



MANAGING THE HEALTH & SAFETY OF OLDER WORKERS

Health and safety strategists have warned employers and the government to be aware of emerging demographic changes which will, in future, result in a workforce with a far higher proportion of older workers. By 2030, there is an estimated 50% increase in people aged 65 and over who will be working. Here we consider the important health and safety implications which, if well managed, will have positive outcomes for both employers and employees.

Health and Safety Comes of Age

Dr Christa Sedlatschek, the Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) recently warned delegates at an international conference in Geneva that new health and safety approaches will be needed to take account of the changing demography of Europe, in particular, with regard to the increasing number of older workers in the workforce.

She said that Europe is facing “a demographic time bomb” with European workers having to stay in work longer, and health and safety professionals facing the challenge of ensuring that older workers can and do stay healthy, safe, and in work.

She called for “a change in attitudes and approaches,” and said, “We cannot keep designing tasks, workplaces and work equipment for 18-year-olds.”

The rate of ageing of the UK population is said to be less pronounced than in some European countries but nevertheless the workforce is ageing at a rapid rate.

Currently, according to research from the Office for National Statistics, the number of over-65s in work is now at the highest level since records began in 1992, with almost 1 in 10 people in this age group now employed.

A recent report by researchers at Brunel University, funded by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), says increasing numbers of people are working into their late 60s and even 70s. By 2030, the report claims, there will be a 50% increase in those aged over 65 who will be working.

According to this research, the drivers behind these trends include plans to delay the payment of State retirement benefits, as well as the end of the default retirement age in the UK. These factors, the report notes, will inevitably lead to increases in people working into their late 60s and beyond.

Effects of Older Employees in the Workplace

The good news is that the researchers at Brunel University largely concluded that employing people over the age of 60 is positive for employers. The research indicated that workers in their 60s are generally less prone to accidents and injuries than younger workers, suggesting that education and experience might help them judge situations better.



In addition, they can cope with work pressures and bring a wealth of experience and knowledge. Staying in work is also good for the older workers themselves, with health and social benefits associated with employment at an older age.

However, there was also evidence that, when accidents did happen, the health of older workers was more seriously affected.

The study found that older workers thought they were subject to similar hazards at work as younger people, including email pressures, driving conditions and over-demanding clients. They largely coped with such pressures by using their experience, changing roles or moving to part-time hours.

Practical Risk Management

Another research report on the health and safety of older workers, commissioned by IOSH from the Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM), suggests certain key factors that need to be considered as people age, as follows:

- Physical capacity: The report says, jobs should be designed to suit a range of individuals and not just the strongest or fittest in the workplace, so it is important to consider rests and important risk assessment issues pertaining to older workers, such as the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular and respiratory systems, vision and hearing. There should also be good reporting procedures for any problems experienced by workers.
- Shift work: Employers should consider limiting night work, or stopping it entirely, for workers aged over 45–50, as well as giving older workers priority to transfer to day work and allowing their choice of preferred shift where possible.
- Heat tolerance: In particular, the researchers say, more regular assessment of older workers who do hot work may be beneficial, to monitor their physical fitness and check that their health has not changed. Similarly, controlling and minimising older workers' activities in extreme heat are also important.
- Vision and hearing: The ability to hear and distinguish sounds decreases with age and visual changes also occur with ageing. Ergonomic solutions could include alternative warning systems, such as flashing lights, linked to the alarm system and making sure that the working environment is designed for optimum visibility.
- Psychological and psychosocial health: Although reaction times slow down as people get older, this is frequently offset by accuracy and experience. The researchers warn that a lack of social support for older workers can increase the likelihood of emotional exhaustion, so improving the coping strategies for stress in high risk environments is important.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) emphasises that looking after the health and safety of older workers is not only a legal requirement, as for any worker, but makes good business sense. The safety watchdog suggests employers should:

- review the risk assessment if anything significant changes, not just when an employee reaches a certain age
- not assume that certain jobs are physically too demanding for older workers — many jobs are supported by technology, which can absorb the physical strain



- consider the activities older workers do, as part of the risk assessment, and think about changes, for example, using self-paced health and safety training to allow older workers more time to absorb key information, allowing older workers to choose to move to other types of work or designing tasks that require manual handling in such a way that they eliminate or minimise the risk
- consider how older workers could play a part in improving health and safety, for example, having older workers working alongside colleagues in a structured programme, to encourage learning from their experience
- avoid assumptions, by consulting and involving older workers when considering relevant control measures.

Future Focus Areas

The ergonomics expert Professor Peter Buckle was recently quoted warning that the UK has made “virtually no provision” for a future workforce in which a growing number will be made up of ageing workers.

Having published a new evidence review for the Government on the future of ageing and the current workplace infrastructure in June 2015, Professor Buckle is one of the nine experts who were recently appointed to HSE’s new Workplace Health Expert Committee (WHEC). He is expected, as a matter of priority, to recommend the WHEC commissions research on risk assessment of work for over 65-year-olds, as it is believed that this is an area currently lacking a sound evidence base.

In the context of the EU, the European Commission recently published its new Strategic Framework for Health and Safety at Work for the years leading up to 2020, and this document identifies “Taking Account of the Ageing of the EU’s Workforce” as one of its three major future challenges (along with work-related disease and small enterprises).

EU-OSHA has also confirmed that its forthcoming Healthy Workplaces campaign for 2016–2017 is to be entitled “Healthy Workplaces for All Ages” and will focus on older workers and promoting sustainable working lives.

All these workplace initiatives suggest an area of emerging focus for the health and safety authorities and one to which employers will, increasingly, be expected to respond.