



# Aging Workforce

Profound changes continue to unfold in the American workforce as Baby Boomers—Americans born between 1945 and 1964—swell the ranks of our workplaces.

They lead many employers to fear the possibilities of negative impacts associated with this demographic trend. On the one hand, they are concerned that having age-gifted workers on the job may mean escalating age-related healthcare costs, workers' compensation, and pension liabilities.

On the other hand, they worry about impacts on quality and productivity or an impending shortage of skilled labor as skilled, experienced veteran workers retire. However, these concerns have not been paralyzing.

Employers are positively looking at the aging workforce issue and have implemented policies and practices that support a more competitive, sustainable, and safer workforce, regardless of its overall age. We will share strategies from our experience and our client's experiences.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 25% of the workforce will be over 55 in 2020. That is one in four workers — up from one in every five workers just two years ago. Why? In addition to Boomers, eliminating mandatory

retirement and enacting age discrimination laws accounts for some of this trend. Better life expectancy and health are partly responsible. Moreover, for most, early retirement is essentially a thing of the past. Many workers now choose to or must remain in the workforce longer than initially planned.

So what about health and safety concerns related to the graying of our offices, retail outlets, and factories? There is no consistent relationship between aging and work performance. Although older workers are more likely to have chronic health conditions and physical limitations, these factors are not directly related to decreased work performance in most cases. Moreover, there are many advantages to maintaining and hiring older workers. They generally have more experience, better relationships with co-workers, and report less stress at work. Older workers also have fewer non-fatal injuries than their younger counterparts. Nevertheless, when an injury occurs, it tends to be more severe, and it takes longer for the worker to recover.

Work is beneficial for many of us as we age. Work may provide access to better healthcare benefits. Emerging research shows a positive relationship between working longer, better cognitive function, and a longer life span. Work keeps us engaged and socially connected with others. It keeps us more technologically savvy and current with the world around us.

The good news is that a well-designed workplace with favorable policies and programs to optimize the health of aging workers benefits everyone. When workstations and job tasks match the capacity of each worker, everyone benefits. Maximizing workplace flexibility, when organized with personal health and well-being principles in mind, and when workplace policies consistently are viewed through their health effects on workers, employers and workers both win. By preventing stresses or injuries that, over time, can have cumulative adverse effects on a worker's ability to work safely and



productively, an employer can help assure that the U.S. continues to have a capable, experienced workforce.

Many effective workplace solutions are simple, do not have to cost very much, and can have significant benefits if implemented properly with worker input and support throughout all levels of management. Consider the strategies below for preparing the workplace for an older, healthier, and safer workforce.

Prioritize workplace flexibility. Workers prefer jobs that offer more flexibility over those that

offer more vacation days. To the extent possible, give workers a say in their schedule, work conditions, work organization, work location, and work tasks.

Match tasks to abilities. Use self-paced work, self-directed rest breaks, and less repetitive tasks.

Avoid prolonged, sedentary work – it is not suitable for workers of any age. Consider sit/stand workstations and walking workstations for workers who traditionally sit all day.

Manage noise hazards (including excess background noise), slip/trip hazards, and physical hazards, conditions that can challenge an aging workforce more.

Provide ergo-friendly work environments — workstations, tools, floor surfaces, adjustable seating, better illumination, and screens and surfaces with less glare.

Utilize teams and teamwork strategies for aging-associated problem-solving. Workers closest to the problem are often best equipped to find the fix.

Provide health promotion and lifestyle interventions, including physical activity, healthy meal options, tobacco cessation assistance, risk factor reduction and screenings, coaching, and onsite medical care.

Accommodate medical self-care in the workplace and time away for health visits.

Invest in training and building worker skills and competencies at all age levels. Help older employees adapt to new technologies.

Proactively manage reasonable accommodations and the return-to-work process after illness or injury absences. Require aging workforce management skills training for supervisors. Include a focus on the most effective ways to manage a multi-generational workplace.