

New Message Needed to Ensure Senior Safety

It's amazing how many times we find ourselves giving contradictory directions or conflicting messages when we think we're being perfectly clear: "Go ahead, back up!", or "Turn left? That's right!"

While these examples may be humorous, others can have a significant effect on worker health and safety. We must consider how the age of the employee group requires a change in messaging, and how we do that is not yet clear. Here are three areas particularly affected by age vs. expectation.

1. Consider safe lifting and aging knees.

For years, the standard message has been, "Lift with your legs, not your back." Chances are this message is one of the basic injury prevention points, if you have any literature on this topic. And you probably do have some, with the current emphasis on musculoskeletal injury prevention in Ontario. There are most likely drawings, or little stick figures, showing workers facing a box, squatting down to get a grip – back straight, knees bent, then standing with the box held in front of them, centred, balanced, safe.

These have been the safe lifting instructions for so long that we don't even question them anymore. Lift with your legs.

If you've ever watched people approaching retirement as they go about their daily chores, have you noticed that the "part" that often "goes" first is, in many cases, their knees.

Think of three stages of life, say early childhood, young adulthood, and pre-retirement. You can see this play out in the way people tie their shoes:

- Kids simply sit on the floor, for two reasons. First, tying shoes

is something that takes some time until they get it down pat, but even more important, getting up and down is no problem. They can do it pretty much as often as they want.

- Young adults often squat. Sitting on the floor is something most adults don't do, especially since dropping into a squat and popping back up is no big deal.

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- However, by the time the knees of these young adults have 30 or 40 more years on them, they don't sit on the floor, and the adults don't squat. They either bend from the waist, or sit on a chair or step. Their knees don't get them up and down as reliably, or as easily, as they used to.

Yet we continue to advise older workers to lift with their legs. Chances are, they can't, or they won't. We keep telling them to do something they know is painful, or that their bodies just refuse to do.

So, what's the new safe lifting advice as we approach a time when many of us will have more senior workers in our workplaces? What will the new safe lifting diagrams look like for those over 60? Are we encouraging injuries by insisting that they “lift with their legs”? This good advice for young workers may be totally inappropriate for many older workers. We need to think now about

developing better messages for the seniors in our workplaces.

Here's another example:

2. Energy conservation and aging eyesight.

Many buildings and firms are winning awards for using much less energy, and some of these energy reductions come from cutting back on lighting. Halls have fewer lights, some of those lights are shut off, and there's an increased reliance on natural light in many workplaces.

Reduced lighting and increased dependence upon natural light does two things. First, it produces a wide variation in the light levels throughout workplaces. As workers move throughout the office, the plant or the worksite, they can move from areas that are well lit through those where the lighting may be dim, at best. In addition, dependence on natural light creates periods during the day when the light levels increase with sunshine or decrease with each cloud passing overhead.

As the workforce ages, the eyes lose their ability to adjust rapidly to changes in lighting. Moving between two areas of different lighting becomes hazardous, especially when the change is near steps, in storage areas or where there are trip or slip hazards. Add bifocal eyeglasses to the mix, and you have a situation where we may be deliberately adding hazards to our workplaces in the name of energy conservation.

The number of slips and falls and the severity of injuries arising from falls increase as we age. If we simultaneously cut back on lighting to save money on the energy bill, we may be setting ourselves up for more frequent – and more serious – workplace injuries. Energy conservation is an important part of our business, except when it makes our workplaces more dangerous for older workers.

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3. The length of the workday and aging energies

Finally, let's think about those workers who are approaching retirement age, but who really don't want to move suddenly and totally into retirement. Many will ask to move into retirement gradually, by working part-time. And any number of us will be pleased to find a way to keep their experience in the workplace for a few more years.

Many retirees want to work a few hours a day each week, as opposed to those firms that want their employees to work a fewer number of full days. The thinking is that if you come in for, say, two or three full days a week, the work can be better scheduled.

The problem is that many older workers simply get tired half-way

through the day. The concept of an afternoon nap becomes more a necessity than a great idea for many. Their preferred solution is likely to be to work every day, say from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., before heading home for that nap. They know that, for a good part of the day, they're as productive as ever. But after that, they need a rest. As employers, we need to be sensitive to this and understand that our preference for full days would fail to address their very real needs.

Our workplaces are aging, and our messaging about health and safety needs to keep up. We'll be seeing far more pre- and post-retirement workers in our workplaces over the next decade.

If we continue to deliver safety messages designed for those 30 years younger ("Lift with your legs") or if

we continue to save energy costs as though everyone has the vision of a 20-year-old, or if we try to fit older workers into the standard 8-hour day, we're going to be delivering conflicting messages. We'll be voicing the words: "Yes, we value you and want you to continue to work with us", but our actions will be communicating: "This workplace is for youngsters – and we're not particularly interested in making it safe for you."

We need to start thinking our way through these issues now. Education sector workplaces already have a significant proportion of workers in their pre-retirement years. Unless we make an effort to create supportive workplaces, all that experience will walk out the door – or leave through injury even earlier than we had anticipated.

The Young and the Vulnerable

A significant investment made by the WSIB, the Ministry of Labour and the entire prevention system in Ontario to reduce the numbers of young worker injuries and fatalities is paying off.

According to the WSIB, the lost time injury rate for teenagers 19 and under decreased by 27% from 2000 to 2004. (See discussions of the problem of young worker safety and efforts to prevent young workers from becoming young victims in two previous editions of Directions: Volumes 1 and 3.)

The group collectively known as "young workers" is a difficult group to characterize. For most purposes, this group includes all workers between 16 and 25 years of age. Many of these workers are full time, many are part-time and also going to school, and an increasing number are juggling several part-time jobs with part-time attendance at either secondary or post-secondary schools.

In general, young workers want to impress and do well. This – combined with the fact that it may be their first "real job" – is a double-edged sword. They work hard and enthusiastically, but they're also reluctant to ask for help or advice. They will go the extra mile and get the job done, but they also have a tendency to lift things that are too heavy, rely on their muscles rather than the proper tools or equipment and, perhaps, work too quickly.

According to the Ministry of Education Information Management Branch,

- approximately 32% of students drop out of the secondary school system before graduation,
- about 35% graduate but do not pursue post-secondary education, and
- 33% enter a post-secondary education program.

This means that, by the time they're 18 years old, almost 120,000 Ontario youth are out of the

education system and looking for full-time work. With only a high-school diploma and little experience, full-time jobs are hard to find. Many young workers move from temporary job to temporary job, and many hold one or more part-time jobs. The bottom line: this age group is almost always new on the job. According to the Institute for Work and Health, new workers are at least four times as likely to be injured during their first four weeks than at any other time.

While the education sector is not a major source of jobs for this age group, there are seasonal jobs available in many of our firms. The data clearly shows that they will be the "new workers" in any workplace and, therefore, they need extra workplace health and safety orientation, as well as job-specific training. They also need

