

Young food workers thrive on this safety recipe



After nearly 90 years in business, it's no surprise that food manufacturer J.D. Sweid Ltd. has a proven recipe for young worker safety — although one ingredient may be unexpected.

“We don't differentiate between young workers and others,” says Human Resources Supervisor Steve MacIntyre. “We treat everyone essentially like a young worker, whether they're 17 or 47 years old.”

That's the basic safety menu for 380 workers at the company's Langley and Burnaby plants. They process red meat and poultry products for cross-Canada clients Loblaws, Costco, Real Canadian Superstore, A&W, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wendy's and others.

J.D. Sweid's safety training builds on WorkSafeBC's *Lost Youth* graphic video on four serious-injury cases involving young workers. It starts as an orientation that examines decision-making and potential consequences. New workers talk about their own personal decisions, like making risky left turns against oncoming traffic. MacIntyre adds his experience to the mix —as an 18-year-old sawmill worker whose decision-making kept him off work for a year after being nearly buried by a forklift load of 18-foot, six-by-six lumber.

After that and other orientation staples, each new worker is “essentially married” to a trainer for first-hand instruction on the production line. It can look deceptively simple — chicken drumsticks, for instance, being automatically battered, breaded, frozen and bagged. But manual labour loads conveyors, keeps moving chicken pieces properly positioned, and finally sorts them for quality.

In all this, one crucial safety message is, “Don’t operate any equipment unless you’re trained and comfortable with it. If not, your answer is a respectful ‘No, I can’t do this.’”

Other key safety issues include ergonomics and a plant temperature of roughly four degrees Celsius. People tend to bundle up and wear hoods that can limit movement and impair vision. The cold can distract workers from their surroundings, and decreased blood flow to the extremities means more risk of injuries such as repetitive motion strains.

After three days, one-on-one production-line instruction ends — unless trainers judge that newcomers need more training, or workers ask for it themselves. That’s relatively rare because new workers really want to prove themselves, according to MacIntyre.

“Everyone wants to be seen as a strong contributor,” he explains, “wants the boss to say, ‘I’m glad we hired this person.’” MacIntyre sees this in most new employees, not only younger ones.

But where young workers have an exclusive franchise, he says, “Is lack of life experience.” They must learn to stop and think through decisions, and avoid gut reactions.

That brings MacIntyre to the special ingredient for young workers in the J.D. Sweid safety recipe — more individualized attention, with trainers and supervisors applying a tutoring-mentoring mentality.

Generally, he also sees a need to stress that “we take young worker safety seriously, that it’s in our interest to cultivate a culture of safety allowing J.D. Sweid to attract and retain young employees.”