

Steps in Overcoming Occupational Safety Issues for Young Workers

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In 2016, a young man named David Vinnicombe was fatally injured at work on a construction site in Inuvik, Northwest Territories when a piece of heavy equipment rolled over on him (CBC North, 2017). Vinnicombe was only nineteen years old, his entire life still ahead of him. As a result, the company in which Vinnicombe was employed was charged with failing to provide proper training and appropriately trained supervisors to ensure the health and safety of workers (CBC North, 2017). With such a young life lost, this controversial issue begs the questions of who was at fault, which factors were involved contributing to his death, and what needs to be changed in the future to ensure no lives are lost on the workplace again. The Safety of youth workers is especially vulnerable as most youth enter the workplace with minimal work experience and unfamiliar attitudes towards occupational safety and hazards. Safety issues contribute to one of the many challenges that new and young workers often face when entering the workforce. Essentially, youth workers are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood where shifting phases of life may not always pave a clear path.

Although many challenges can hinder a young worker's ability to thrive in the workplace, a significant issue that young workers are often susceptible to is that of workplace safety related to inherent youth mindsets and exterior factors out of their control. This essay will also explore solutions to overcome this dire problem.

To contextualize, the young worker is defined as workers between the ages of fifteen to twenty-five years old, essentially working part-time or establishing themselves full-time in the workforce (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). From there, this age range is usually divided into two groups of youth in high school (working part-time) and youth that are beyond (establishing themselves full-time). Recognizing the differences between these two cohorts are important for employers as there exists different demands, experiences, and work implications between age groups (Loughlin &

Barling, 2001). By default, young workers often enter the workforce with minimal work experience and when entering a 'dangerous' workplace with this lack of work experience, the risk of injury exponentially increases. Castillo (1999) stated: "these young people are inexperienced and eager to please, they are typically given little or no on-the-job training, and they are vulnerable". This speaks to the young worker's mindset of work-related risk taking behaviour. In a Canadian young workers study, it was found that when injunctive safety norms (approval and expectations of safety behaviour) from parents, supervisors and co-workers were given to a specific group of young workers, work-related risk-taking behaviour decreased and therefore, fewer workplace injuries occurred (Pek, Turner, Tucker, Kelloway & Morrish, 2017). This implies that having the right kind of safety pressures and cultures surrounding the young worker is essential to their well-being and in fostering positive safety culture. Additionally, Young workers often develop their working skills and mindsets from their upbringing and also form their own work place experiences.

Attributing safety issues to young worker inexperience and failing to recognize the exterior factors that are out of the worker's control would be a major oversight when tackling issues of improving young worker's health and safety in the worksite. Young workers are consistently found to be at the highest risk of lost-time injuries. Specifically, approximately 60,000 young workers are involved in lost-time injuries on the job each year in Canada (Human Resources Development Canada, 2000). Additionally, those whom are injured on the job are not in what appears to be 'dangerous' work sites and conditions. An important factor to keep in mind is often employers do not consider the fact that young workers are often employed as inexperienced or part-time reassuring the idea that more time and attention to training these individuals is necessary. Some workplace employers are not providing adequate training and supervision, as demonstrated in

David Vinnicombe's case and unfortunately, a young person paid for mistakes that were out of his control.

As a young worker myself, I have had my fair share of workplace safety training. Previously, I have worked at a mine site where there was zero tolerance to behaviours and practices that could bring harm to yourself or other workers. I can still remember all the hours of safety training I had to go through right from the start. Having never worked in such an isolated and potentially dangerous work site, I was shocked and impressed by the safety culture the mine instilled upon me. Through my own experience, I believe that immersing youth in a safety culture, with proper training to common hazards and threats will enable the young worker to achieve a mindset that is concurrent with positive workplace safety goals. It is first the responsibility of the employer to provide proper training and supervision to the young worker to ensure their health and safety. Alongside that, youth workers should be familiar with their rights as a worker and to be aware of their responsibilities as a worker. While eager to please, young workers might forget that they have workers' rights, access to union rights, and they always have the right to refuse unsafe work above all else.

Overall, as young workers enter the workforce, many obstacles line the path to a successful career; however, safety of the young worker is increasingly becoming, an issue and how we choose to solve this problem will become vital for the future of our workforce and society. Youth often lack the experience and therefore the correct safety positive mindset that workplaces thrive upon. It is important to recognize the outside factors that might derail a young worker's ability to follow proper workplace protocols and work together to better ensure the right tools to work safely. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the young worker as well as the employer and the community to allow the smooth transition from adolescent to adult worker.

Works Sited

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