



The Aging Workforce: Impossible to Ignore

Welcome to the age of the aging workforce. Faced with a job pool of fewer younger employees than older ones, employers who want to maintain or boost workplace productivity have no choice but to find ways to effectively manage the older worker. The number of older employees is soaring, and by 2008, 1 in 6 workers will be over 55.¹

Silver-collar workers may be your most experienced, dedicated and stable employees, but they will require some accommodations to perform their best. One solution is to make the work – and the workplace – fit the needs of those employees with a customized ergonomics program.

While many employers have seen ergonomics programs prevent injuries, facilitate recovery for injured employees, and lower workers' compensation costs – including big-name companies such as ConAgra, Sun Microsystems and Georgia Pacific² – most employers haven't considered the benefits of an ergonomics program specifically designed for their older workers.

With knowledge of the aging process and its related conditions, physical therapists are able to provide

relevant information to older workers and their employers on injury prevention, workplace modifications, movement alterations, and injury recovery. For example, older employees who have been working for many years report more back injuries than younger workers.

Prevent Injuries through Education

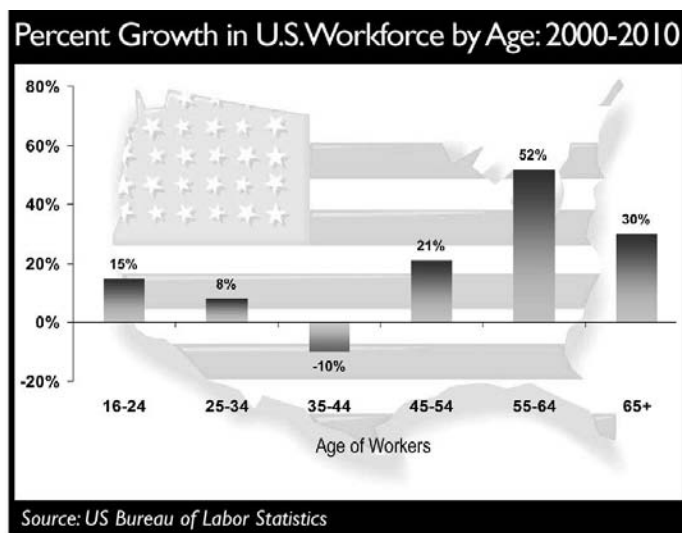
“Since many injuries experienced in the aging workforce are cumulative trauma injuries, the major part of an ergonomics program would be injury prevention through education,” says PTPN provider Lori Leonard, PT, of M.O.R.E. Therapy Clinics. “Along with a jobsite evaluation to analyze potential risks, back school and arm/neck school would be particularly beneficial for the older worker.”

Leonard, an ergonomics specialist who performs jobsite evaluations and conducts worksite injury prevention classes, urges employers to ensure that injured workers have easy access to a healthcare provider so they can begin treatment immediately. “To help injured employees return to work, a physical therapist may prescribe modified duty and task rotation,” she says. “To prevent re-injury, the therapist can assess the factors that contributed to the injury, and educate the worker on techniques to do the job safely.”

Use Full Lifestyle Management Programs

In addition to an ergonomics program to enhance the productivity of older workers, an emerging and powerful tool for companies is a full lifestyle management program.

“Wellness programs go hand in hand with ergonomics,” says Carin Shuler, DPT, a PTPN provider from Inland Empire Physical Therapy. “While it's important to accommodate the older worker with more lumbar support and institute stretch breaks to improve circulation and flexibility, employers need to move beyond musculoskeletal concerns and address the



Dychtwald, K., Erickson, T., Morison, B., “It’s Time to Retire Retirement,” Public Policy and Aging Report, Summer 2004, Volume 14, #3.

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This information is provided by PTPN, the nation's first and largest outpatient rehabilitation network. All members of PTPN must be independent practitioners who own their own practices. Headquartered in Calabasas, Calif., PTPN's network includes more than 1,200 therapist offices throughout the United States.

1 "Older Workers, Demographic Trends Pose Challenges for Employers and Workers," U.S. General Accounting Office, Nov. 2001.
 2 "Ergonomics: Possible Solutions, Success Stories," Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Available at www.osha.gov/SLTC/ergonomics/success_stories.html. Accessed June 16, 2004.

away without exercising, it's imperative that older people get both aerobic exercise and resistance training. Older patients should continue a post-rehab exercise program – whether as part of an employer wellness program, at a gym or a physical therapy clinic – that will become a lifetime habit that will keep them productive." For more information, request a copy of our free white paper, "The Aging Workforce: Impossible to Ignore" from Stephen Moore at smoore@ptpn.com or 800-766-PTPN. Or, visit the Payor and Expert Advice sections at www.ptpn.com.

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In dealing with the injuries of older workers, Shuler educates employers and employees about the risk factors associated with aging, such as osteoporosis. "If a truck driver fractures a wrist while loading a truck, his physician may just take care of the fracture, but one needs to look at the whole picture: Did he sustain the fracture because he has osteoporosis? Is he a longtime asthmatic taking steroids, making him even more susceptible to osteoporosis?"

The key to getting older workers back to work after an injury and keeping them on the job is exercise, says Shuler. "While those in their 30s might be able to get

Look at the Big Picture

chronic conditions affecting their aging employees, such as arthritis, diabetes and obesity."

For instance, as part of a worksite analysis, Shuler, a certified ergonomist, will make note of an overabundance of obese employees and the type of food available in the company vending machines. "Those things impact their health just as their workstation set-up does, so I educate employees about the importance of a healthy diet and regular physical activity to fight obesity."

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From PTPN, the rehabilitation and workforce productivity experts

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