

The Impact of an Aging Workforce on Construction Safety

An Aging Workforce and Injury in the Construction Industry

*Natalie V. Schwatka, Lesley M. Butler and John R. Rosecrance.
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Overview

The proportion of older workers in the U.S. workplace is increasing. Understanding the health and safety needs of an aging workforce will be critical, especially in the physically demanding construction industry. The authors reviewed 22 studies discussing the relationship of age with the cause, type and cost of workplace injury among construction workers. The studies, published between 1998 and 2011, generally reported that older workers experienced fewer but more costly injuries than younger workers. The higher injury costs associated with worker age are likely due in part to the severity of the injuries sustained by older workers. Research efforts to identify trends and factors associated with injury among older construction workers are needed so that construction employers can effectively address the needs of the aging worker in their safety programs.

Key Findings

- The construction workforce is aging. The median age of construction workers in 2000 was 37.9; in 2010, the median age was 40.4.
- Although construction work is physically demanding, older workers may hesitate to switch to less strenuous occupations because a change would entail reduced income or reduced access to pension and health benefits.
- Most studies suggest that injuries are less frequent but more severe among older construction workers.
- In general, workers' compensation costs increase with the age of workers, in part due to greater lost work time per incident.
- Employers can mitigate injury risks to older workers by adapting the workplace, for example by selecting lighter materials, providing material handling equipment, and by using ergonomic principles to fit the work to the worker.
- Employers who resist adapting work to older workers are susceptible to losing valuable, experienced employees and incurring significant recruitment and training costs.

For more information, contact:

Natalie Schwatka: nvschwatka@gmail.com

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