

[HEALTH &amp; WEALTH]

# Catering to an ageing workforce

## GREY POWER



**Workplace well-being**  
As Australia's population ages, so does our workforce – efforts must be made to satisfy older workers

by **DION KLEIN**

AS SCIENTIFIC breakthroughs help slow down the ageing process, populations world-wide grow older and still have many productive years to offer, not only to families and friends, but also to the workforce. The ageing population creates a challenge to society on such matters as social transfer, health care, retirement, and employment.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia's population continues to age due to sustained low levels of fertility and increasing life expectancy. Last century the proportion of people aged 65 years and over tripled and this growth is likely to continue this century. By 2020, 18 per cent of the population will be aged 65 years and over.

The labour force participation rate has increased in all the 45+ age groups as well. Between 1988 and 2001, it rose from 74 per cent to 79 per cent for those

aged 45-54, while those aged 55-59 went from 53 to 61 per cent. For those over 60 it increased about 6 years. The median age of Australians was 35.4 years, up 5.8 years over the past 20 years.

In the United States where normal retirement age is 65, many continue to work well into their early 70s, not only for financial reasons but also for mental, social and intellectual reasons. Though the retirement age is lower in Australia, people are either staying in the workforce past 55 or taking early retirement, then re-entering the workforce at a part-time level; that is, if someone will hire them.

There is substantial research showing that older workers may be discriminated against because of their age. In one case, a 45-year-old male was not considered for private-enterprise jobs because he was "too old". Another report indicated that of the 500 employers interviewed, none said they would hire anyone in their 50s for executive or management positions, and those who were in that age bracket would be the "first to go" in the event of retrenchments. Even though there are laws against discrimination, it is often difficult to prove and can be emotionally and financially draining for both employer and employee.

It could be that employers are the ones who are not reaping the rewards by employing the older worker (in this article "older" refers to 50+). The

50+ workers generally have a high work ethic, appreciate the importance of trust and loyalty, and have years of experience in diverse areas that can be fruitful for any organisation. They have an inherent and sincere need to make a difference in society during the "best years of their life". Having older employees on staff maintains a balance between the younger and older staff, and may also provide natural mentors for younger employees.

There have been concerns regarding potential increased injuries by older workers, but Human Resource Development Canada found experienced workers were less subject to work-related accidents. In any case, implementing programs which cater for the older workers, such as health and wellness seminars on relevant topics, and modifying jobs, may reduce overall workplace accidents.

Employers must consider promoting workplace practices and an environment that accommodates the needs of the older worker. Management needs to address the reasons and attitudes for not considering older workers. Through investigation and experience, they may find that employing the older generation will add depth to the overall organisation.

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- An appreciation of loyalty and trust
- Can be as productive (and possibly more so) as their younger colleagues
- Understand the importance of customer service
- Attendance and punctuality
- Commitment to quality
- Low turnover
- Experience