

Ageing workforce and workplace challenges

View from the Ground

No. 1: Ageing and Working – a continuum

I have developed an interest in ageing and work. Probably because I am ageing and I work, and as I continue to age I will continue to work. There are many ways to define 'work', but for me basic is best, it is either paid work or unpaid work. I have been working in paid employment since I was sixteen years old. I have spent many years working in the community sector as a volunteer, doing unpaid work. And for all of my adult life and some of my pre-adult life I have worked in the home, more unpaid work. Retirement has never been in my plan. I know that at some stage the paid work will decrease and the unpaid work will increase, but work will remain a constant. In all of this, I am not unique. There are many older Australians who would like to continue to remain in paid work, albeit in some changed form, either in reduced hours, or changed roles, functions, and locations, to accommodate a more balanced life as their services are required as carers for ageing loved-ones and grandchildren, and they enjoy some time to themselves.

I am not sure when it happened, perhaps ten years ago, or longer, but the ageing workforce has become a topic for community 'concern' and a focus for demographers, researchers, and management consultants. The debate about the ageing of the population, the impact on the workplace, and how the community, business and government responds, particularly in terms of current and future skill shortage appears to be gathering momentum. A basic search of the internet will yield many articles written by academics, human resource practitioners, demographers, researchers, management experts, industry spokespeople, politicians, and others. Some of these include helpful and practical suggestions as to how to deal with the challenges, but others are filled with 'doom and gloom' and a dire prediction if nothing is done. Mostly it is negative commentary about those over 45 years of age – what blight on society these people appear to have become!

From my humble view, here on the ground, it seems pretty simple. If you are not dead, then you are ageing, everyone in the workforce is ageing, not just those over 45 years. The focus is wrong. We need to see work, both paid and unpaid, for what it is, an important and continuing part of everyone's lives. The challenge for Australian workplaces is to better accommodate the individual differences of all employees as they progress through life. Accommodating those expecting children, raising children, those requiring ability support (either physical or mental), those who are carers, those with cultural and language differences, ensuring training, retraining and support is available to achieve organisational outcomes in unison with a productive workforce, not at their expense. Older workers in particular have a lot to contribute and could continue to contribute in paid employment if the workplace was receptive to individual differences.

— **Linda Eather**
March 2010