

## Safety and Young Workers: What We Have Learned

Huguette Blanco, John Lewko, Rick Volpe, Kate Tilleczek, Amanda Duncan, and Cindy Tremblay

An area of increasing interest to researchers is the early years of work. Benthin, Slovic, and Severson (1993) found that the only age group to have a rising mortality rate since the 1960s was that of workers aged 15 to 24 years old. Findings like these demonstrate that continued research into the occupational health and safety issues of youth is needed. Young workers are exposed to various work settings, types of risks and hazards, and types of supervisory interactions that serve as their initiation into the adult work world. Despite their unique experiences, this group has only recently become a focal point for research (Runyan, Bowling, & Schulman, 2004). The present study is based on a 3-year action research project that conducted case studies in 15 service sector worksites and 159 individual interviews with young workers (YW) and young supervisors (YS) aged 15 to 24 years of age. Case studies used a multidimensional evaluation model (BRIO, Volpe, 2002) and involved site visits, participant observations, formal and informal semi-structured interviews, as well as a review of relevant business materials. A recursive process was used for interviewing (Bigelow, Tesson, & Lewko, 1996) with conceptual components developed from case study materials. Individual interviews were between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours and explored the young worker or young supervisor perspective of various work settings, issues and relationships.

Results suggest that YWs associate and take for granted the hazards that are in their workplace. Young Workers and Young Supervisors are not trained to “think” about the need to manage risk and hazards in the workplace. The association that some injuries, such as cuts or burns, are considered to be “part of the job” has become apparent from our sample. Furthermore, YWs often experience task training with an emphasis primarily on the specifics of the task instead of safety or risk management training. Interestingly, interviews with YS also revealed these themes but also identified unique themes in managing this group of workers. Young Supervisors received minimal training on how to work with and manage YWs in the workplace. Due to the closeness in age between YWs and YSs, establishment and maintenance of authority is difficult. This closeness in age can also affect the nature of the relationship between YSs and YWs by influencing the supervisor’s ability to function as an effective teacher/trainer as well as a motivator. The link between YW training and increased understanding of safe work practices is tenuous at best and may be tied to the lack of specific training of management and Young Supervisors in this area.

Results of this study were transferred into the Ontario Service Safety Alliance Injury Prevention System. Improvements and modifications were made to internal business practices, client coaching, and products to put injury prevention research into practice to

help reduce workplace injury for young people. This research project has left us with numerous opportunities for future work in the area of occupational health and safety as they relate to YW.