



Vulnerable Workers

and the language of safety

Ontario's construction and transportation sectors are in ever greater need of new workers to meet the demand for skilled tradespeople and labourers. However, when these new workers are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the language of health and safety becomes difficult.

If those workers have not understood their training or their supervisors' safety instructions because of a language barrier, they may be in danger on the job. Even workers whose first or only language is English may still need help if their literacy skills are low.

Ontario's skilled trades are facing serious shortages, and the provincial government is putting more emphasis on immigration to fill these needs. For the first time, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration is emphasizing the essential place of skilled immigrants in Ontario's construction trades. The Ministry points to these facts:

- Newcomers make up 30 per cent of Ontario's labour force.
- Without continued immigration, Ontario's working-age population will begin to decline by 2014.

In July 2012, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants reported that the second-highest concern among immigrants was not having a thorough knowledge of English; about 33 per cent of newcomers said it was a barrier to their integration into Canadian society. Their top concern was to find a job. That may be why some of these workers are not willing to tell their employers that they don't understand safety directions.

Employers should consider the language spoken on the worksite and how best to speak to workers in a way they will understand. It may be helpful to demonstrate safety hazards with images or pictograms and with gestures and hand signals.

Who are vulnerable workers?

Generally speaking, vulnerable workers are those who have recently moved to Ontario from another province or country, have just started their first job, or are returning to the workforce after a long absence. Vulnerable workers also include people who work in the "underground" economy, especially those who



do not have documentation—such as a SIN card or citizenship papers—and refugees whose English is inadequate. Though they may be skilled at their work, the language barrier may result in more injuries in the workplace.

Vulnerable workers may be more exposed to injury and illness than other workers because of their lack of experience, reluctance to ask questions, difficulty with English, and the type of work they do.

In a September 2008 report, the Conference Board of Canada argued that there is an opportunity to increase both productivity and safety by improving literacy in the workplace. The report described a two-year study which found that

- workers with a lower literacy level may not understand all their health and safety rights and responsibilities
- workers who work in high-hazard areas or perform high-risk tasks may not fully understand the health and safety precautions required or the warnings given by their supervisors or employers.

General tips

There are a few things a company can do when it has vulnerable workers among its employees.

- Establish procedures and measures for workplace health and safety and make sure they are always followed.
- Be sure the proper equipment and personal protective equipment are provided and are maintained properly.
- Insist that all hazards, illnesses, and injuries be reported immediately.
- Provide proper and ongoing general training.
- Point out hazards in the workplace and provide training or instructions on how to handle them.
- Respond promptly to all health and safety concerns expressed by workers.
- Lead by example: Use and wear safety equipment when it is required and take part in drills and other emergency-response training.

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