

New and young workers

'read out'

Here is an example of an incident in WA.

A 16-year-old school student had three fingers on his left hand severely crushed (two of these fingers have since been amputated). The student had been given the task of cutting off the ends from 50 pre-cut flat metal strips on a metal cutting guillotine. The person supervising the student had shown him what to do. After watching the student cut the ends off four strips, the student was left to complete the rest of the task on his own. The student had cut 47 strips and was in the process of cutting the 48th strip when he slipped, lost his balance and fell forward, putting three fingers into the operational area of the machine. At this time the student accidentally activated the foot control, bringing the machine's clamping device down and crushing his fingers.

'ask'

Q. What factors contributed to the incident?

Possible answers:

- The machine was not suitably guarded to prevent contact with its moving parts
- The student had no prior experience operating a metal cutting guillotine
- The supervisor assumed the student had more experience within the industry than was the case

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Young people include those leaving school and starting work for the first time, including apprenticeships and traineeships; those employed on a casual basis or working part-time outside school hours; work experience, vocational and training students; and children who visit the workplace who may not necessarily be 'workers'.

Claim data does not help us identify accidents involving new workers. However, the 15-19 age group represents about 8% of lost time injury claims.

Workplace safety and health is everyone's responsibility

The aim is for our employer to prevent accidents by identifying the hazards, assessing the risks, and dealing with them before new and young workers are exposed.

When assessing risks to young people there are several special factors to consider

The size of the person and their level of physical maturity - Young workers may be at greater risk of manual handling injuries because of their small size, their muscle strength is still developing and the bones do not fully mature until around 25 years of age.. They may misjudge the degree of difficulty when handling items that are heavy, bulky or out of reach and may persist when a more experienced worker would ask for assistance.

Their general behaviour and psychological maturity - Brain development isn't complete until the early twenties (especially decision making and organising). This means that we need to adopt a different approach to learning. For example, have you ever tried to give orders to a young person? They don't always respond to being told what to do, it may require a different approach to teaching and learning.

Their work experience and training - New workers who don't have experience won't be able to process information in the same way as experienced workers. Some hazards may seem too obvious to mention, but not be known to the new worker. They may be less skilled in pacing the work according to their capabilities. They may take on too much work too quickly.

Their ability to make mature judgements about their own safety and the safety of others - Safety is often not a priority for young workers. Some are risk-takers, others have limited OSH knowledge. Parents also often don't realise the importance of safety. However, young workers also crave responsibility and autonomy, which may lead them to develop short cuts and their own way of doing things.

Their ability to cope with unexpected, stressful situations - New and young workers have less ability to deal with violent and aggressive behaviour. Initiation ceremonies may also be an issue. Making sure they know who to talk to if they're feeling under pressure is a good start. New and young workers are often keen to make a good impression, and we need to be mindful not to allocate jobs that are unpopular with other workers such as cleaning toilets, or jobs like cleaning up spills that they may not have the skills/knowledge for.

In respect to information, instruction, and training, it is our employer's responsibility to provide this before a new or young worker starts work. Humans are social animals so in the first few days of work it will be a bigger priority for them to find a place in the tribe and this will limit the amount of information they absorb. This also means that new and young workers may be influenced by peer pressure. If you bombard new workers with safety information they aren't likely to remember it all, and may miss or forget important safety information. Staggering the induction can be useful – give them the essentials on day one; review on day five; final review with supervisor on day ten, with additional information given each day. We can help by preparing a checklist to see if we have the basics right.

Mentor programs are a good idea. People often find it easier to talk to a co-worker than a boss. This also allows for constant supervision: The mentor can show the new person procedures, alert them to hazards, and be a friend. Some workplaces use this strategy for the first month of employment.

As individuals, we have a responsibility to take care to protect our own safety and health and that of others affected by our work and to abide by procedures and policies in relation to OSH. We should all be provided with appropriate information and training to allow us to fulfil that obligation.

So, if you are doing an induction to a new task or job with a person make sure you do the following things:

- **Give clear instructions** - Explain something, and get the new worker to repeat the information.
- **Demonstrate** - Show and tell them how to perform a task. It's easier to learn if you are shown how to do something.
- **Observe** - Watch them do it to make sure they have it right. Don't leave them until you are sure.
- **Assume nothing** - Even if they come from a similar workplace, don't miss anything out, the obvious things to you may not be obvious to a new person.
- **Encourage questions** - New people don't want to seem stupid by asking questions, so you need to make them feel comfortable to ask by questioning them.
- **Consider special needs** - like language barriers.
- **Check understanding** - Get the new person to go through the job. Review it with them and follow up constantly to make sure they are still doing the job safely.

'ask'

Q. Before I finish, is there anything that you can identify that we could be doing better in this workplace for new and young workers?

Take notes about suggestions...don't panic if there aren't any takers.

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for listening to me.

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