



Central Kitchen + Bar in Kelowna is one of several employers proving that preventing injuries to young workers is good for business.

Setting a positive example for young workers

By Jesse Marchand

Between 2012 and 2016, around 126 young workers were injured daily on the job in B.C. But, a proactive approach from employers is trying to turn the tide.

Work can be intimidating for young people, especially when they're new to the job, or don't have a lot of experience in the industry. They want to make a good first impression by showing their employers and co-workers that they know what they're doing.

But, without proper training and support, young workers are at risk of injury. Between 2012 and 2016, more than 32,000 workers aged 15 to 24 were hurt on the job in B.C. Eighteen of those individuals died.

That, quite simply, is unacceptable, says Trudi Rondou, WorkSafeBC senior manager, Industry and Labour Services. "So, together with employers, we're encouraging young workers to trust their instincts, and, when they have safety concerns, to raise them with their employers. We also want to ensure they know their rights and responsibilities on the job."

"I wish I knew then, what I know now."

Understanding rights and responsibilities, is something Clint Mahlman, executive vice president and chief operating officer for London Drugs Limited, takes to heart. Two near misses at a B.C. sawmill opened his eyes to the dangers of inadequate training on the job.

"It was a different time and place back in the early '80s when I started to work. I wish I knew then what I know now about safety," says Mahlman. "I just about lost my hand due to a crush injury when working in a sawmill as a young maintenance worker, and I saw one of my good friends nearly impaled by a hydraulic ram. Those two things really snapped my attention," he adds. "We were never taught lockout procedures."

Today, Mahlman considers training young workers a top priority at London Drugs. Since 26 percent of injuries in retail involved young workers in 2016, it's a significant concern. One of the things they are doing is making sure workers understand the health and safety training no matter what their background.

“English isn’t the first language for a lot of our employees,” says Mahlman. Having a coach or co-worker help reinforce a safety message in the worker’s mother tongue helps get the message across.

“It’s also really important for young workers to talk about safety,” he says. “Speaking up to your employer is a very good thing, and quite honestly, if an employer doesn’t value that, you’re working for the wrong place.”

Working toward continuous improvement and innovation in safety

Over in the construction industry, which employs 28,000 young workers in B.C. each year, the risk of serious injury is high. Five young people lost their lives to workplace incidents in this industry in the past five years.

Scott Jacob, co-owner of Jacob Brothers Construction in Surrey, B.C., is determined not to see that happen at his workplace. And he believes that getting young workers to feel comfortable asking questions is key.

“It’s not enough to say safety matters. You have to demonstrate it,” he says. One of the ways they do that is through their innovative Green Hard Hat training program.

“The green hard hat identifies them as a new or a young worker,” says Jacob. “We think it makes it easier for young workers to ask for safety help, or receive safety suggestions, from the more experienced workers.” The hard hats are a reminder to not only ask questions, but to really think about the risks before doing something.

Promoting a safety culture

Over at Beedie Construction in Burnaby, B.C., early training and orientation is part of the business model. Eric Jensen, director, construction operations, knows all too well what lack of training on the job can do. In his youth he got an injury at work that he feels to this day.

“I was standing on the edge of an excavation, the bank gave away and I suffered a knee injury that took a fair number of months to recover from,” says Jensen. “It really opened my eyes to the importance of safety.”

So much so that today, Jensen sees safety as a high priority. “In our company it starts from the top,” he says. “It’s very much in the DNA of the Beedie’s

themselves. They’re very proud of what they do and take a great deal of pride in doing it safely.”

Almost 20 percent of workplace accidents involving young workers occur during their first month on the job, so orientation is key, says Beedie.

“An initial orientation provides young workers with information about what we expect from them and how they are expected to work. We then mentor them by providing them with experienced work partners.” Young workers are also encouraged to ask questions, he adds.

Safety is good for business

“There’s a strong connection between safety and productivity,” he says. “We’re not building one building or any one project, we’re building a reputation. I believe very much there’s a competitive advantage to being a safe company.”

Over in Kelowna, B.C., Central Kitchen + Bar has the proof that a safety mindset is good for business. They recently won Best Employer at the 2017 Small Business BC Awards. The hospitality industry employs around 71,000 young workers in B.C., with the most dangerous jobs falling to cooks, kitchen and food service helpers, and fast-food preparers.

“When people start in restaurants, they underestimate the risks of just working an everyday serving shift or bartending shift,” says Central Kitchen co-owner Jared Lee. “We want to encourage staff to ask questions and not feel they’re being judged. It’s important that we create a space where they can really thrive, feel safe, and just be happy to work.”

Setting a positive example

“At the end of the day it’s our responsibility as owners to make sure we lead the charge for safety,” adds Lee. As an employer who started out as a young worker in the restaurant industry, he knows that setting a positive example is vital.

While employers in B.C. are required by law to train and supervise their workers and ensure their health and safety, Lee, Jacob, Mahlman, and Jensen all agree that health and safety is just the right thing to do. As Scott Jacob says, “When you care about your employees from a safety perspective, you’re telling them in the most sincere of ways that they matter, and that what they do is important.” ☺