

# Ageing workforce and workplace challenges

## View from the Ground

### No. 2: Manual Labour and Performance

In the past few weeks I have enjoyed watching the Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Whilst I have been captivated by some of the sports and the elite athletes, the television commentary made me think about ageing and physical performance. What makes an athlete old? When is an elite athlete a veteran? When is an athlete too old to compete? When are they too old to be competitive? Commentators were heard to call a 33 year old athlete a 'veteran', stating the Vancouver games had many competitors who would be calling it quits after these games because they were in their 30's. Commentators expressed surprise when a Mexican alpine skier was confirmed as 51 years old, and a luge competitor from Argentina 47 years old. There were comparisons between the youngest (16 yo) and oldest (40 yo) curlers in the USA team and interest in the Chinese husband-and-wife skaters, who at 36 and 31 were the oldest in their competition. Media reports stated that in the first 3 days of competition 25% of medals went to Olympians in their 30's. Clearly I wasn't the only one interested in the age of athletes!

To become an elite athlete requires years of training, some of which is paid and some unpaid. Elite athletes were once amateurs, but now it is not unusual for athletes to be paid, by governments, sports institutes, by sponsors, and others. When athletes are considered too old to perform at the elite level they retire from competitive sport. Does this mean that they can no longer contribute in any significant way to the sporting arena? No it doesn't. Some former athletes become sports broadcasters and commentators, whilst others go on to coach younger athletes, and manage sports teams from the elite to the community level. Some use the generic skills gained from years of competition, such as being a good team player and leadership skills, in other roles in a range of industries and environments. Others pursue retraining and study options and new careers when they 'retire'. Some athletes retire from one elite sport, only to take up another sport competitively. There were athletes at Vancouver who had competed in successive Olympics but in different sports. Their motivation was identified as one of 'personal pride' as well as getting medals. The possibilities for retired athletes are endless. They are not discarded once past their physical peak.

Do we treat our manual workers the same way? It is apparent that no-one expects an athlete who first competes at the Olympics at age 15 to be performing physically at the same level when they are 67 years old. Should we expect tradespeople who start an apprenticeship in their late teens, and labour on work sites in sub-tropical heat, to physically perform at the same level when they reach retirement age at 67 years old? What happens to highly skilled and qualified tradespeople when their bodies can no longer perform as it did when they started work? They certainly deserve to retire if they choose; however, many need and want to continue to work. Research shows that there are health benefits to continued involvement in work, particularly for men. Shouldn't we also value their skills and expertise? If there is a skills shortage, why do we continue to ignore and waste the skills of older tradespeople? Why don't we provide options for older tradespeople to share their skills and knowledge in a significant way, that doesn't involve manual labour, e.g. coaching, mentoring, teaching, etc? Why don't we provide options for retraining, or up-skilling? Why not career modifications or changes incorporating the specific trade skills and the generic skills these workers have developed? We need to recognise what a valuable industry and community resource we have and encourage and support their continued participation in the paid workforce. If personal pride is important to ageing athletes it is equally important to ageing 'tradies'. If there are options available for retired athletes at 25 or 35 but there are not similar options available for retired tradespeople at 60 and 65 then we are discriminating on the basis of age.