

THE AGEING WORKFORCE, FACING THE CHALLENGES IN THE RAILWAY OPERATIONS

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Abstract – *The paper addresses the challenges facing rail operators and their workforce in the new society of tomorrow when recruiting, retaining, training and promoting ageing employees. The number of older employees (people), in concert with the trend to continue working at older chronological ages, is resulting in a shift in workforce demographics. Some of the implications include age sensitive risk assessments, medical surveillance, adapting the workplace environment, review of the health and safety procedures to address challenges in the railway operations. The ageing workforce is a reality and more employees are extending their employment as a result of the labour market demand, skills retention, and improved quality of life and for social reasons. Without proper planning and revision of safety related policies, companies could face litigation on discrimination, exclusion and safety related violations from employees. The aging workforce bring their own dynamics to the workplace, they are more mature, experienced and stable. However, they are also more vulnerable and therefore the operator has to consider a review and change or adaptation in their recruitment policies, occupational health, wellness and safety management systems, adaptation of facilities and workplace requirements, without compromising both the employee and the 'production line'. The paper will also address workplace safety strategies for the employer, interventions for the safety of all employees, especially aging employees and how occupational health programmes can improve the health and safety of ageing employees.*

Keywords: *ageing workforce, health and safety management systems, occupational health and wellness*

I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of an ageing workforce in the workplace simply means that changes and adaptations have to be introduced to accommodate the needs of ageing employees. These include policies and all related procedures and guidelines, which affect aging employees. There would need to be greater flexibility of standards, such as those which address periodic medical surveillance, re-employment and working conditions. Looking at chronic and lifestyle diseases, aging employees have to be routinely monitored alongside other administrative systems such as job rotation and reducing long working hours, among other interventions. Safety professionals are at the core of developing health and safety management systems and as a result have to change their approach to accommodate the aging workforce within the health and safety management framework. Communication becomes a key driver in the process. Furthermore, increased longevity has put new pressures on older adults who need extra financial resources to cover living expenses accrued during these additional years.

Having young and aging workers in any organization can create stress for both groups. It is clear that aging workers may be skilled but work slower and could be at risk if they are not regarded as a high priority. By the time aging workers re-enter the workplace, they could possibly be already suffering from chronic diseases, which may make them more susceptible to workplace injuries or occupational diseases¹.

The adjustment and working conditions means that greater care must be shown to the aging workers may have other implications to avoid injuries at work. One of the important aspects of retired employees re-entering the workplace is to assist them in peak times or where special projects are being embarked upon. Its important therefore to keep to maintain regular contact with retirees, while others have developed lists or databases of retirees who are available for work.

Aging employees need higher priority than the rest of the workforce. The main objective for employers should be to adjust the workplace for aging workers as to ensure that the aging employees' health and wellbeing is not compromised and to help those who already have chronic conditions to stay in work. Prevention of workplace accidents, work-related symptoms and diseases in all age groups should be a priority. Aging employees are bound to have accidents, which could be fatal and cause them to be hospitalized².

Older people are a valuable and productive economic resource. Increasing employment opportunities among aging workers is essential to ensure that the labour market and workforce adapt to meet the needs of an aging population. Not only must the systems be improved, the general attitude of employees towards ageing employees needs to change, since ageing employees may be discriminated against.



It is therefore up to management to ensure that they are fully aware of the various challenges aging employees face at work, alongside the health and safety in their workplace.

Research shows that employers and maturing workers may benefit from strategies designed to keep people with disabilities on the job. While most companies have set 60 as their mandatory retirement age, recent legislation requires them to gradually increase it to at least 65 by 2013. Moreover, despite the current rules, many Japanese workers do have options (shifting to a different job within the organization, shifting to an affiliated organization, shifting to part-time employment, etc.) making it possible to work beyond the typical corporate mandatory retirement age³.

II. DISCUSSION

Strategies for skills retention for aged employees

As far as the skills for Railway operations are concerned, recruiting and retaining older employees may serve as a benefit and can help the business to address labour skills shortages now and in the future, and gain the benefits of older workers' decades of experience⁴. This means that railway operators, 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 due to early retirement or retirement. In order to do so the company policies may need to be adapted and become more flexible as the same working rules may not necessarily apply to aged employees. Flexible working arrangements can be important for mature-aged workers as they move towards retirement. Allowing them to work flexibly may lead to increased participation and productivity. **These may include;**

- Flexible leave arrangements, which could be company funded
- Extra health benefits for both the employee and spouse/partner
- Support programmes
- Flexible office hours, lunch breaks
- Access to other company perks such as drivers and delivery services
- Additional medical surveillance programmes



Risks

Many organisations manage safety functions using many approaches, one of those being the regulatory framework. However, many hazards and risks are not covered or controlled adequately through existing regulations. Thus, regulations may not be optimal to control risk or to provide due care for aging workers. Aging employees are exposed to the same risks as younger employees, these risks range from slips and trips, contact with moving machinery and vehicles, falling objects falls from heights and the potential for musculoskeletal disorders resulting from poor ergonomic and fast paced work.

Risks may also be associated with long shifts, chemical exposures, excessive noise and vibration. Safety professionals, often lack a sense that age management is a necessary element in understanding the long term business needs of the organization. A number of factors have been found to influence the association between age and performance. Broadly categorised into three levels, (individual, organisational and societal), they include factors such as functional capacity, work demands, work environment, stress, shift work, expertise, attitudes towards work and retirement etc. For risk management of ageing employees the following should be considered in their employee profile , but not limited to;

- Occupation
- Emotional demands
- Expertise,
- Experience
- Fatigue
- Mental , cognitive demands
- Physical demands(strenght, muscle effort, lifting, etc.)
- Task demands. Time on task/task duration;Work related psychological complaints
- Work organisation(shift work, role conflicts, control, fear of failure, lack of recognition)
- Work situtation/environment(stressful situations, temperature, new technology) ⁵.

Health and Safety Management Systems, Polices and Practices

To successfully manage older and younger employees in the workplace, existing Human Resource policies and processes have to be carefully re-assessed to ensure that goals of productivity and efficiency of the organisation can be maximized while ensuring employee safety and wellbeing.



Employers should exercise flexibility when managing change in order to handle the challenges and opportunities brought about with the presence of a multi-generation workforce. Apart from re-assessing policies and processes, job scopes should also be re-evaluated, and redesigned to accommodate the needs of both employers and employees. Health and Safety policies should be written with aging employees in mind.

These include, re-employment and the relaxation of medical requirements, hearing requirements (when in a mentoring role or project based assignments), ergonomics and job design and reward and recognition policies ⁶.

The responsibility for health and safety is generally vested in senior management; however, many organisations rely on the health and safety departments that deliver health and safety management systems. Systems require flexibility as far as managing a workplace where aging workers have been employed. Re-designing the workplace for aging employees can be considered as one of the key aspects of the management system.

Job Redesign as part of the workplace adaptation

To successfully manage aging employees, the workplace has to be redesigned to ensure that the levels of productivity and efficiencies. The flexibility must address human resources policies in particular as to handle the challenges and opportunities brought about as a result of multi generation workforce. The job scopes of aging workers also have to be reassessed to accommodate the needs of both the employer and the employee. Benefits for the employer spans from having a wider pool of skilled employees who have the necessary skills, experience and qualifications, rather than limiting factors such as ethnicity, religion, marital status, gender, and in this case **age**.

Age Management

The importance of succession planning for any organization includes exploring ideas aimed at looking after skilled aging employees for the purpose of retaining knowledge and skills. Part of the aging management process is to let aging people play a part, rehabilitate, retrain, return to the workforce, remain in jobs where they perform well ⁷.

Policies that force-aging employees out of the workplace must be reviewed alongside other measures to introduce aging employees remain beyond planned retirement dates. Aging management schemes must include flexibility, downscaling of working hours, training as mentors and structures to share their knowledge more widely. Flexibility in the workplace includes downscaling of working hours, training as mentors and structures to share their knowledge more widely ⁸.



Employee Wellness Programmes

Wellness programmes has developed over the years in the case of aged employees, this involves offering ergonomic assessments for workers' chairs and workstations, subsidizing gym memberships, organizing on-site fitness facilities, providing employees with access to wellness experts such as registered dietitians, or offering on-site health screening. Health check-ups and stress level evaluations have been shown to reduce health-related absences, increase employee satisfaction, and potentially delay the onset of retirement. Employee wellness programmes are an effective method to promote health and wellness amongst aging employees as well as the rest of the organization⁹.

These programmes are geared at encouraging health awareness amongst employees and related issues aimed at improving morale, reducing absenteeism, reducing turnover rates and injuries. With the adoption of well-being programmes companies can save on resources previously spent on healthcare, as healthier employees would require less frequent medical attention. These resources can be channeled into other aspects of the organisation to improve the company's bottom line. Additionally, with a healthier workforce, health care costs of employees will also decrease, which translates to lower health insurance premium paid by the company and reduced healthcare costs.

III. CONCLUSION

Finally, whilst flexibility in the workplace is paramount to success of the organisations long term success. Employees with certain health issues, or disabilities appreciate having some flexibility in their schedule that provides a helpful buffer to customary workplace stress¹⁰. Employers need to develop short term to long term strategies to address policy gaps and practices that would enable them to recruit and retain the ageing workforce with occupational health related challenges and disabilities.

Employers should maximize the learning opportunities in the workplace are to maximize the learning opportunities that lead to self-enrichment and enhanced career satisfaction. "Understanding the commonalities among the generations will create a synergy which leads to individual job satisfaction, ultimately decreasing turnover at all age levels."

Managing a workforce that spans over generations represents tremendous challenges to companies that want to be in tune with social trends, progressive thought and political correctness, all of which are workplace dynamics filtered through employees' generational self-perception.

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