

WORK COMP INSIGHTS

Worker's Compensation and the Aging Workforce

Older Americans continue to delay their retirement or reenter the workforce to supplement their income and combat the effects of a down economy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of workers between the ages of 55 and 64 is estimated to climb to 29.3 million by 2020 and make up almost 18 percent of the labor force. This increase in older workers introduces the need to understand the risks associated with this age group, and as a result, effectively manage their potentially costly workers' compensation claims.

The Challenges

One of the main challenges associated with older employees is the impact that they can potentially have on your organization's workers' compensation costs. These costs come largely from the growth of employees with pre-existing and age-related medical conditions, as well as chronic illness. This is resulting in a much more difficult and time-consuming process to prevent and treat work-related injuries.

For many employers, workers' compensation claims are growing at a rate faster than most other costs. Claims for back injuries, knee injuries, stress and cumulative trauma disorder continue to increase as the proportion of aging workers grows. Addressing the challenge of meeting the needs of aging workers will not only decrease workers' compensation claims, it can have a positive effect on both workplace safety and health care costs.

It's true that accidents can always occur in the workplace, but the majority of workers' compensation claims are not accidental. Rather, they are preventable. And many of these claims simply occur because the employee is not physically capable of performing the duties associated with the position in a safe manner. This is especially common with aging workers due to many of them having pre-existing injuries or chronic conditions.

Controlling Costs

While many states' fair employment acts prohibit employers from questioning potential candidates about disabilities or previous injuries, you can help control your workers' compensation costs by determining if potential employees can safely perform job duties needed for the position. Assess candidates' abilities by doing the following:

- Have a local medical clinic provide pre-employment physical examinations and pre-employment physical abilities testing to candidates.
- Invite the clinic's medical director and those conducting pre-employment testing to your facility so they can better understand the nature and exertion level needed to perform the duties of each position.
- Create clear, specific and accurate job descriptions to help potential candidates determine if the physical strain of the position would be too much.
- Provide these job descriptions to the physician who performs the fit-for-duty exams to help them better assess candidates' physical limitations and their ability to perform the duties necessary to be successful in the position.

To minimize the potential impact of workers' compensation claims, executing pre-employment physical exams and physical ability testing can significantly reduce your risk exposure.

Although some workers' compensation claims are unavoidable, executing pre-employment physical examinations and ability testing can significantly reduce your risk exposure.
