires more than lowering shelves and improving lighting for employees with waning muscle strength and declining visual acuity. A comprehensive system, if developed correctly, can call immediate attention to problems inherent in job structures or job-matching practices. This is critical to every employee, young and old alike.

A business-wide approach to safety is advantageous to every employee. It is analogous to the curb cuts on sidewalks that were designed to smooth the transition from sidewalk to street for the disabled. Countless others have benefited from this safety measure, including stroller-pushing parents, workers with carts, and toddlers on tricycles. Similarly, a workplace safety innovation created for a specific struggling population can be just as transformative for all.

Businesses must look at their employees as long-term investments, not short-term fixes. As employees age, their risk of injury increases, but so does their expertise. Smart employers who have painstakingly tracked job details and analyzed the injuries and skills of long-term employees will find a way to protect them against risk while building on their new and safer potential. By building a sustainable system for re-engineering safer jobs and protecting employees, employers not only will keep them safe, but also they will reap what they sow in the form of healthier and happier employees, saved medical and insurance costs, and much higher productivity from their entire workforce.

Sources: AARP; Re-Engineering for the Older Worker & Older Worker Information – OSHA

Editor's Note:

The KING Safety Matters newsletter is published monthly to provide general safety information. It is not a substitute for adequate safety training, or intended to provide complete safety information or training, on any specific subject. The information contained herein is intended to assist safety efforts, and increase safety awareness.

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