



Health & Safety

MATTERS

Health & Safety Information for GMB Safety Reps

May 6th 2011

Vol 8 No 3

Health & Safety Issues for an ageing workforce

Introduction

As governments across the industrial world grapple with what they claim to be a crisis in pension provision, legal moves are being undertaken to raise the age of normal retirement – currently to be 66 and possibly even 67 or 68 in the future. One of the aspects that appears to have been forgotten is the health and safety implications for an ageing workforce.

There is no doubt that the population of the UK is an ageing one. It is estimated that people aged 50 or over will represent around 30% of the workforce by 2020, and by 2040 there will be 15 million people over the age of 65.

How is an older worker defined?

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines older workers as *those who are liable to encounter difficulties in employment and occupation because of age*. This seems to be a fairly vague definition. Interestingly the World Health Organisation (WHO) sees the relatively low age of 45 to be the lower limit when ageing could be considered a significant issue for workers. Obviously individual physical and mental capacities are different in all of us, but there is no doubt that in some very physical jobs, even this middle age of 45, can be affected considerably by the type of job done.

What perceptions are there on older workers?

There are a number of what could be termed myths that surround older workers, some of which are looked at here:

- Old age brings illness and disease – not necessarily true as lifestyle, diet and exercise can have a much bigger influence on worker's wellbeing.
- They think less clearly – again this is not inevitable and many older workers bring other factors, such as knowledge and experience, to use in their job.
- They have less physical strength and endurance – these factors vary greatly with individuals and are more dependent on an individual's capacity than on their age.
- They have less sensory awareness around light and sound – these issues happen gradually and again, not at a consistent pace.
- There is an inability to adapt to change in the workplace – this is not dependant on age but can occur in anyone.
- They find it harder to learn new skills – not if the training in these skills is tailored properly towards them.

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- They take more time off work through sickness – in fact they don't tend to take as many short breaks as other workers, which is often the most disruptive to business.
 - They have more accidents than other workers – in general younger workers often have more accidents due to lack of experience.
 - They are less productive – again this is influenced by a range of factors, age just being one of them.

However, some of these areas may require the employer to make the necessary adjustments in the approach to work to enable the task to be done safely.

Employer's Duties

The employer has a number of duties under health and safety legislation to comply with including:

- A general duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of ALL employees.
- A duty to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment, evaluating the risks which might arise due to ageing.
- Ensuring safe pedestrian and traffic routes, including safe access and egress, and emergency evacuation procedures.
- An assessment of first aid requirements to consider ageing.
- Display Screen Equipment/ Workstation assessment.
- Ensuring that the Manual Handling Operations regulations are complied with.

There may also be a need to review the Health & Safety policy to make sure that there are no ageist assumptions within it.

Outside of H&S legislation there are a number of other areas that need consideration. These include the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 and the Equality Act 2010.

Conclusion

While it can be seen that older workers may need consideration on their health, safety and welfare in the workplace, where the safety culture is inclusive to all the workplace, there should be very little need to increase resources towards them in particular. Obviously those employers who are already not complying with basic health and safety provision have the greatest potential to cause harm in an ageing workforce. GMB safety representatives should use their rights to make sure all their members are considered both in the safety policy and the risk assessment process. For further information on this or other H&S matters contact Daniel.shears@gmb.org.uk or john.mcclean@gmb.org.uk

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