PROTECTING YOUNG WORKERS FROM WORKPLACE HAZARDS
Young workers in the workplace

As young people reach the minimum age for employment, they are eager to find a job, and start making and earning money. Most of the young workers undertake their first work experience in the retail sector; working in sales and customer service.

The meaning and implication of young worker, or young employee, differs from country to country. As in some places youth obtain the right to work at the age of sixteen, in others they may be allowed to start working at the age of fifteen, fourteen or even younger under restricted conditions such as limited number of working days and hours.

Usually students are engaged in part-time jobs, pre or after school hours, during weekends and holidays. Also those who have completed their education and are in the beginning of their careers are considered or belong to this category of young workers. Thus, the term young worker may cover a wide range of group ages, people from 15 to 24 year-old.

Also, people of this age are increasingly participating in many charitable, community and other volunteering jobs. In most cases, these volunteers are not recognized as employees and their basic worker rights regarding leaves, rest breaks, allowances and hours of work are being abused or denied.

Young workers at risk

Among several other vulnerable groups that require specific attention regarding Occupational Health and Safety, young workers are indeed some of the most important ones. Their involvement in the workplace indicates possible unfamiliar risks for work accidents. There are many reasons why this group of workers is more exposed to risk than those of any other age:

- Lack of experience and training to recognize and avoid hazards;
- Unawareness of their rights and responsibilities
- Inadequate orientation
- Improper supervision
- Lack of confidence in bringing out problems/issues, and unwillingness to ask questions

In many countries, laws and regulations restrict the employment of young people in certain kinds of industries and occupations such as agriculture, manufacturing and construction. Unfortunately, despite these regulations, yet the number of work-related accidents including fatalities among young workers in these industries is quite large.

Considering the fact that young people work fewer hours and hold less dangerous jobs, they are still 50% more likely to get injured at work, and have higher work-related injury rates than the older ones. As the majority of youths work in retail and service industry, the number one industry young worker injuries occur in is the service industry which includes restaurants, hotels, cafes, etc. Statistics show that especially young male workers are more likely to get injured during performing job-related activities.

Young workers can be exposed to a number of different workplace hazards. They include:

- Possible violence from customers
- Load lifting
- Slips, trips and falls
- Working with hot or sharp objects
- Working with running equipment or motor vehicles, etc.

The most common injuries to young workers are sprains, strains, open wounds, fractures, crushing and burns.
Protecting young workers from workplace hazards

Governments worldwide have developed legislations to protect young workers from workplace hazards and eliminate the risks for injuries and fatalities. Therefore, an employer’s first and foremost duty is to meet its legal obligations and undertake the responsibility for providing a safe and healthy work environment for its employees.

Secondly, senior managers and supervisors play an important role in governing health and safety in the workplace. Some safety professionals might disagree, but at least when employees are well-informed and aware of workplace hazards, all accidents are preventable. Thus, the best way to prevent workplace accidents for young workers is by providing and educating them with appropriate training, useful orientation and constant supervision. In order to achieve these, several actions may be taken:

- Make available health and safety information to all employees, especially young workers;
- Train them on all present hazards and risks specific to their job, and any other potential hazard in the workplace;
- Provide on-site orientation sessions and help them know the workplace layout;
- Show how to use specific equipment, tools and work practices involved in their job;
- Provide them with necessary personal protective equipment and show them how to safely use them;
- Communicate their rights and responsibilities concerning workplace health and safety;
- Explain health and safety policies and procedures;
- Even after engaging in work, regularly monitor them during their first months;
- Supervise young workers until they can demonstrate that they have gained the ability to work safely on their own;
- Encourage them to report hazards, injuries and unsafe working conditions;
- Meet regularly and discuss health and safety issues with young workers, listen and respond positively to any concerns they raise.
The employer must ensure that all employees, especially young workers, are performing their work safely and their health is not jeopardized. In this aspect, many national regulations require the OH&S supervisors to be competent persons (usually experts certified in health and safety) who possess a good understanding of health and safety in their workplace, and demonstrate the ability to provide ongoing responsible and mature supervision. To do so, employers and supervisors are recommended to regularly attend OH&S and supervisor development trainings.

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