

Ergonomics Support an Ageing Workforce

Underwriter Laboratories (UL) is a global independent safety science company with over a century of expertise innovating safety solutions. In this article, they look at the shifting demographics of our workforce and how ergonomics is changing to meet the challenge.

Look around you. There is a good chance that your co-workers and colleagues are getting older. For the first time in history, four generations are in the workplace at the same time.

According to the United Nations, by 2050, one in three people living in the developed world will be over 60. In Australia, one in four people is older than 55 and over the next decade this will increase to approximately one in three. This shift in demographics means that it will be necessary to prolong paid workforce participation in a bid to cut the dependence of the non-working population on the working population. In the US, there were 28 million workers over the age of 55 back in 2008. Last year, that number had jumped to almost 40 million – an increase of 43%. By 2020 it is predicted that 25% of the U.S. labour force will be over 55 and almost 17% will be 65 and older. And when you have the majority of baby boomers saying they have no plans to put their feet up at retirement age, you can clearly see a trend emerging.

The changing make up of staff at companies everywhere presents both challenges and opportunities. Promoting health, safety, and wellbeing is essential if companies are to truly engage older workers and make the most of their expertise, experience, and know-how across a range of different sectors. According to the National Technical Assistance and Research Center, the 25 million baby boomers likely to exit the workplace by the end of this decade possess some of the most important character traits to commercial success, including being results-driven, ambitious, idealistic, competitive, optimistic, and people-oriented. Finding ways to retain and attract older workers is about to become more important than ever.

So, accommodating these professionals and keeping them safe, fit, and productive is crucial. With age can come a loss of strength, flexibility, and reaction time. A decrease in oxygen intake can boost blood pressure. And psycho-social changes means workers favour different ways of working and learning on the job.

And that's where ergonomics can play a key role. Ergonomics is the science of designing the workplace to help and support workers given their current capabilities. By designing jobs, tasks and places that take away any form of incompatibility between work and worker, companies are better able to prevent sicknesses, injuries and mistakes, particularly among the older workforce.

Here are 6 rules for creating ergonomically positive workplaces.

1. Focus on neutral postures

Whether standing or sitting in the workplace, encouraging workers to adopt the neutral posture is best – the posture when the joints are not bent and the spine is aligned and not twisted, reducing stress and strain on the musculoskeletal system.

2. Remember the ‘power zone’

Often referred to as the ‘hand shake zone’ too, remember to encourage lifting only when it is close to the body, between mid-thigh and mid-chest height. Similar to the ‘strike zone’ in baseball, this zone is where the arms and back can lift the most with the least amount of effort.

3. Educate and training

You’re never too old to learn new things. A positive training or induction programme can help to motivate staff to accept responsibility for their own workplace habits.

4. Offer good lighting

Probably the most common issue for older workers is poor lighting as visual acuity naturally deteriorates with age. Be sure to light work areas properly and appropriately.

5. Get a grip

Offering so-called ‘power grips’ rather than alternatives like pinch grips for a multitude of tasks, equipment and machinery is a basic ergonomic rule which will really help ageing workers.

6. Avoid repetition

Some older workers may have less stamina and need extra recovery time when doing specific tasks. By allowing them to control the pace of work themselves, you will support their needs and boost productivity and morale.

These basics are a good starting point when considering the ergonomics of your workplace – and how fit you are to prepare for an aging workforce. As mentioned, older workers are valuable to any business and will increasingly represent a large portion of your organisation’s knowledge and skill.

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