

YOUNG WORKER SAFETY

Our Communities & Youth Need Us

By Wyatt Bradbury

A fond memory for many growing up might be splashing with friends and family at the community pool. I worked in aquatics throughout high school and college and loved every minute of it.

The scary truth, however, is that this is a highly hazardous work environment with one of the most vulnerable employee populations: young workers. While these employees take daily responsibility for the safety and health of facility patrons, they are often woefully underprotected.

The statistics for young workers paint a concerning picture. In 2017, 377 workplace-related deaths occurred among those under the age of 24 (BCSP Foundation, n.d.). In 2017, high-school-aged students were 1.25 times as likely to suffer a work-related injury requiring treatment in an emergency department compared to workers age 25 and older (NIOSH, 2020). In 2018, the rate of nonfatal injuries was 110.3 per 10,000 full-time employees for workers age 16 to 19 and 96.3 per 10,000 full-time employees for workers age 20 to 24 (NIOSH, 2020). These statistics alarm us, and they should. In 2018, there were 22 deaths among workers younger than age 18—likely high school students trying to develop themselves or provide for their families (NIOSH, 2020).

Let's back up: The goal of this article is not to assign blame. Organizational development with regard to safety and health is a continuum. Some organizations are further along than others in their growth from meeting base-level compliance to world-class safety management programs, irrespective of resources, knowledge and commitment. In fact, the facilities where I worked were fantastic workplaces from a developmental standpoint; they sup-



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ported my growth as a professional, as a leader and as a person despite the fact that their management of employee safety and health was severely lacking.

As a young worker, my parents instilled in me the value of hard work. I learned to always show up on time, speak respectfully and find a way to get the job done with the highest possible quality. However, this ethic also put me in some compromising situations: Lifting heavy, awkward objects by myself, not wearing PPE when handling highly hazardous pool

chemicals and, in one volunteer instance, climbing on a self-constructed scaffold about 15-ft high although it looked like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. And, even with the recent awareness campaign and training resources provided through BCSP Foundation (BCSP, 2020), little has changed.

My brother is now employed in the audiovisual community as a high school student and is subject to height and electrical risks. He did not receive much, if any, training from his employer on the hazards faced on the job. Help for lifting material, safety data sheets, storage of chemicals, lockout/tagout: these are terms that pique my interest now, as a safety professional, but were unfamiliar as a teen worker despite my exposure to and interaction with the hazards.

Vantage Point

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Why would I put myself in those compromising situations as a young worker? Because, in my mind, that is what it meant to be a “good employee,” and the culture of my family and safety was something I provided to others as a lifeguard, not worried about for myself, right?

Now, I look back on those days as a high school and college worker with a profound feeling that I was lucky. Regardless of how invincible I felt, I now know that I was at risk and, frankly, neither the employer nor the employee knew any better. This is not an excuse but a reality that safety professionals should recognize as an opportunity. City pools, community centers, recreation facilities, churches and local theaters have supported me and my siblings through our formative years. Adding to the list, retail and fast-food establishments have likely supported the early careers of many readers or their families. In all of these cases, neither the employer/supervisor nor the employee has any desire for harm to occur. However, in many cases the supervisor and employee do not know any better. While we as professionals may have conversations regarding safe work behaviors with young people in our lives, the majority of young workers are not so fortunate and must depend on their employers to provide the training. Through observation and experience, this seems akin to hoping for bad things not to happen rather than actively preventing their occurrence. There has to be a better way.

As we send our children, neighbors and emerging community leaders to work, we must ensure that as a pro-

fessional community they have access to the safety training, resources and knowledge they need to grow and develop without harm. Is it our job? Not necessarily. However, I would argue that we have a professional duty to serve where there is a demonstrated opportunity. With the vulnerability of this workforce due to their lack of teaching, lack of experience and hazards present, look for opportunities to educate and support where practicable. Even simple consultation, insight and support could make a significant impact on the immediate or lasting futures of these employees during an impressionable stage.

The opportunities will look different in each organization and to each professional, and, as always, one should only support where one is qualified and competent. With that said, imagine the impact if each ASSP chapter, let alone member, looked to engage one set of youth in their community. What would it look like if people were provided with awareness regarding workplace safety when they were young employees instead of when they return to the workforce to begin a full-time career? What about those who suffered some sort of incident? Imagine if our organization could impact those statistics for the better and allow for life-changing, not life-altering, development. The

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goal should be to teach young workers how to act safely in the workplace and instill them with a sense of awareness that will help them navigate the dynamic workplace hazards they face. They should be empowered to speak up for their safety, not to find fault in what are often already burdened workplaces. The objective of the safety professional should be to lend support and expertise where it might be accepted at workplaces throughout our communities that employ young workers. So, as we encounter young employees heading to work in our communities, take a moment to stop and see where the insight of a safety professional might be valuable and let us work as an association of community leaders to ensure the betterment of our neighborhoods and the young workers growing within them. **PSJ**

References

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- BCSP Foundation. (n.d.). Youth safety institute. www.bcspfoundation.org/initiatives/youth-safety-institute
- NIOSH. (2020, Oct. 5). Young worker safety and health. www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/youth/default.html

Math Toolbox, continued from pp. 44-47

Answers: The Case of the Misplaced Radioactive Element You Do the Math

Your answers may vary slightly due to rounding.

$$1.a. I_2 = 13.5 \cdot \frac{100^2}{762^2} = 0.23 \text{ R/hr}$$

(rounded)

$$1.b. I_{2 \text{ per minute}} = 0.23 \div 60 = 0.004 \text{ R/min}$$

(rounded)

$$1.c. 30 \text{ minutes} \cdot 0.004 \text{ R/min} = 0.12 \text{ R}$$

$$2.a. I_2 = 1,418,040 \cdot \frac{50^2}{90^2} = 437,666.67 \text{ R/hr}$$

(rounded)

$$2.b. I_{2 \text{ per second}} = 437,666.67 \div 3,600 = 121.57 \text{ R/sec}$$

(rounded)

$$2.c. 45 \text{ seconds} \times 121.57 \text{ R/sec} = 5,470.65 \text{ R}$$

How Much Have I Learned?

$$3.a. I_2 = 270 \cdot \frac{15^2}{225^2} = 1.2 \text{ R/hr}$$

$$3.b. I_{2 \text{ per minute}} = 1.2 \div 60 = 0.02 \text{ R/min}$$

$$3.c. 47 \text{ minutes} \times 0.02 \text{ R/min} = 0.94 \text{ R}$$

$$4.a. I_2 = 0.2 \cdot \frac{70^2}{140^2} = 0.05 \text{ R/hr}$$

4.b. Yes, intensity at the worker’s distance is one-fourth of the reference intensity ($0.05 \div 0.2 = 0.25$).

$$5.a. I_2 = 4 \cdot \frac{80^2}{800^2} = 0.04 \text{ R/hr}$$

5.b. Yes, intensity at the worker’s distance is one-tenth of the reference intensity ($0.04 \div 4 = 0.01$).