

Imagine you're starting a new job. You have to meet your co-workers, learn the ins and outs of the company, and begin performing your duties.

Meanwhile, you have to stay safe. This can be a challenge for new workers: **Employees in their first month on the job have more than 3 times the risk for a lost-time injury than workers who have been at their job for more than a year, according to research from the Toronto-based Institute for Work & Health.**

Possible reasons for this? Peter Smith, IWH scientist, points out that new workers may be performing unfamiliar tasks – some of them hazardous. In addition, the workers may be unsure about their safety rights and responsibilities, and might feel uncomfortable speaking up about a hazard.

"We can only speculate on the 'why,'" said Curtis Breslin, another IWH scientist who has collaborated with Smith on research about new worker safety. "One thing studies have shown is that there's a lack of familiarity. That's a common theme that could be contributing to new workers' increased risk. The other possibility is that new workers might be encountering more hazards. Or their risk perception – they don't have the knowledge and awareness, so they're underestimating the risks. It could be issues with training, maybe they're not being trained [or receiving] on-the-job, hard-knocks-type training that happens in the first or second month."

IWH research has found that few new workers receive safety training – 1 out of 5 among a sample of Canadian workers, according to a 2007 study.

"The fact almost 80 percent of workers who were in their first year of employment could not remember receiving any workplace safety or orientation training is worrying for a few reasons," Smith said. "This likely results in these workers being without important knowledge that could prevent them, or one of their co-workers, [from] getting injured."

However, according to IWH, as novice workers gain job experience, their risk declines.

#### Looking at the numbers

In 2013, nearly one-third of the nonfatal occupational injuries or illnesses that involved time away from work were suffered by workers with less than one year of service, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nearly one-quarter of these cases resulted in 31 or more days away from work, said Ken Kolosh, statistics manager at the National Safety Council.

**Certain subgroups of new workers are at heightened injury risk. In the agriculture, forestry and fishing industry, 45.4 percent of the injuries and illnesses in 2013 occurred among workers with less than one year of experience. In the construction and extraction industry, it was 34.9 percent.**

"That makes sense because a lot of those industries are cyclical; they're seasonally employed," Kolosh said. "Almost by definition, many of those workers are always going to be new employees. **The construction industry has a lot of seasonal employment. It has a lot of contractor-type workers, so a larger proportion of that population by definition is going to have less than three months of service.**"

**Construction workers frequently change jobsites as well, which can present problems.**

"Every day, you have to be aware of what's going on. You have to have good communication," said Scott Schneider, director of occupational safety and health at the Washington-based Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America. "It's less an issue on unionized sites, where people have a substantial amount of safety training in apprenticeship programs. They also, as apprentices, get mentored along the way. It's still an issue in the sense you're going to a different jobsite, and you may not be familiar with that jobsite."

IWH research published in 2012 concluded that risk was higher among new workers who were older, men and workers in the "goods sector," including construction and manufacturing. This may be because these jobs have more physical demands, and older workers might be more physically susceptible to injury, Breslin said.

Additionally, IWH researchers determined that newness is a more significant risk factor than youth. A 2006 study concluded that workers' compensation claim rates decrease as tenure increases, regardless of age.

"We found that a new worker at any age is at risk," Breslin said. "What I usually tell people is that experience is more important than age. I'd rather be a 16-year-old who's been on the job for a year than a 40-year-old on the job for the first month."

"The other reason why this is important, especially now, is there's more part-time work – more temporary, precarious employment. That means people are moving from job to job. They're going through this new worker, high-risk window more and more."

#### Possible solutions

**Training** – especially orientation and reinforcement – is paramount to protecting new workers, experts say. Learn what workers have been trained for, assign appropriate tasks, and don't assume they know all of their safety rights.

"People learn differently. Some need more hands-on, some more auditory. [It's] adapting your styles and making sure everyone really understands, getting them real-life practice, even if it's simulated. The more real, the more in-context it is, it's always better."

**New workers should receive safety orientation specific to the workplace**, Schneider added. Trained instructors should conduct the orientation, and having experienced workers participate and share personal stories is valuable. The orientation should include hands-on training. "The main thing is, in orientation, for the employer to give a very strong, clear message about safety, the importance of safety and how safety is going to be implemented on the site," Schneider said.

Schneider pinpointed **eight elements for an effective orientation**:

- Site-specific information, including identifying present and expected hazards and how they are handled, as well as required personal protective equipment
- Hazard assessments
- Encouraging workers to identify and report hazards to a supervisor
- Safety culture
- Informing workers of their OSHA rights and that they have the right to a safe workplace, as well as the right to refuse unsafe work
- Reporting injuries and incidents without repercussion
- Participating in the safety program and being safety stewards
- Knowing what to do in an emergency