



Tap Baby Boomers' Safety Know-How Before They Retire

It's no secret to safety professionals – America's workforce is getting older. According to a 2001 report by Washington-based AARP, "Health and Safety Issues in an Aging Workplace," the number of workers older than 55 – about 18.2 million in 2000 – will rise to more than 25 million in 2025 and 31.9 million in 2035. That would be a 75 percent increase in 25 years.

In addition to making considerations to ensure mature workers can stay in their jobs and perform them safely, businesses are faced with the specter of "brain drain" (a massive loss of experience and knowledge) when members of the baby boomer generation – those born between 1946 and 1964 – begin retiring in the next few years.

Not only will this "brain drain" have an impact on productivity and the quality of work, safety also will be affected. "New workers have a higher injury rate than more experienced workers. They are new to the job. They are still getting used to the hazards; they are getting used to the equipment and the layout of the facility," said Ron Miller, former director of the National Safety Council's Occupational Safety and Health Group.

One advantage employers have in bringing safety to the next generation of workers is the older, more experienced workers currently employed. Companies need to use this resource to pass on their organization's safety culture and instill safety as a value among younger workers.

Train them early

Involving mature workers in training programs is an effective way to prevent "brain drain" and to enhance safety overall in an organization, Miller said.

The key to getting the most out of worker training, in terms of safety, is to have a strong safety culture in place. This helps ensure safety is a value among your organization's experienced workers, as well as new hires. "One of the biggest challenges is, you have to make sure the experienced person is doing the job correctly themselves," Miller said.

Implementing a consistent training process can solve this potential problem before it arises. According to Miller, an organization should have established standard operating procedures. A job safety analysis should be completed on every job or task, and that information should be incorporated into the standard operating procedures, which then serves as the training guide for whoever is doing the training.

The second component of effective training is the trainers themselves. A good trainer must know, understand and follow the right procedures as well as safety policies, but he or she needs more than that. "Trainers have to be respected by the rest of the people working there, as well as the person to whom they are teaching the job, because if they are not respected they won't be taken seriously," Miller said.

In this regard, personality goes a long way. Not everyone is cut out to be a trainer. In addition to effective communication skills, a trainer needs to be patient. Some people learn faster and in different ways than others. The trainer needs to have the patience and understanding to guide the new employee through the process – sometimes more than once.

In addition to the initial training, Miller said, employers need to follow up to make sure the training sinks in and the employee is doing the job right. Miller said the time frame for the follow-up depends



on the complexity and hazardousness of the job. "It could be as soon as two to three weeks, could be a month," he said.

A supervisor or another team member should perform the follow-up, and base their observations on the standard operating procedures.

A more personal approach: mentoring

In addition to training, mentoring programs are another tool to help instill safety values and knowledge about a job or organization in younger workers and new hires. Mentoring differs from training in that it is a kind of personal relationship as well as a business relationship, according to Emily Allen, director of workplace initiatives for AARP. A key component of mentoring is leading by example. Mentoring must have specific goals and objectives and a timeline for implementing those objectives.

Getting buy-in from current and new employees alike is important, according to Allen. Employers should clearly communicate the reasons they believe in their mentoring programs and help employees understand how this benefits them. For example, the new employee gets the benefit of the mentor's experience, knowledge and advice.

"For the mentor, this is more than just passing on information," Allen said. "This is an opportunity to influence the future of your workplace. Mentoring programs allow older workers to have a legacy within their organizations."

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