Ergonomics and an Aging Workforce

By Terry Jo Gile, MT(ASCP), MA Ed

It is expected that the working population over the age of 55 will grow by 38% in the next decade, and 75% in the next 25 years. Despite the aging process, laboratories should accommodate all ages, including older workers, because this segment of the workforce with their vast knowledge and experience are a valuable asset. Employing a seasoned workforce can be both challenging and beneficial. However, older workers' needs differ from their younger counterparts and safety considerations must be targeted at this segment of the workforce. The following are suggestions to help with age-related accommodations:

**General**

- Encourage accurate, safe performance, not speed.
- Provide job-rotation for challenging activities.
- Eliminate clutter in the work environment to reduce the potential for falls.
- Walkways should be well-illuminated.
- Safety signs/symbols should be marked in bright, contrasting colors.
- Minimize changes in working schedules to improve quality of sleep.
- Priority should be given to day shifts.
- Provide a cultural environment that supports safety

**Vision**

- Use task lighting with desk lamps (consider up to a 60% increase in task lighting).
- Reduce Glare. The light source should be perpendicular to the work area/computer screen rather than directly in front of or behind it. Use indirect lighting or ergonomic equipment such as glare-reducing screens on computers.
- Adjust the monitor angle of the computer so that print can be easily read and glare is reduced.
- Increase the size of font in written communications and on the computer screen.
- Reduce visual clutter in correspondence and on the monitor screen.
- Have magnifiers or magnifying glasses readily available.
- Clean computer screens regularly and adjust the screen color and contrast so that the print is most legible. Use high resolution monitors. Use larger monitor screens.
- Schedule or encourage regular visits to an eye-care specialist.
Eye drops and artificial tears can reduce the discomfort of dry eyes and irritations.
Take frequent breaks when reading, computing and performing work that requires intense visual focus such as using the microscope.
Be particularly aware of neck and shoulder posture if using bifocals.
Consider purchasing eyeglasses that are prescribed specifically for computer use.
Use brighter colors to draw the focus and attention.
Safety signs and symbols should be marked with high-contrast, bright materials.

Hearing
- Reduce background noise whenever possible.
- Contain high-noise equipment in insulated cabinets/housings to dampen the noise.
- Use or encourage protective ear equipment in high-noise areas to prevent further loss.
- Use equipment with adjustable noise levels such as phones with magnified audio output.
- Use visual cues in place of auditory cues when possible - such as phones that light when ringing or flashing computer prompts.
- Schedule or encourage regular visits to an ear-care specialist.

Body Mechanics
- Modify the work load to reduce the amount of strength and endurance needed for tasks (consider maximum lifting capacity 20% less than for a younger worker).
- Be aware of proper posture. Avoid stressful positions/activities or static, uncomfortable postures.
- Perform work directly in front of and in close to the body.
- Encourage/perform frequent stretching breaks.
- Provide寻求 information on body mechanics.
- Increase the size of handles and levers. Replace smaller buttons and controls with larger ones when possible.
- Use leverage instead of grip whenever possible.
- Use textured/knobbed handles to improve gripping ability.

It is a myth that as we age we become a burden. Although there are actual age-related changes in physical function; wisdom and skill can compensate for any slowing down in ability. We need to create a culture of respect for the elderly in our workforce. We need to look ahead and plan to accommodate for changes in physical ability. By doing this, we can maximize the valuable contribution that an aging and experienced workforce has to offer.

Best-selling author, professional speaker and safety consultant Terry Jo Gile, MT(ASCP)MA Ed., the Safety Lady®, has helped thousands of laboratorians create safety savvy laboratories. Her book, Complete Guide to Laboratory Safety - Third Edition, is considered the consummate safety reference tool that is specific for clinical laboratories. She can be reached at www.safetylady.com.