

Vision Correction and Workplace Safety

What You Need to Know to Develop A Stronger Safety Eyewear Program

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Today, our nation's workforce is comprised of the highest percentage of workers aged 55 and older since the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began reporting labor force statistics in 1948. Furthermore, the BLS projects that more than ninety percent of all growth in the U.S. labor force from 2006 to 2016 will be workers aged 55 and older.

In a recent study of 137 North American safety directors*, nearly all recognized a growing need for prescription eyewear among workers. According to The Vision Council, seventy per cent of workers today require vision correction, and that number is on the rise. The leading reason behind this trend is the rapidly expanding population of Baby Boomers in the workplace. Baby Boomers are living longer and working longer, dramatically altering the face of U.S. worker demographics. As the workforce changes, the ways that we protect it must change as well.

Born between 1946 and 1964, the Baby Boomer population is now reaching the age when it is common to experience reduced visual capacity. Yet, vision loss often occurs so gradually that even the individual doesn't notice it happening. The most common vision issue for people is nearsightedness, or difficulty seeing things that are far away. But by their early 40s, most people experience farsightedness, or difficulty seeing things that are nearby. Over time, eye muscles get tired and eye lenses become less flexible. As a result, it is more difficult for the eyes to shift from focusing far to near like they used to.

Once in their 50s, most individuals' ability to see middle distance also deteriorates (typically the distance from which we view a computer). This natural progression of vision loss requires multifocal lens corrective eyewear. Today, roughly fifty five percent of people wearing corrective lenses wear ones with multifocal capabilities to account for more than one type of vision loss.

Safety directors are not typically trained to be alert to workers' vision needs and most companies do not have vision screening programs in place to detect and meet employees' needs. However, when vision loss goes uncorrected, companies put themselves and their workers at risk: a worker can lose his or her vision due to injury; companies can experience decreased productivity; and companies can pay thousands, even millions, in direct and indirect costs related to an eye injury. It is important that safety managers are aware of these risks and fully understand what is needed to avoid them.

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Z87.1 standard, which specifies requirements for workplace eye protection, states:

“Wearers of prescription (RX) eyewear shall wear eye protection that incorporates the prescription in its design or that can be worn over prescription lenses without disrupting either the prescription eyewear or the protective eyewear.”

Many workers and safety managers incorrectly assume that “dress” glasses—prescription glasses designed for wear outside the workplace—provide enough protection. Dress glasses **do not** provide the

protection necessary for occupational hazards, and simply adding sideshields does not make them ANSI-compliant.

The use of over-the-glass (OTG) safety eyewear is the leading reason for not having a formal prescription safety eyewear program, with approximately twenty percent of the companies surveyed indicating the use of OTGs in lieu of committing to a prescription safety eyewear program. Another ten percent of companies indicated that they rely upon that individuals' own prescription eyewear.

OTGs that meet ANSI requirements may be used by the workforce, although they are not the optimal choice. When selecting any safety eyewear – including OTGs – worker acceptance is critical. Comfort, fit and styling all play an important role in the selection process. If their eyewear is uncomfortable, workers are more likely to remove it on the job, putting themselves at risk. Because OTGs are worn over existing prescription frames, comfort and fit are even more important.

The best option for protecting workers who require corrective lenses throughout the day is prescription safety eyewear. Each set of prescription safety eyewear is manufactured individually to meet the worker's specific needs with a single, comfortable solution. And like non-prescription safety eyewear ("planos"), prescription safety eyewear can feature optional side shield capabilities to provide frontal and appropriate side coverage. When manufactured properly, prescription safety eyewear delivers fantastic results: an individual's vision is corrected, they feel more comfortable in their eyewear, and as a result they are more likely to leave it on throughout the workday, improving worker safety throughout the workplace. The most effective way to accomplish this is to implement an Rx safety eyewear program

Even though a large percentage of people need corrective eyewear, only about fifty percent of companies provide an Rx safety program, most likely because of the common misconception that prescription eyewear is expensive and managing the program is time-consuming and complicated. But, consider the following scenario: you may currently provide plano safety eyewear for your employees, which carries a cost of approximately \$42.00 per year or \$84.00 every two years. The average cost of prescription protective eyewear every two years? Approximately \$80.00 – priceless when you consider the safety of your workers and the costs associated with eye injuries when they aren't wearing correct eyewear.

But what about the investment of time and resources to implement a program? Implementing an Rx safety eyewear program is not as complicated or as expensive as one may think. For example, the Honeywell Eyelation program uses cutting-edge technology to help companies manage their Rx safety programs in an extremely cost-effective manner; saving time and money while making it easier than ever to provide safety Rx eyewear to the entire workforce.

Vision loss among the aging workforce often goes unnoticed. To ensure a long and healthy work life for our nation's Baby Boomers, it is important that employers address the specific vision-related needs of this rapidly growing segment. Now is the time to help workers detect a vision problem and get the safety eyewear they need to carry out their work safely, effectively and comfortably. After all, eye safety is not just about eye protection — it's about wearing the right kind of protection—and it's becoming easier and more cost-effective than ever to implement an effective safety Rx eyewear program.

* Honeywell Rx Safety Eyewear Market Study, April 2011.