

AGEING WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

May 2010

The following 'solutions' are an eclectic mix of suggestions which, if applied in the appropriate circumstances, may contribute to improving the skill shortages in Australian workplaces by utilising the skills and talent of older workers.

1. Flexible Workplaces

Flexible workplaces are one of the main pathways to keeping older workers in the workforce. Older workers often have multiple responsibilities, as grandparents, parents, and as carers for their parents. This causes pressure and conflict which may be the catalyst for many to leave the workforce. Part-time work, varied start and finish times, and allowing midday leave to attend to appointments are essential. While many workplaces have increased flexibility, it is not flexible enough and it is not available to all workers. Workplaces need to extend flexibility to all workers and ensure the flexibility accommodates individual differences.

2. Ageing Workforce Risk Management Strategy

All public sector agencies, private organisations, and businesses need to develop a strategic risk management framework to prepare for and manage the challenges associated with the ageing workforce. Risk management is often viewed as a 'negative' response, but risk management is also about generating positive ideas that are 'future focussed' and which capitalise on opportunities. The ageing workforce provides opportunities to retain, and if necessary retrain, skilled workers, whilst continuing to benefit from the previous investment in staff development. The focus should be on connecting the corporate and business objectives, via middle management, to the members of the workforce. Components of the risk management strategy should include the 'Ageing Workforce' as a standing agenda item for Boards, and Executive, ensuring that issues and opportunities are identified and actions developed and implemented. If this is combined with Ageing Workforce Key Performance Indicators for middle management there is less possibility of age discrimination, and more opportunities for the recruitment of ageing workers.

3. Tele-Sage Services

These are professional services provided by older workers with technical, specialist and research skills and experience, for example, librarians, accountants, lawyers, engineers, architects, and other professional groups. The location of the specialist service provider is irrelevant, with services provided locally, nationally and internationally, utilizing all of the technological resources available. The range of services that could be included is unlimited, research, planning, analysis, development, solution formation, etc. The Tele-Sage Service provider could also be mobile, a traveller moving from one location to another. The opportunities for this type of professional service, provided by older workers, are limited only by the imagination. Older worker + technology = a potentially powerful mix!

4. Older Worker Business Awards

Why not recognise and reward those businesses who value and retain older workers, and in the process, reduce the skills shortage. Recognition and reward can be very motivating, and good for business.

5. Targetted Education Strategies to Retrain Older Workers

There should be specific education strategies to target older workers for retraining in industries identified as having skills shortages. Older workers are an untapped resource, and retraining is less expensive than complete training, with the older worker bringing a set of life-skills to the new job that is invaluable.

6. Age Discrimination Reporting

All large businesses and organisations should be required to report on the age profile of their workforce, identify the percentage of the workforce over 45 years, and the strategies implemented in their workplace to reduce discrimination. Organisations should be required to report on strategies in place to engage, support and retain older workers, and identify specific age discrimination strategies appropriate for their industry.

7. Affirmative Action for Older Workers

Those industries that identify a skills shortage should be required to identify strategies that have been implemented that specifically target older workers to fill the skills gap, and report annually on the effectiveness of those strategies. This should be a prerequisite before proceeding to immigration based solutions.

8. Media Profiles on Older Workers

Articles that focus on the positive health benefits to both men and women of continuing in paid employment. Articles that provide examples of workers in a variety of occupations, at 60+, 70+, 80+, 90+, that provide ideas, and inspiration, to others. We need more articles that focus on older workers as the provider of services; rather than the recipient of services from others.

9. Temp and Locum Agency for Older Workers

There are opportunities for employment agencies to specialise in the provision of temporary professional workers, aged 55+. This may suit the 'grey nomads' and would provide relief for overworked professionals in rural and regional locations, who are often the only specialist in the area. They could provide 'blocks' of work, provide temporary relief for overworked professionals, back up professionals who are on study leave updating their skills, or simply annual leave relief.

10. 'Ageing Industries' Workplace Innovation

Industries that have a disproportionate number of older workers aged 45+ need to consider different ways of 'working'. Instead of talking about the looming crisis when existing staff retires, and expecting staff to retire, these industries need to recognise that 'retirement' does not have to be an all or nothing proposition. Nor is retirement particularly healthy. Examine the way 'work' is done, and pilot improved work practices. Practices which capitalise on the skills and experience of older workers, strategies to keep them engaged at work, and to ensure that the work environment encourages and facilitates the sharing of their skills with younger workers. Involve the workers in the discussion, because workers know best how to improve the workplace – management need to listen and act on the suggestions.