Managing a multi-generational workforce

Introduction
Today's workforce spans five generations. A single workplace can employ people that range in age from their twenties through their seventies. In fact, by 2024 the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates people over the age of 55 will make up 25 percent of the workforce.

A multi-generational workforce makes organizations stronger. Older workers’ experience and knowledge makes them valuable mentors for younger workers, and can reinforce your safety culture while passing on productive work habits and safe practices. Younger workers can bring with them a new perspective, and an expectation of technological integration and efficiency. While it might feel impossible to meet the needs of this huge range of people, by implementing simple solutions to support your workers – regardless of age – you can build a stronger, safer and more productive workplace.

Focus on individuals
You may have heard that certain generations have specific needs, and while there may be some stereotypes based in truth, it's important to remember your workforce is made up of individual employees first. Basing management decisions on generational labels – “millennial” and “baby boomer” – ignores individual situations, needs and characteristics like role, learning style, experience, gender, education, and race/ethnicity.

Lumping people together in age-specific groups can impact the safety, health and job satisfaction of your workers. For example, an oil rig worker and an accountant working for the same company will have very different safety and training needs, even if they were born in the same year. Similarly, an oil rig worker with twenty years of experience in a technologically innovative company will have very different expectations than one of the same age who had previously worked with a company less inclined to incorporate new technologies.

Instead, focus on individual needs. Identify your organization’s goals, the message you intend to share and the needs/roles of the workers to be trained. When possible, allow some flexibility in how the training is presented, and allow for some experiential training when possible. Be sure to consult the affected employees and monitor the effectiveness of training regularly to ensure it is meeting each worker’s needs.
Keep employees engaged
Working in the right job – where skill and interest match the demand and expectations of the role – has been linked to fewer chronic health problems in older workers. A bad fit, on the other hand, is more likely to push an employee to early retirement. At the same time isolation, whether due to being left out of the social component at work, being demographically unique (i.e. women in construction), or working remotely, can also create a less engaged workforce.

Engaged employees are not only healthier, more productive workers – they also make for healthier, more productive organizations. According to the CDC, employee engagement improves profits and customer loyalty, and reduces employee turnover and absenteeism. By working to keep employees of all ages engaged, you can improve the physical and mental health of workers while reaping significant organizational benefits.

NIOSH offers several suggestions for engaging employees.

- **Be flexible.** Workers value the ability to have more control of their work life and to be able to integrate their personal needs into their day. If possible, give employees flexibility in their schedule, conditions, location and tasks.

- **Encourage self-direction.** Allow employees to work at their own pace and self-direct rest breaks. Engage them through less repetitive tasks. When less repetition is not possible, consider cross-training to provide variety.

- **Avoid prolonged, sedentary work.** Long days sitting at a desk are bad for workers at every age. Consider sit/stand or walking workstations.

- **Provide training in a variety of ways.** Everyone learns differently, but adults generally are more adept at experiential learning. Encourage trainers to provide hands-on opportunities, invest in training and building worker skills and competencies at all age levels, and help identify areas that workers can benefit from a more personalized approach. Some older workers may struggle with technology integration; some younger workers may struggle without it. Find ways to meet both groups’ needs.

Be supportive
When employees feel supported in their work – through job autonomy, strong relationships with bosses, and fair and respectful treatment – they experience lower stress levels. When, however, these supports are lacking, mental distress levels increase, which is linked to increased risk for on-the-job incidents. Building a psychologically safe workplace that promotes wellbeing and prevents harm to employee mental health shows commitment to employees both on and off the job.

Chronic stress is a serious workplace safety issue. Impairment due to stress -- as well as factors like fatigue, mental distress and substance use -- can lead to increased injuries and accidents on the job.

You can create a culture of support and understanding for employees of all ages and backgrounds at your workplace by:

- Engaging workers of all ages and roles in open, honest communication about what they need to reduce stress and perform their jobs.

- Providing workers with the flexibility to complete tasks based on their strengths and expertise, when possible.

- Communicating to supervisors the importance of strong, supportive relationships with workers of all ages.

- Making decision-making and implementation practices transparent and open to employee concerns and input.

- Requiring supervisors to engage in aging workforce management skills training, with an emphasis on managing a multi-generational workplace. Consider investing in the NSC Impairment Recognition and Response Training for Supervisors to help increase awareness among managers of mental health, fatigue, substance abuse, and stress related impairments.
Implement safe practices
Safety is important for workers of all ages. Older workers are more prone to chronic conditions that can be exacerbated by on-the-job conditions. Younger workers are more likely to experience work-related injuries. Implementing safe policies and practices at your workplace can help prevent injuries and incidents of all kinds.

There are several easy steps you can take to make your workplace safe for a multigenerational workforce, according to NIOSH:

• **Manage hazards.** While some hazards can be more likely to seriously injure an older worker (such as same level slips and falls), younger workers are more likely to be injured on the job due to lack of experience, awareness, or a lower risk aversion threshold. Managing hazards effectively is key to keeping everyone safe.

• **Provide and design ergo-friendly work environments,** workstations, tools, floor surfaces, adjustable seating, better illumination where needed, and screens and surfaces with less glare. Don’t forget to address any noise exposure – older workers may be dealing with decreased hearing, and younger workers may not recognize the risk.

• **Provide health promotion and lifestyle interventions** including physical activity, healthy meal options, tobacco cessation assistance, risk factor reduction and screenings, mental health supports, substance misuse cessation programs, coaching, and onsite medical care. Accommodate medical self-care in the workplace and time away for health visits. Provide opportunities for physical activity or connections to low-cost community based activity options, such as a corporate discount to a local park district or fitness center.

• **Proactively manage reasonable accommodations** and the return-to-work process after illness or injury absences.