

# 'Inclusion ergonomics' benefit older workers – and everyone else

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In two years, one out of four U.S. workers will be age 55 or older. What are the best practices to protect this group from ergonomic injuries?

As the Boomer generation ages, more and more workers will choose to voluntarily leave the workforce. When that happens, they take knowledge with them.

But what about when their workplace departure is due to injury? These unplanned absences – or retirements – leave knowledge gaps that haven't been planned for.

A session at the Association of Occupational Health Professionals in Healthcare (AOHP) annual conference explained the benefits of "inclusion ergonomics" for these employees.

Inclusion ergonomics aims to retain the wealth of knowledge possessed by an aging and differently-abled workforce by ergonomically accommodating these older workers, according to Kathy Espinoza, a certified ergonomist with Keenan & Associates, an insurance brokerage and consulting firm.

Espinoza noted the effects of aging at work:

- visual
- hearing
- balance
- strength
- joint mobility
- manual dexterity
- reaction times (particularly for drivers), and
- endurance.

## General strategies

In general, these are good inclusion ergonomic practices, according to Espinoza:

- Shift work from manual to mechanical (i.e. get equipment and machines to replace/assist human work)
- Reduce repetitive motions

- Provide more recovery time
- Reduce static and stressful postures, and
- Rotate job tasks more often.

In her at times rapid-fire presentation, Espinoza also laid out some more specific suggestions to help employees:

- An IT specialist with a back condition has to move, lift and carry computers. *Solution:* Provide a compact, adjustable-height lifting device with straps to secure the load.
- An employee has a restriction on the amount of time he can stand. *Solution:* Provide a sit/lean stool and anti-fatigue mats.
- A machine operator with arthritis has trouble turning control switches. *Solution:* Small tabs were replaced with larger cushioned knobs, and he was given gloves with non-slip gripping.
- An HR specialist was having trouble going between reading printed text and a computer screen due to diabetic retinopathy. *Solution:* Provide task lighting and a glare filter for the computer screen.
- An employee in a cubicle had migraines triggered by noise. Her cube was in a high-traffic area and near a copying machine. *Solution:* Move her to an area with less traffic.
- A military veteran with post traumatic stress disorder is easily frightened when approached unsuspectingly. He works in a cubicle. *Solution:* Place a small mirror on his computer monitor so he could see the entrance behind him.
- A housekeeping worker with low vision has trouble seeing carpet when vacuuming. *Solution:* Use an industrial vacuum with a light-system, and provide the worker with a headlamp.
- A benefits specialist has difficulty reading files due to her multiple sclerosis. *Solution:* Provide a stand magnifier and add task lighting to her desk.

Espinoza emphasized that these work station changes are ones that can benefit any worker, not just those with conditions that require accommodation.

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