



Our aging world

What it means for our industries

Retirement on the horizon

For many companies in the sectors that IHSA serves, the aging of the workforce is a cause for concern. The baby boomers, who make up a large group in the population, have now begun to retire, and they are expected to leave a large gap in the workforce. For members of that age group who are in the trades and who are still working, new health and safety problems begin to arise, such as more frequent musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and slips and falls.

Those areas of concern, though very different, will present employers with both challenges and opportunities in terms of human resources, as well as possibly affecting their health and safety records.

At the same time as so many workers are leaving the workforce, the construction trades, according to the Construction Sector Council and Statistics Canada, will grow modestly over the next three years. The growth may be from a few hundred workers to a few thousand workers per trade.

The Canadian Trucking Human Resource Council says the trucking industry in Ontario will grow from about 64,000 in 2011 to 75,000 in 2015.

According to the Electricity Sector Council's 2011 report *Power in Motion*, "Canada's electricity and renewable energy industry will be recruiting over 45,000 new employees between 2011 and 2016. This is almost half of

the existing workforce and more than twice the number recruited in the last five years."

The combination of so many retirements and the expected growth in the size of the construction trades may affect a company's bottom line in several ways.

- Infrastructure projects may be slowed down or stopped due to a lack of workers.
- A company's work may become less reliable as valuable skills are lost. There may not be enough staff to maintain system support.
- It may be necessary to rely more on automated systems than on the human workforce.

The new situation may affect a company's health and safety record, because workers who have been with their current employer for less than a year are generally at a higher risk of injuries, particularly struck-by LTIs. Complicating this issue is the fact that many new workers will require extensive training in recognizing and controlling health and safety hazards, and they will not have the benefit of working with more experienced workers who can offer useful guidance and instruction. In addition, workers who have only a few years' experience may be promoted much earlier than expected.

One way of dealing with those difficulties is by succession planning, a process that tries to ensure the smooth continuation of a business. One part



Workforce

of succession planning is to decide what skills the organization will need in the next five to ten years—not just technical skills but also team-building and leadership skills.

The other large part of succession planning is workforce planning—not only hiring and training apprentices and new staff but also ensuring that selected employees are prepared to take on more senior jobs as supervisors, managers, and executives when those positions become vacant. In order to do that, suitable employees are identified and prepared for promotion through mentoring, training, and job rotation. This is an ongoing process that will create a supply of qualified internal candidates.

Companies may also want to identify those workers who place the greatest value on health and safety and encourage them to learn and grow in their positions. That may result in more effective health and safety programs in future.

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Injury and potential for harm

Aging workers who remain on the job may face new challenges. Though they may be better at recognizing hazards because of their experience, if they are injured, their recovery may be long or complicated. The consequences of injury are, on average, more severe for older workers.

There may also be

- decreased resistance to general wear and tear on the body
- non-occupational health problems (which tend to increase with age)
- diminished energy
- hearing loss
- poor eyesight.

While those things may not affect work performance, they can all contribute to a greater likelihood of MSDs or other workplace injuries such as slips and falls.

MSDs are of particular concern. According to the *Resource Manual for the MSD Prevention Guideline for Ontario*, “an effective MSD prevention program helps employers to retain their skilled and knowledgeable workers. This is particularly significant with an aging workforce. A well-implemented MSD prevention program is an opportunity to consider how the jobs are done. The resulting changes not only reduce the workers’ exposure to MSD hazards but also help to improve productivity and quality by finding better, smarter and more efficient ways to do the job.”

Rather than make assumptions about the abilities of older workers, it may be prudent for employers to assess all job tasks for MSD risks. This is a sound idea, not only for aging workers, but for the workplace in general as part of hazard assessment and control. It may be of benefit to identify areas where tasks require awkward and repetitive forceful exertion or where workers can rotate through a variety of tasks. An effort to match tasks to abilities can be helpful to the entire workforce.