

Webinar: Achieving Maximum Productivity With an Aging Workforce

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We are currently in a global retirement crisis. Due to the recent economic crisis, many people are working past the age of 65, onto over 70 years old. With an aging workforce, employers need to be aware not only of the changes encountered with aging, but also the interventions that can be put in place to make work tasks easier for aging workers.

Approximately 25% of longevity and health can be attributed to genetics while the remaining 75% is affected by other factors. Some of these include physical fitness, nutrition, illness & injury, medication, mental stress, sleep, and lifestyle choices. Aging results in multiple changes to both the body and mind. Some common changes include reduced tolerance to stress, decreased balance, decreased motor skills and reaction times, decreased endurance, and changes in cognitive abilities. These changes will impact an aging workforce which will influence the health and safety of the workplace.

Research has shown that aging workers process information differently than younger workers. The aging workers' brains use crystallized intelligence, which is experience-based knowledge. Generally, employers should direct aging workers toward work that is a derivative of their previous workplace experiences. When training for new tasks, aging workers require more structured programs and an increased time frame for the learning to occur.

Some tips to assist with these changes in aging workers include:

- Provide aging workers more time for training. Self-paced programs tend to be effective for this cohort. Morning training sessions will help keep aging workers more focused.
- Provide more time for the practice of new concepts.
- Match worker's skills with job assignments. Build on their previous experiences.
- Use checklists and standardize processes to ensure steps are not missed.

Aging workers tend to have reduced strength capacities, especially after age 50-55, which make manual material lifting tasks more difficult. Employers need to be aware of this when evaluating tasks, as the lifting limits that are currently used are based on a "healthy" population. Although there is a reduction in strength capabilities, aging workers can still perform work tasks with some modifications.

Some suggestions for modifications include:

- Provide extended handles on tools to avoid sustained and repetitive bending/reaching.

- Use material handling assistive devices (i.e., hoists, dollies, scissor lift carts, roller conveyor systems, gravity flow shelving racks).
- Provide anti-fatigue matting to reduce stress on the feet, legs, and low back.
- Provide sit-stand chairs for standing tasks, to allow the worker to change their posture throughout the day and reduce the stress on the lower extremity and low back.

Studies have shown that older people have an elevated level of cortisol, a stress hormone, in their blood, even when not under stress. This increase in cortisol keeps the brain aroused, which can cause difficulty in falling asleep, or fractioned sleep. Additionally, the stress hormone, corticotropin-releasing hormone, has been shown to impair learning and memory, which, as mentioned above, is an issue that aging workers may encounter. Teaching workers stress management techniques will not only increase their performance, it will increase their sleep quality and quantity, which results in a well-rested and healthier worker.

Overall, investing in the health of all employees enhances productivity and avoids unnecessary costs as the workforce ages. Wellness programs produce healthier employees at all ages; on-site clinics save workers time and focus care on prevention and early disease detection, which also lowers costs.

Some general wellness interventions that can benefit all workers include:

- Encourage postural breaks and on-the-job stretching
- Make healthy food accessible to the work force
- Establish early reporting and interventions
- Provide education and wellness fairs on various health topics (i.e., smoking cessation, cancer testing, diabetes, and blood pressure)

Despite the age related changes that occur with aging workers, mature workers bring a wealth of benefits to the workplace. They have a great work ethic, a can-do attitude and years of experience. This translates to greater morale and loyalty, reduced replacement costs and a reservoir of key knowledge. In order to maximize the productivity of mature workers, employers need to consider making some accommodations. While some adaptations lie on the more distant horizon, others can be undertaken right now, to the benefit of both younger and older employees — and of the company itself.