



Safe and Healthy

A guide to
managing
an ageing
workforce



About this publication

***Safe and Healthy: A guide to managing an ageing workforce* outlines how Persons Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBUs), managers and supervisors can adapt workplaces, tools and procedures to deal with age-related changes.**

This publication will help you to:

- overcome common misperceptions about older workers' capabilities
- learn that the lost-time claim rates of older workers is not much higher than the average of all workers in Tasmania
- consider simple changes in your work environment to keep ageing workers safe, healthy and productive
- understand how a safe and healthy work environment benefits workers of all ages.

Besides helping PCBUs, managers and supervisors to develop and use policies and programs to improve work health and safety, this publication will also assist all workers to better understand and adapt to physical and psychological changes as they age.

Please note

This publication is not intended to be a first aid or safety manual or to offer detailed hazard assessment or materials-handling guidelines.

This information is for guidance only and is not to be taken as an expression of the law. It should be read in conjunction with the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*, the *Work Health and Safety Regulations 2012*, national codes of practice and any other relevant legislation. You can find this on the WorkSafe Tasmania website at www.worksafe.tas.gov.au

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Introduction

We all share the fact that we're getting older. But how we age differs from one person to the next.

While two people may share the same birth date, one may function better physically or mentally. We describe these two people as having the same *chronological* age but different *functional* ages.

Just as it is difficult to define 'age', it is not easy to define 'older workers'. The World Health Organisation uses 45 as the dividing line between 'younger' and 'older' workers, and this publication describes 'older workers' as those 45 and over.

Older workers, whether they are 45, 60 or 70, can be victims of outdated attitudes, stereotyping, unfair policies and prejudices. This can negatively affect older workers by:

- prematurely forcing them out of the workplace
- denying them promotions
- excluding them from learning and training opportunities.

Beliefs, whether right or wrong, about the health, safety and effectiveness of older workers may influence whether they are hired or let go. A common misperception is that older workers are 'over the hill' and cannot work safely and effectively.

Not only can these mistaken beliefs harm older workers, they also negatively affect businesses, particularly since older workers are a valuable human resource in today's labour market.

Our bodies do alter as we age. However, once these changes are better understood and small adjustments are made to offset their effects, workplaces can become safer, healthier and more productive for all workers, not just older ones.

Any change you make for one person helps the whole population. Changes made for the older population can be the driver, but they will benefit everyone in the workplace.

— ergonomics consultant advising a large urban municipality



Riding the population wave

Tasmania's ageing population

On average, Tasmania's and Australia's populations are ageing. Tasmania has:

- the oldest population of all the states and territories with a median age of almost 40 years (2010 figures)
- experienced the largest increase in median age over the past 20 years, increasing by almost 8 years from around 32 years in 1990 to almost 40 years in 2010
- approximately 28 per cent of its population between the ages of 45 and 64 (2012 figures).

Other contributing factors

The emigration of younger adults from Tasmania to the Australian mainland has contributed to this accelerated ageing.

The tendency for families to have fewer children than in the past also supports the trend of an ageing population, as young people comprise a smaller percentage of our population.

Many births occurred during the period 1946 to 1964 (post Second World War), creating a baby boom. These baby boomers are now middle-aged.

People are generally now living longer and the number of people in the older age categories is increasing.

Workforce participation rates

Statistics on the participation rate in the labour force measure the part of the general population aged over 15 that is working or looking for work.

The percentage of the labour force aged over 45 has increased considerably in Tasmania—from approximately 34 per cent in 2002 compared with 43 per cent in 2012.

The participation rate for those aged 45 and over has also increased from around 31 per cent in 1992 to around 47 per cent in 2012. During the same period, the participation rate of those aged 15 and over has remained relatively constant at around 60 per cent. This results in a greater number of older workers in the labour force.

Now hiring—a sign of the times

An ageing population and an increased number of older workers leaving the workforce could mean there are fewer workers available to do the work required in the near future.

This ageing trend creates both challenges and opportunities for Tasmanian businesses. Over time, a shortage of workers could reduce our economic output, lower our standard of living and lessen our competitiveness.

Staffing shortages are likely to intensify. This is especially true in the transport and education sectors, but also in government, health care and agriculture. On the other hand, recruiting and retaining older workers can help business to address labour shortages now and in the future, and gain the benefits of older workers' decades of experience.

This means that PCBUs, managers and supervisors need strategies that retain older workers and encourage them to work beyond the traditional retirement age. It may also mean bringing back those who have left the workforce.

These strategies may require financial incentives as well as finding ways of accommodating workers through:

- adaptable workplace policies that meet demands for options such as flexitime, part time, job sharing, temporary work, ‘bridge’ work (between careers and retirement), contract work, job pooling, phased-in retirement (gradual reduction in hours)
- motivational incentives
- education and training strategies.

Workers of any age are more likely to be attracted to employment and remain working if they feel their work environment is safe and healthy.

What work means to older workers

For individual workers, decisions about staying in or returning to the workforce depend on many considerations, including:

- individual economic needs (for example, inadequate pension income)
- job satisfaction and the sense of productivity and creativity offered by work
- the need for social contact and stimulation
- maintenance of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Issues in attracting older workers and keeping them employed

Business concerns and motivation	Older worker motivators	Possible responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep those now working employed • Bringing back older workers who have left the workforce • Convince those working to stay (beyond traditional retirement age) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual economic needs • Job satisfaction and productivity • Need for social contact and stimulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility in the workplace • Motivation and nonmonetary incentives • Education and health and safety training strategies for older workers • Procedures that ensure older workers’ health and safety

Facing age-old misperceptions

Dealing with myths and realities

Some of the social, economic, safety and medical myths about older workers are based on a perception that older workers are frail, unreliable and incapable of working effectively and safely. It is time to set aside these stereotypes and negative attitudes. The following table presents and responds to some of these myths.

Myths and realities about older workers	
Myth	Reality
Older workers are more likely to have work-related injuries.	Not true. In fact workers over 45 are no more likely to suffer job-related injuries than workers under 45.
Older people are all alike.	Differences within age groups are often greater than those between age groups.
Older adults are unable or unwilling to learn new things or skills.	Age does not determine curiosity or the willingness to learn. Older workers may sometimes take slightly longer to learn certain tasks and may respond better to customised training methods more suited to their needs.
Older adults avoid new approaches or new technologies.	Many people, regardless of age, enjoy new technology. Older workers are likely to respond well to innovation if it: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relates to what they already know • allows for self-paced learning • provides opportunities for practise and support. See the section <i>Delivering the message — designing training for older workers</i> in the chapter on <i>Creating a safe and healthy working environment</i> .
Older workers have failing memories.	Long-term memory continues to increase with age.
It is not worthwhile investing in training older workers because they are likely to leave or are 'just coasting to retirement'.	Older workers tend to be loyal and less likely to change jobs frequently. This is particularly the case if older workers know their efforts are appreciated and they are not faced with a mandatory retirement age. In a knowledge economy (economy based on creating, evaluating, and trading knowledge), the payback period on investment in training is becoming shorter for all workers. That means that spending on training older workers is very likely to be recovered before these workers retire.

<p>Older workers are less productive.</p>	<p>Productivity is individual and varies more within an age group than between age groups. No significant impact on productivity due to ageing is likely until workers are well into their 70s.</p> <p>Older workers may be less productive doing heavy physical work. However, most jobs do not require maximum physical exertion. Older workers generally make up for any decline in physical or mental ability through experience and forethought. If strength and agility are a factor, older workers can usually find ways to compensate by 'working smarter'.</p> <p>Older workers are often well trained and have a track record of responsibility and dedication.</p>
<p>Older workers relate poorly to customers.</p>	<p>Older workers can often be more effective than younger workers when experience or people skills are needed, as when dealing with customers or building a client base.</p>
<p>Older workers are inflexible.</p>	<p>Older workers may be more cautious, a trait that can improve accuracy and safety.</p>
<p>Older adults have impaired mental or intellectual capacity.</p>	<p>Intellectual abilities stay intact into the 70s and beyond. Short-term memory may start declining well before age 45, but measurable, in-depth knowledge continues to increase as we age.</p> <p>Age tends to enhance the ability to perform activities depending on judgment, decision making and general knowledge.</p>
<p>Older workers are more likely to suffer from illness and are more often absent or late for work than younger workers.</p>	<p>Older workers have lower absenteeism and tend to be more punctual than younger workers.</p> <p>Usually, older workers with health conditions requiring extensive sick leave have left the workforce of their own accord. Any significant increase in hospital stays or sick leave are not likely to show up until people are over 80.</p>
<p>Older workers have less education.</p>	<p>While this may have been true at one time, it is less a factor now that many well-educated baby boomers fill the ranks of older workers.</p>

It is a common but incorrect belief that older workers suffer more injuries than younger workers.

Dealing effectively with age

Ageing is not a disease; it is a biological process of change that starts at birth. The ageing process means that people may not have the same strength or physical abilities at 50 or 60 that they had at 25 or 30. But in the case of most jobs, with minor adaptations or adjustments, workers can perform the work very well into their 70s and sometimes beyond. In some types of work, performance may continue to improve into the 60s and 70s.

Age does not determine fitness. With regular physical exercise, physical capacity can remain relatively unchanged between ages 45 to 65. It also means that 45-year-old workers who do not exercise can be less fit than co-workers aged 65 or older who do look after their health.

The following table lists some physical and mental changes that occur gradually as people age. When and at what rate these changes occur varies from person to person. The table includes information about how these changes can affect workplace performance and health and safety if changes and adjustments are not made. The table also includes actions that PCBUs, managers, supervisors and workers, can take to improve the health and safety of all workers, not just those 45 or older. More detailed suggestions are provided in the chapter *Creating a safe and healthy working environment*.

Ageing is not a disease; it is a biological process of change that starts at birth.



Responding to physical changes

Musculoskeletal system (muscles, bones, joints, ligaments and tendons)

How organs and systems change with age	How age-related changes impact work	What PCBUs need to do	What workers need to do
Muscles			
<p>Muscle strength gradually declines, reaching an annual average three per cent decline after age 70. On average, those 51 to 55 have about 80 per cent of the strength they had in their early 30s.</p> <p>Muscles lose elasticity.</p> <p>Muscles take longer to respond.</p>	<p>Less muscle strength and endurance may affect the ability to do physical work over extended periods, particularly for heavy or intense activities.</p> <p>Though maximum strength declines with age, the level of strength available necessary for most work does not change greatly.</p> <p>Grip strength decreases.</p> <p>Range of motion decreases. Some work may become difficult due to pain.</p>	<p>Provide mechanical devices and power tools for lifting and moving.</p> <p>Minimise lifting by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • storing at lower levels • packing in smaller quantities or containers. <p>Provide supportive, adjustable seating and workstations.</p> <p>Minimise work requiring fixed (static) muscle positions.</p> <p>Provide grip friendly tools, gripping gloves and easy-to-turn and twist valves and container lids.</p> <p>Provide power tools.</p> <p>Provide long handled tools to reduce bending.</p> <p>Provide guidelines and training for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lifting • sitting, standing • bending • stretching. 	<p>Use the equipment provided for lifting and moving loads.</p> <p>Maintain proper posture.</p> <p>Reduce or eliminate upper body twisting.</p> <p>Wear proper footwear.</p> <p>Change position frequently.</p> <p>Stretch before, during and after work.</p> <p>Move joints through their complete range of motion.</p> <p>Minimise squatting, bending, kneeling and stooping.</p>

Musculoskeletal system (muscles, bones, joints, ligaments and tendons) continued			
How organs and systems change with age	How age-related changes impact work	What PCBU's need to do	What workers need to do
Bones			
<p>Bones lose calcium, making them more porous. This can lead to osteoporosis.</p> <p>Cartilage deteriorates and can lead to bone damage at the joint.</p>	<p>More porous, less dense bones are more likely to break as a result of workplace slips or falls.</p> <p>Work injuries may result from short-term overexertion or repeated, long-term stress on muscles, joints and bones.</p>	<p>Minimise slips, trips and falls by reducing climbing and not working at height.</p> <p>Arrange for proper equipment and tools storage.</p> <p>Supply safe ladders and steps.</p> <p>Ensure proper lighting.</p> <p>Construct and mark steps, floors and surfaces properly.</p> <p>Install fall protection barriers.</p> <p>Rotate work assignments to avoid overuse injury.</p> <p>Limit above-shoulder and above-head work.</p> <p>Eliminate or isolate vibration.</p> <p>Offer exercise or stretch breaks.</p>	<p>Use ladders properly and be cautious on steps.</p> <p>Add weight-bearing activities (walking, running) to a regular exercise routine.</p> <p>Eat a healthy diet, including foods containing calcium.</p>



Cardiovascular and respiratory systems			
How organs and systems change with age	How age-related changes impact work	What PCBUs need to do	What workers need to do
<p>The heart, lungs and the circulatory system's ability to carry oxygen-filled blood decreases.</p> <p>Between age 30 and 65, functional breathing capacity is reduced by 40 per cent.</p> <p>Blood vessels lose flexibility. Arteries thicken, which can lead to hardening of the arteries, increasing the risk of high blood pressure and strokes.</p> <p>With more constricted blood vessels, blood flow to outer parts of the body decreases. It also lessens the body's ability to carry heat to the skin.</p> <p>The heart takes longer to return to resting level following an increase in the heart rate.</p>	<p>Capacity for extended physical labour is reduced. Changes do not usually affect normal work.</p> <p>Lessened blood flow to outer parts of the body reduces heat loss from skin surface in hot conditions.</p> <p>Insufficient warm clothing can lead to frostbite and hypothermia.</p>	<p>Provide mechanical devices to minimise lifting.</p> <p>Avoid work in extreme heat or cold, if possible.</p> <p>Adjust work in high or low temperatures.</p> <p>Provide air conditioning, heating and adequate ventilation.</p> <p>Assign and schedule work to avoid fatigue.</p>	<p>Avoid over fatigue.</p> <p>Dress properly for hot and cold conditions.</p> <p>Use appropriate personal protective equipment (including masks and respirators).</p> <p>Maintain a healthy lifestyle by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • controlling weight • not smoking • avoiding substance abuse • eating properly • exercising.
Hearing			
<p>The ability to hear and distinguish one kind of sound from another, especially high-pitched sounds, decreases with age.</p> <p>More difficulty locating the source of sounds.</p>	<p>Hearing loss may reduce the ability to hear alarms and other work-related signals, as well as verbal instructions.</p>	<p>Reduce general workplace noise.</p> <p>Use back-up warning systems, lights and vibration systems (vibrating pagers) along with sounds.</p> <p>Reduce long-term and repeated exposure to noise.</p> <p>Shield and insulate noisy equipment.</p> <p>Provide hearing protection.</p> <p>Speak clearly.</p>	<p>Use personal protective equipment to preserve hearing.</p> <p>Have hearing tested.</p> <p>Use hearing aids if prescribed.</p>

Vision			
How organs and systems change with age	How age-related changes impact work	What PCBUs need to do	What workers need to do
<p>The flexibility of the lens of the eye changes, often resulting in long-sightedness, which is noticeable around age 40.</p> <p>The eye's ability to see light gradually diminishes. The amount of light reaching the back of the eye can decline by up to 75 per cent between ages 20 and 50.</p> <p>The macula, a light-sensitive point at the back of the eye, works less effectively.</p> <p>Sharpness of vision for stationary objects does not decline significantly before age 60. The ability to see moving targets, sideways and in-and-out motions can begin to decline at a much younger age.</p> <p>Many of the changes can be dealt with by using corrective lenses.</p>	<p>Visual changes may affect the ability to read printed material, dials and screens within arm's length.</p> <p>Ability to do detailed tasks may be affected.</p> <p>Ability to adapt to changing lighting conditions may be reduced.</p> <p>Eye movement, including the ability to follow visual targets, may be affected.</p> <p>Increased sensitivity to glare.</p> <p>Diminished ability to notice a difference between blue and black.</p>	<p>Where practical, improve workplace lighting, making it individually adjustable and suited to the task.</p> <p>Reduce glare by using several light sources rather than one large source.</p> <p>Provide indirect lighting.</p> <p>Avoid sharp contrasts in light levels.</p> <p>Reduce sunlight glare with shades and awnings.</p> <p>Ensure written material and displays have sufficient contrast and are readable. Some colour combinations are difficult to read when used together. Black letters on a white background is good, while white letters on a black background can be difficult to read.</p> <p>Provide personal protective equipment for eyes.</p> <p>Provide or encourage regular eye examinations.</p>	<p>Have vision tested regularly and get reading glasses if required.</p> <p>Use personal protective equipment for eyes.</p>
Skin			
<p>The skin stretches less easily.</p> <p>Secretion of oil and sweat declines.</p>	<p>Decreased tolerance to heat and cold.</p>	<p>Control or limit work in extreme heat or cold.</p>	<p>Use skin protection, lotions and protective clothing.</p>

Mental and motor processes			
How organs and systems change with age	How age-related changes impact work	What PCBU's need to do	What workers need to do
Mental processes			
<p>While mental processes are at their height when people are in their 30s and 40s, these abilities decline only very slightly in the 50s and 60s. A decline may not be noticeable until people are 70 or older.</p> <p>The amount of change varies greatly from one person to the next.</p>	<p>It may take slightly longer to process information.</p> <p>In most situations, changes do not affect work performance.</p>	<p>Reduce multi-tasking.</p> <p>Increase time between steps of a task.</p> <p>Increase available decision-making time.</p> <p>Reinforce tasks and skills (including emergency response) through repetition, drills and refresher courses.</p>	<p>Exercise to increase flow of blood, which encourages growth, and prevents or reduces death of brain cells.</p> <p>Follow a healthy diet.</p> <p>Minimise stress at and outside work.</p> <p>Get enough sleep.</p> <p>Be aware of the possible side effects of medications.</p> <p>Challenge the brain through hobbies, reading and other mentally stimulating activities.</p>
Sensory and motor processes			
<p>The sensory system carries messages to the brain and the motor control system carries messages from the brain to parts of the body performing an activity.</p> <p>A decrease in the size and flexibility of muscles and a reduction in central and outer nerve fibres occur with age.</p>	<p>Lengthened reaction and response time may slow decision-making in some cases.</p> <p>Except where extremely quick responses are required, these changes do not affect the ability to perform most work.</p>	<p>Reduce multi-tasking.</p> <p>Provide opportunities to practise and reinforce tasks.</p>	<p>Practise and reinforce tasks.</p>

Ensuring that work is done in a healthy and safe way may require some adjustments to equipment and working conditions.



We're not all the same—other health and safety considerations

As discussed, when and how fast physical and mental changes related to ageing occur varies greatly from one person to the next. However, as they grow older, everyone is affected by these changes in some way.

For example, over time, repetitive tasks can lead to a variety of difficulties, including vision problems and headaches or back, muscle or joint pain. Again, these conditions are not confined to older workers.

While some hearing loss occurs naturally with age, hearing loss may also be caused by continued exposure to noise or a one-time traumatic event.

Thinking smarter—mind over matter

In most cases, perception, memory and learning skills remain constant well past the traditional retirement age of 65. There is even evidence that some mental abilities, such as use of language and planning, improve with age. Being able to work well in groups and with other people are abilities that tend to get better with age. With experience can come an improved understanding of tasks and work efficiency. This often means older workers learn to 'work smarter'.

The body clock

Adequate sleep and rest from work is important for all workers, but regular sleep patterns become even more important with age.

People over 40 have greater difficulty adapting to shift work. This can mean work performance, and the work health and safety of older workers could suffer as a result of any changes to the regular circadian (daily body clock) patterns.

This does not mean older workers cannot or should not do shift work. However, the impact of sleep patterns should be considered when assigning and scheduling shift work. (see the section *A matter of timing—older workers and shift work*)

Handling stress

Workers of any age can experience emotional or psychological stress in the workplace.

While there are many potential sources of workplace stress, some causes of stress might be more specific to older workers. For example:

- feeling threatened by younger workers or supervisors
- coping with negative attitudes about ageing
- being concerned about retirement plans.

Individuals react to and cope with stressful situations in different ways. No matter what the source, stress can reduce workers' effectiveness and ability to concentrate on work. Work health and safety can be affected by symptoms of stress such as:

- a rise in blood pressure or pulse
- headaches
- rapid breathing
- muscle tension (including tightened abdominal muscles)
- upset stomach

Summing up work performance and age

Depending on the nature of the work, job performance may improve, remain constant or decline with age. But in almost all cases, training, changes and adaptation within the work environment can improve safety and performance and offset effects of physical and mental changes related to ageing.

If you manage the business better from a safety perspective, everyone benefits. It doesn't matter how old they are.

— WHS professional

Work health and safety

Understanding the laws

PCBUs (Persons conducting a business or undertaking)

A PCBU conducts a business or undertaking alone or with others. The business or undertaking can be operated for profit or not-for-profit. Although employers are PCBUs, the term PCBU is much broader than this and may include:

- a corporation
- an association
- partners in a partnership
- a sole trader
- a volunteer organisation which employs any person to carry out work
- householders where there is an employment relationship between the householder and the worker.

A PCBU has the primary duty of care for work health and safety. That is, their primary duty of care is to ensure the health and safety of workers, customers, visitors and others by removing or reducing risks at the workplace.

Workers

In turn, workers are responsible for:

- caring for their own and others' health and safety
- taking reasonable care not to adversely affect the health and safety of others
- complying with any reasonable instruction given by the PCBU, so far as they are reasonably able.

Asking the right questions

Here are some questions to consider when checking for workplace hazards that affect workers of any age:

- Are the procedures safe?
- Are workers using equipment and materials correctly?
- How suitable is the equipment used for the task? Is it easily accessible?
- How might people be hurt directly by equipment, machinery and tools?
- How might people be hurt indirectly through noise, fumes or radiation?
- How might people be hurt by using chemicals or other materials such as paints, solvents, fuels, toner, oils, plastics, acids, pesticides, gases, biological samples or waste material?

Identifying hazards

The *Work Health and Safety Regulations 2012* require PCBUs to identify and assess workplace hazards. A hazard is any situation, condition or thing that may be dangerous to a worker's safety and health.

Not every workplace hazard is listed in the regulations. PCBUs are still responsible for identifying and dealing with hazards in their workplace. All workplaces must be assessed and appropriate action taken if a hazard is identified. Hazards not only exist in obvious locations such as construction sites and manufacturing facilities, but can also be present in offices and retail shops.

Hazards are not limited to what can be seen, touched or heard. A worker's psychological state can affect work health and safety. For instance, workplace hazards could be present if someone is working while tired, under too much stress or while dealing with workplace conflict. In such situations, workers may be a hazard to themselves and others.

Safe and unsafe at any age

Workplace hazards affect the health and safety of workers of all ages. Although age doesn't make a difference to a worker's health and safety requirements, certain hazards, if not dealt with, may present added dangers to older workers. For example, poor or inadequate lighting may pose a particular safety issue for older workers. However, improving lighting will also help ensure the health and safety of all workers.

Sudden-onset injuries are likely to occur to workers of any age when they:

- do not recognise a hazard
- do not have their eyes or mind on the task
- are in the line of fire when something goes wrong
- are participating in an activity that may cause them to lose their balance, grip or traction
- are rushing, frustrated or careless
- are unable to react quickly enough to avoid injury, possibly because they are in poor physical condition.

Creating a safe and healthy working environment

Ensuring the health and safety of older workers may sometimes require minor changes to the work environment and in work routines. These measures will also make the workplace safer and healthier for all workers. Often the necessary changes and adjustments involve fairly minor expenses for your business.

Steps taken to help older workers will also make the workplace safer and healthier for all workers.

Keeping fit for life and work

The possibility of sudden-onset injuries and lasting health problems increases if workers are overweight or unfit. For example, lack of flexibility or strength can cause injuries to the lower back. Physical exercise also stimulates blood flow to the brain and preserves and regenerates brain cells. This enhances mental health. Physical work alone is unlikely to maintain a worker's health and fitness. It's important for those involved in physical work to also exercise regularly.

While exercise generally occurs on a worker's own time and initiative, PCBUs can encourage such activity by:

- offering in-house exercise facilities
- providing incentives to take part in fitness programs and classes
- supporting quit-smoking programs.

As work is usually where we spend much of our time as adults, a workplace can provide the ideal opportunity for addressing health and wellbeing issues and helping people change any unhealthy behaviours. Workplaces can play an important role in ensuring physically, mentally and socially healthy workers who then contribute to better business.

Helping workers to improve their health and wellbeing can deliver benefits for both the worker and the PCBU: greater job satisfaction and engagement, improved team relationships, better productivity, reduced absenteeism and staff turnover and associated costs, lowered workers compensation costs and ultimately, higher profits.

Assessing and discussing health and safety

When PCBUs, managers and supervisors adopt supportive attitudes toward older workers, their abilities and their health and safety, it has a positive impact on everyone's attitude toward ageing.

Supervisors should communicate directly and honestly with workers about health and safety concerns and should be aware of what options the PCBU can offer. For instance, if the worker is sick or has health concerns, the supervisor should know whether the PCBU can offer time off work, part-time work, workplace aids or assistance or changes in assignments.

Any discussions between a supervisor and a worker should use straightforward but open questions that encourage the worker to add more information when answering.

Keeping it confidential

Supervisors should make it clear that any information the worker shares about their health and safety will be kept confidential and will only be used to support the worker's needs or to modify their work situation.

Asking the right questions

If health and safety concerns arise, a supervisor might ask questions such as the following:

Are you clear what your responsibilities are?

Do you have the training and equipment you need to do the job?

Are there any health or personal issues that are preventing you from doing your job to the required levels or standards?

Are you receiving the support you need?

Meeting commitments

If special support is needed, the supervisor should indicate what could be provided and avoid making commitments that cannot be met. Keep the process reasonable, reliable and relevant:

- If commitments cannot be met, explain why.
- If there is a delay, tell the worker the reason for the delay. Make a commitment to get back to the worker with answers by a specified time.
- If workplace modifications or adjustments to work routines and schedules are needed, reach agreement with the affected worker on:
 - what can be communicated
 - how it should be communicated—by supervisors, the affected worker or someone else
 - who is to receive the communication.

Responding to questions from other workers

Explain that workplace accommodation and modifications are not a special favour to the affected worker but a way of keeping a valued worker in the workplace.

Designing the workplace to fit the work

There are many ways to design and rearrange workplaces, work procedures and equipment to improve:

- efficiency, including performance and productivity
- health and safety
- comfort and ease in doing the job.

When these conditions are met, it often indicates that the equipment or work procedures are well designed ergonomically. Good ergonomics involves fitting the job to the worker. It also means matching the product or equipment to the worker's job requirements.

Sitting properly for health and comfort

Risks associated with office type activities are generally minimised by well designed and adjustable work equipment. Sitting is now regarded as a significant health hazard. Sedentary jobs such as office work that involve long hours of sitting (usually in front of a computer) increase a worker's risk of contracting a chronic disease (such as diabetes, cancer or heart disease) and dying prematurely.

Prolonged sitting can also lead to weakened abdominal muscles, cause problems with digestion and breathing, and may lead to damage of spinal discs. Although such conditions may show up in older workers, people of any age can suffer problems after years of poor posture.

PCBUs can help reduce muscle strain by:

- supplying workers with adjustable work equipment suited for the job
- providing information and training on the suitable setting up of the work environment
- permitting opportunities to switch positions, walk about and stretch.

Workers can help to reduce this risk by:

- standing up to make/answer a phone call
- changing or rotating tasks (and therefore postures)
- getting up every hour and walking briskly to another part of the workplace
- avoiding the lift and using the stairs
- standing in meetings
- walking around in meetings
- walking to speak to a colleague in person rather than emailing or phoning them
- walking in their lunch break
- using a standing desk or improvising with a high table or counter.
- practising proper posture when sitting



We have made alterations to workstations and fabrication benches. By simply modifying the table or bench legs so that they telescope, the worker can adjust the working height of the bench to suit their needs. This results in reduced back strain and pain

— safety director of a construction company.

Keeping things within reach

PCBUs should also make adjustments to reduce or remove tasks that require workers to raise their hands above the head or their elbows above shoulder level for long periods. PCBUs should consider adjustments such as:

- raising workers up on a platform or ladder
- bringing the work closer to the worker
- providing arm supports.

Providing a lift

If manual lifting is required, PCBUs can redesign the process to reduce stress on the body by:

- reducing the weight of the load being lifted (for example by repackaging)
- decreasing the need to twist the trunk by relocating where loads are taken from and where they are moved
- placing loads as close to the body as possible
- removing or lowering barriers when moving boxes and bins.

Getting a grip—handing workers the right tools

When supplying tools and installing controls, PCBUs should:

- provide lighter weight tools when possible
- install levers, which are easier to control and grasp than knobs (especially smooth knobs on doors, taps and valves)
- use controls or levers that turn inward (the hand is most powerful turning inward toward the palm rather than outward)
- consider replacing hand-powered tools with mechanically-powered tools
- supply rubberised or other types of gloves to improve grip and leverage.

Shedding the right light—the eyes have it

PCBUS should encourage workers to report noticeable changes in eyesight. Make it clear that changes in vision will not lead to reprimands or job loss.

The ability to adjust and respond quickly to changes in lighting decreases with age. PCBUs can deal with this by avoiding or limiting contrasts in lighting, for example, ensuring that the level of lighting in the work environment is similar to the light level on the computer screen. PCBUs can also pay particular attention to maintaining consistent lighting on steps, walkways, entryways, high-traffic areas and parking lots.

Reaction to glare increases with age. To reduce glare:

- use several smaller light sources rather than a few large light sources
- provide low or non-glare computer screens
- install blinds or awnings to reduce glare from sunlight.

Individual task lighting can allow workers to adjust lighting to meet their own job requirements. Rather than more lighting, often all that is needed is a better location for the light. As a result, lighting improvements need not mean increased energy costs or require the purchase of new fixtures.

Printed material and graphics

When preparing written material for workers, PCBUs should use the style of letters (fonts) and letter sizes (at least 12 point) that are easily read. Reading something written in all capital letters is more difficult than reading a familiar mix of capital and lowercase letters.

PCBUS can reinforce the message of written material with graphics and illustrations.

Place important signs at eye level where they are easier to read for all levels of vision.

Sound management—hearing and older workers

Workers may be affected by gradual, age-related hearing loss, particularly the ability to hear high-pitched sounds. Hearing loss also may be caused by long-term exposure to harmful sounds or by a sudden traumatic event, such as an explosion.

To eliminate unwanted noise, PCBUs should:

- install sound-absorbing material
- shield machine noise
- minimise air-conditioning noise
- provide ear protection, where appropriate.

PCBUS should encourage workers to report hearing problems. Ensure that audiometric testing (testing a worker's hearing to measure whether it is normal or there is some degree of hearing loss) is done where required by law.

A matter of timing—older workers and shift work

Fatigue can be a safety hazard for all workers.

Older workers sometimes have trouble adapting to shift work.

PCBUs can respond to these needs by:

- offering workers flexitime and shorter hours
- minimising night shift work
- using shift rotations that are the least disruptive to sleep (forward shift rotations, consisting of morning shifts, followed by evening and night shifts and then days off, are preferable)
- limiting shift lengths, particularly night shifts, to eight hours.

Supervisor self-check list

By asking themselves questions such as the following, supervisors can ensure they are being fair and objective to **everyone** in the workplace:

- Are performance management procedures consistent for all workers? (not harder or softer on any group or individual)
- Are expectations clearly communicated to workers?
- Is everyone being given opportunities for retraining, development and guidance?
- Are workers' needs understood?
- Is a positive attitude being demonstrated toward and about all workers?
- Are all workers' positive contributions and strengths being recognised?
- Is positive feedback being encouraged?
- Is the workplace friendly toward older workers?



Delivering the message—designing training for older workers

While older workers may sometimes take slightly longer to learn, once they have mastered a routine or task, it sticks. Because of this, older workers tend to make fewer mistakes.

Older workers may be unfamiliar with or have been away from formal classroom education and testing for many years. To help older workers learn more effectively:

- explain why they are learning
- provide supportive and friendly learning environments
- use small groups, case studies and role play
- use step-by-step or self-paced learning
- build on the familiar by making a connection with past learning and experience
- avoid giving too much information at one time
- consider instruction by peer workers of same age
- speak clearly and exclude unnecessary noise
- accommodate older eyes (see section *Shedding the right light—the eyes have it*).

Raising awareness about older workers

Here are some other ways that PCBUs, managers and supervisors can raise awareness about the value of older workers:

- Make sure senior management in the organisation supports older workers.
- Arrange wellbeing days to inform workers about the value of exercise, diet, lifestyle choices and work-life balance.
- Have supervisors attend courses on ageing and the workforce.
- Share knowledge about the stages of ageing with all workers.
- Make other workers aware of the value of hiring and retaining older workers.
- Have older workers mentor younger workers.
- Talk to other businesses with successful records in work health and safety and experience hiring and retaining older workers.
- Have an expert on ageing talk to workers.
- Encourage worker feedback on ageing issues by surveying workers and listening to concerns or suggestions.

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