



MINIMIZE RISKS TO AGING EMPLOYEES

6 Ways to Minimize Risks to Aging Employees on the Workforce

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A CLASS ABOVE

A safety plan for your company and facility has to include all demographics contained therein. That's a seemingly simple statement that can quickly become more complex in reality. Chances are that from supervisors to shift workers, employees of all backgrounds and ages work to help the company succeed. Do your safety efforts keep all of them in mind?

It should. Especially when it comes to varying ages, an often inherent bias can actually make working within the facility more hazardous for aging employees. Keep the shifting demographics of your employees in mind as you build strategies to protect your workers and prevent implicit age-based discrimination. This is what you need to know.

The Shifting Demographics of Your Employees

Age-based demographics matter throughout the supply chain. From the factory worker to the truck driver, you have to make sure that your policies follow best practices not just in general, but for this specific age group. That's especially important considering the aging population, meaning that we'll only see more aging workers in and around the supply chain in coming years.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average age of an American worker was 42.3 years. Now, compare that with:

- Labor unions (50.6 years)
- Textile product mills (49.3 years)
- Metalworking machinery (48.9 years)
- Industrial chemicals (48.1 years)
- Aluminum production (48.0 years)

Of course, these are just a few of the many examples. Across the supply chain, the same trend applies. The average truck driver is 55 years old. The average supply chain manager? 48 years. Younger workers are moving away from manufacturing and supply chain jobs, leaving this audience segment to grow older fast.

How to Decrease the Risks of Age-Based Discrimination

Now, contrast the above demographics with your current safety practices. In many companies, they're based on the younger safety managers who have developed them. You won't find many examples of overt discrimination around, given the strict laws around the concept. More implicit alternatives, though, are all too common.

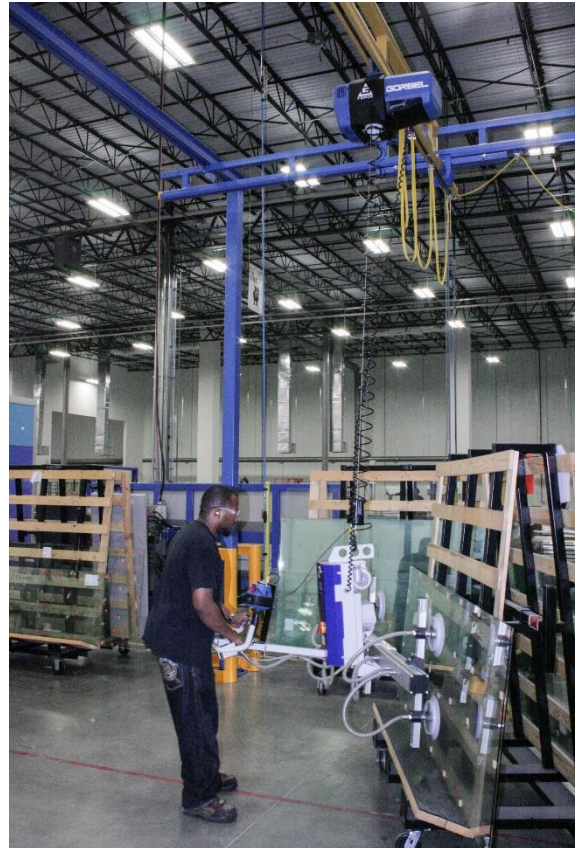
It doesn't just happen in the hiring process. Throughout the factory or warehouse, you might find technologies that are simply not designed for older eyes or working hands. Reducing these biases means not just improving the workplace for your entire team, but also minimizing the potential for claims to be filed that could harm your operations or revenue.

Older workers file thousands of age discrimination claims every year, and many of them are justified even if they don't end up successful. Making your factory safer, therefore, has significant benefits in more ways than one.

6 Ways to Minimize Workplace Hazards for Aging Employees

Fortunately, it's not all doom and gloom. You can make significant inroads in creating a safer environment for aging employees as you improve your overall safety practices. The workforce is getting older. Taking these practices into account now means preparing for a future in which a larger share of your team will actually be relying on them to prevent personal harm.

These six ways just are some of the many options you have to reduce workplace hazards and improve safety for all of your employees. Many of them are relatively simple improvements that don't just reduce hazards for older team members, but do so without compromising the work of anyone else within the facility.



1) Invest in Ergonomic Equipment

Ergonomic equipment can and should play a major role in supporting an aging workforce, especially when physical labor is involved. Aging means losing some reaction time, flexibility, and strength. That means heavy equipment and machinery will be much more difficult to maneuver and manage than it was just a few years ago.

That doesn't mean your older workers are no longer capable of doing the work. They just might need more ergonomic equipment to work with. That means accounting for their unique needs as you purchase and build the equipment, fitting it to the person in charge rather than trying (and failing) to do the opposite.

It requires an adjustment and initial investment. Switching out your current equipment is always a major capital expense. That said, and given the benefits especially for an aging workforce, it's well worth the initial cost.

2) Increase Visibility Throughout the Warehouse

For most people, age is directly related to a loss of vision. Warehouses and factories don't always account for the fact that a 50-year old may simply not see as well as their 30-year old co-worker. Failure to spot a hazard quickly can lead to injuries and dangerous situations. Some ways to prevent that include:

- Improving the lighting throughout the facility.
- Increasing the fonts on any signage related to directions or safety.
- Enhancing the sightlines between different stations of a job a worker may have to accomplish.
- Providing safety equipment with prescription options for appropriate working conditions.
- Reducing glare on screens to enhance readability.

The key, again, is to prevent vision of individual employees to become a potentially serious hazard. Yet, no one will mind the better sightlines, lighting, or larger fonts. It's a simple improvement that increases safety for your aging workers, but improves working conditions for all in the process.

3) Organize Your Pathways

This concept borrows from lean manufacturing, and especially the value stream mapping that occurs frequently within that philosophy. Whereas traditional mapping follows a product through the production flow, it can be just as beneficial when considering the pathways your workers take as they accomplish their daily tasks.

For older and younger workers alike, it's crucial to eliminate any unnecessary tasks. They take away from productivity, but also cause a loss in concentration that can ultimately lead to more dangerous behaviors through other tasks. Mapping your teams' tasks with a focus on value helps you understand the steps currently taken, and which can be eliminated without losing value.



That's especially beneficial for older employees, you can't spend as much time on their feet or performing strenuous exercise as their younger co-workers. Organizing your pathways thus improves their health and wellbeing even as you make your processes more efficient.

4) Build Training for All Age Levels

Don't assume that experienced workers no longer need trained. The opposite may well be the case. Build your training opportunities so that members of all generations can easily understand them. Then, encourage each employee to participate.

That might mean helping older members of the team learn new technologies and operations procedures. It also means making sure that newer team members know the basic principles underlying these technological advances, even if they're no

longer needed on a daily basis. You can even consider a mentor-mentee program in which aging members of the team take their younger counterparts under their wing, which makes them feel involved even as they have their own lessons to learn on more modern processes.

5) Focus on Digital UX

A millennial just entering the workforce has grown up with technology. They intuitively know how to manage new software, and might even have some coding skills based on core classes in high school and college. That, in turn, has prompted some employers and manufacturers to build equipment and machinery that assumes pre-existing technology expertise.

But that step can be a dangerous one to take. Naturally, members of Gen X and Baby Boomers are not as familiar with the technology as their younger colleagues. New equipment should be just as intuitive to use for these workers as it is for millennials, which means that the Digital UX in any situation (from machinery to computer system) needs to be positive for all groups. It's a tough task, but one that ultimately helps to make operations smoother and less dangerous.



6) Enhance Flexibility

The Society for Human Resource Management recommends that when it comes to aging employees, sometimes flexibility can be the simplest and best solution to safety:

Prioritize workplace flexibility. To the extent possible, give workers a say in their schedule, work conditions, work organization, work location and work tasks

These simple adjustments help older workers better build their schedule around your health while honoring doctors' appointments and similar commitments. It also

allows them to feel more involved in the process, helping to keep them engaged enough to be a productive member of the team.

Aging Workers: An Asset, Not a Hindrance

In the end, much of the above comes down to the right managerial mindset. Yes, the workforce is aging. Yes, that introduces some challenges that might not have been as evident (through they certainly existed) previously. However, that does not mean you need to panic, or prepare yourself for age discrimination claims. Instead, it makes more sense to treat this demographic as an asset to your company.

The organizational and technical knowledge accumulated in this group tends to be immense. Leveraged the right way, that knowledge can transfer to your newer workers for increased productivity. Making some investments such as the tips to improve safety above then becomes a natural step to ensure you secure your assets and make sure they avoid any potential hazards.

Workplace safety is an important topic regardless of industry or demographics, but it becomes especially relevant for aging workers. Is your organization doing what it needs to in order to protect this population? Through the above adjustments, you can be well on your way to providing a work environment from which employees of all age groups can benefit.