

SPEAKING UP FOR WORKPLACE SAFETY:

Researchers study the effects of age and supervisor commitment to safety on workers' willingness to raise concerns

Slippery floors, mislabelled chemicals, and inadequate safety equipment - unsafe working conditions pose hazards to the life and well-being of workers, young and old alike.

Occupational health and safety research has highlighted the vulnerability of young workers to workplace injury due to workers' lack of knowledge and inexperience in the workplace, and noted that younger workers are reluctant to speak about safety concerns. Researchers have yet to examine whether young workers are, compared to their older co-workers in similar jobs and work environments, less likely to raise their concerns with supervisors when confronted with job-related hazards.

Dr. Sean Tucker, an Associate Professor at the Hill and Levene Schools of Business, and his co-authors from the University of Calgary, conducted a study regarding workplace safety in the food services sector to address this gap in knowledge and test whether workers' intentions to speak up about hazardous working conditions vary between young workers (those between 15 and 25 years of age) and

older workers (over 25 years of age).

The researchers presented study participants with two hypothetical yet realistic scenarios of workplace safety concerns in a restaurant. To participate in the study, individuals had to have experience working in the food services sector. In both scenarios, a new worker faces multiple hazards, such as slippery floors and cluttered, unclean work spaces, in the restaurant's kitchen.

Secondly, the researchers used two different conditions to examine whether supervisor expressions of commitment to safety – either consistent and clear, or inconsistent and ambiguous – influences young and older workers' ability or intent to voice their workplace safety concerns with managers.

The researchers found that in the scenario where the supervisor expressed a clear and consistent commitment to workplace safety, both young and older workers reported similar intentions to speak up about their concerns with hazardous workplace conditions.

However, when the supervisor's commitment to safety was unclear

and inconsistent, older workers were less likely than young workers to raise safety concerns. The researchers suggest that older workers' reluctance may be attributed to their particular life stage and previous work experiences that may have taught them that a supervisor's indifference to safety is a clear sign about the riskiness of speaking up about safety concerns.

While young workers are vulnerable due to their lack of experience in the workplace and higher exposure to injury, the results of this study suggest that when supervisors are unclear about their commitment to safety young workers may be more likely than older workers to voice safety concerns.

These findings demonstrate that supervisors' commitment to providing clear and consistent signals about safety is crucial to creating an environment where safety-related voice is welcome for both young and older workers. This study lays the groundwork for future research where these results can be tested in a real-world setting in the food services, manufacturing, and health care sectors.

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