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Aging Workforce Problem

"Aging workforce" is a term often heard throughout corporate America. We have read how, over the next decade, the 45 and older (active worker) crowd will grow to an unprecedented percentage of the working population.

Not long ago, reality became sparkling clear to me. Typically while conducting interviews with clients and potential clients, employee tenure is discussed.

In our efforts to assist with controlling workers' comp, we know high turnover of employees makes it more challenging to perpetuate an injury prevention culture. Moreover, the statistics tell us that employees with less than one-year experience are more likely to sustain injuries than the average worker.

This is well known information and along with a host of other reasons, make lowering employee turnover a common goal for all organizations. At least I thought it was. For the first time during two different interviews, with two different organizations, I was told, amazingly, that turnover was an issue. Too *little* turnover!!

Here we have companies that are managed so well that employees want to stay there. Hooray we should say. But the concern of these companies was that employees were aging and becoming more prone to injury. They performed the same or similar job tasks for years and were beginning to breakdown more often.

Unfortunately, the higher production benefits of experienced employees were being out-weighed by the costs of work related injuries to these employees.

I was informed that these companies were being "hurt" not by fraud, where lazy employees feign work related injuries in order to be paid for doing nothing. I was hearing that good employees, who worked for these companies 10, 20, even 30 years, interested in making an honest living, were a **PROBLEM**.

These companies were trying to figure out how to "early retire" them or somehow make them go away. What an ethical dilemma for owners or management, who want to return loyalty but at what price to the company?

Well, coming from the school of "having one's cake and eating it too" how can this dilemma be solved? How can we enjoy the production and morale benefits of having long term employees whilst lowering workers' comp costs at the same time? What if it was possible? What if it was available? What if there was a way to teach people, the "aged" as well as the "yet to be aged", how to manage their musculoskeletal health on a moment by moment, day by day, month by month, year by year basis? How valuable would it be to employees, their families, their employers to know how to prevent physical pain and to know how to relieve incurred physical discomfort, how to prevent or forestall the accumulation of physical stress that turns the "aged" into potential liabilities?

These companies had employees making "widgets" and lifting things for years, unbeknownst to them, improperly. A lack of basic body management skills caused innocent, frequent physical stresses that over time contributed to fatigue, discomfort, and for the unfortunate, pain and injury. Some just felt that this discomfort that they were feeling was just a natural part of aging.

Cumulative trauma that contributes to life altering injuries is entirely controllable, despite what you may read to the contrary.

As our employees age they do not have to be victims of worn down bodies. Being 50 today is not what it was only a generation ago.

The 50'ish generation is still a vital group. We have found them amazingly receptive to learning techniques that reduce pain and discomfort. They do not want to give into "this is the way it has to be" mindset. They (we) are highly motivated to live without pain.

Experienced employees for many companies are a huge asset. The optimum solution is to give them the means to stay healthy so they can remain contributors to the organization versus being seen as a liability.

Cumulative Trauma Disorders

The physical stress caused by long term sustained postures or repetitive activities can be mitigated by simply knowing how to change positions, sometimes very subtly, to better share the muscle and joint workload, and knowing how to perform job tasks in ways that are more friendly to the body.

Additionally there are specific work stretches that are called reverse posture stretches that can provide tremendous relief to often-used muscles.

Work stretches is a term we use instead of "stretching break" because most stretches that we teach are done while working. Part of knowing how to manage your own well-being is knowing how to quickly relieve tension when it is experienced.

An example of a reverse posture work stretch comes from our experience with a large airline. The flight attendants were experiencing shoulder and mid back tension, back related injuries, neck and upper extremity disorders, etc.

Part of our solution for the mid back discomfort was created after observing:

- Flight attendants reach continually while serving
- Flight attendants pull 300 pound carts up a 4% grade with their arms extended
- Flight attendants worked with their arms extended while preparing meals, beverages, etc.

After learning more optimal techniques for the above that eliminated reaching or modified it, flight attendants learned how to relieve tired back muscles by doing a chest extension, which in effect was a reverse posture stretch. By placing their arms behind them and stretching in this position it precisely addresses the muscles engaged while reaching.

What is better -- flight attendants on the job for 20 years with 20 years of physical stress packed into their muscles? Or flight attendants on the job for 20 years who know how to prevent physical trauma or relieve it as it is experienced? What a difference this type of knowledge can make in work-related injuries and quality of life issues.

Each task they performed was evaluated, better or different techniques were taught, and task specific stretches for those tasks were given to put the flight attendant in control of how they felt and that could be applied to off work activities as well.

The result was 63% reduction in back and neck injuries

The beauty of this approach other than its practicality was how it was trained. Practical modules that required practical drills of these more optimal techniques created an "enlightened" stage where the flight attendants self-discovered the personal value of applying these techniques. Buy-in is critical. Body mechanics, posture, etc. cannot be "enforced" behaviors. Employees must make personal decisions to change behavior because it is "good" for THEM! Employees must come to the realization that discomfort and pain is not just the result of aging. It is the result of lack of education of what causes our bodies to accumulate physical stress in our neck, shoulders, backs and wrists, and how to prevent and alleviate any retained physical stress.

This training methodology has been applied to countless job descriptions in the private and public sector with similar results; employees enlightened and motivated to apply proper body management techniques while at work and at home.

You see an aging workplace does not have to be a "problem". We all remember what it felt like to be without pain and discomfort. We can't turn the clock back but we can help people to lead healthier and more productive lives.

YOU can have the benefits of experienced workers or the liabilities of an aging workforce. Which one would you prefer?

Lemonade anyone?



Prevent tomorrow's injuries today! TM
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