

AGEING WORKFORCE and WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

“View from the Ground”

No. 3: When is a worker the right age?

During a recent discussion about older workers the children’s nursery rhyme Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and those infamous bowls of porridge, came to mind. One was too hot, one too cold, and the other bowl was just right. What is ‘just right’ when it comes to the age of workers? There was recently some media commentary about a 19 year old political candidate in Queensland and his ‘lack of experience’ to be a representative of the people. He is old enough to vote, old enough to fight in a war, but is he old enough to be a politician, and when will he be too old? When Ronald Reagan was 73 years old and campaigning for his second term in office as the President of the USA he stated in his second presidential debate *“I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”* Was he talking about a 19 year old candidate – no – he was referring to the Democrat Walter Mondale, aged 56 years old! Whilst this rhetoric had a clear political purpose it puts the relativity of age into the spotlight. If 19 is too young and 73 is too old, then is the middle age of 45 years ‘just right’? If so, then why is it so difficult for workers around this age to keep a job, or to get a new job? Why is it viewed suspiciously when a person over 40 years old changes careers? What happens to those workers who do not retire at 60, or 65, or 67 years old? Age discrimination in the workforce does not begin at 19, nor does it end at 67.

There has been some animated debate recently about the age of a popular female newsreader on Channel 7 in Brisbane, whether in her fifties she is too old and should be replaced with a young newsreader, a woman in her 40’s! Under what circumstances do we consider 40 as being young and when is it considered old? (That we are not having this discussion about the age of *male* newsreaders is a topic for another day.) Why do people still flock to see rock groups like the Rolling Stones, with their ageing rockers? And the Australian band AC/DC, whose songs are as popular today as when the group started in 1973, 37 years ago. People pay a lot of money to see these bands because the members are still very good at what they do. Why then do we assume that ageing workers in other workplaces are too old? When was the last time you saw an older worker behind the counter in a fast food restaurant? Would you get a shock next time you went to get a burger to find everyone available to serve you was over the age of 40? You would certainly notice. We need more examples of people of varying ages in all jobs, to challenge the prejudices. We need more people like Ruth Flowers, the 69 year old English DJ who is called the ‘Groovy Granny’, currently in big demand in the best clubs in Paris. We need more examples of employers like Bunnings who received media coverage for their employment of older workers who had changed careers. I recently discovered, during genealogical researching, that a female relative in Glasgow in the 1800’s was recorded in most of the census as a ‘wife’ with ten children, until the age of 67 when her occupation was recorded as a ‘winder’ in an industrial mill. Starting a new job or changing careers in later life is nothing new. So, what is the ‘just right’ working age for any particular job, and who decides?

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