

HUMAN RESOURCES

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Flexibility key to older workers

By Melissa Yen

MATURE AGE workers must be flexible in their approach to work and prepared to accept roles in which they report to younger managers, Prime Minister John Howard said recently.

Speaking at a breakfast in Sydney, he also encouraged employers to invest in the untapped resource of mature workers and people on disability pensions.

"There needs to be adaptability on both sides," he said. "When I exhort firms to retain more older workers, I also exhort the older workers to accept that as their employer retains them, they must accept perhaps a changed role within the organisation for which they work."

"They must increasingly accept the command structure perhaps, or a management structure, where the person to whom they report is a lot younger than [they are]."

Howard said mature workers should also be prepared to take part-time work and accept the possibility of rearranged remuneration structures.

Alison Monroe, director of mature age recruitment firm Adage, said it was time to move beyond awareness and start taking action.

"In terms of the Government taking it to the next level, they could be highlighting the pragmatic next steps and taking more of a solutions-based approach," she said.

The Government needs to support companies and consultancies who have intimate knowledge and research around the aging workforce, and who are trying to make a difference in the area, according to Monroe.

"I think they now need to keep the momentum going by offering really tangible and pragmatic advice and assistance regarding next steps.

"They need to look at how to tackle the challenges of capturing the knowledge of baby boomers as they move into retirement, and retaining mature talent longer in the workforce," she said.

The Prime Minister acknowledged the very significant demographic challenge that Australia faces as a population, in which people are living longer, healthier lives.

The greatest challenge for Australia is the fact that the workforce participation rate of those aged between 55 and 64 is far too low.

Howard believes, however, that the "process has begun" because Australia has adapted to cultural change within the community as well as in businesses.

Furthermore, he said, a balance needed to be struck between Australia's effective social welfare system and the need to encourage people, including those with disabilities, into the workforce.

"This is a challenge that involves the whole community and our response to it has got to be a response based on bringing out the best in people's human instincts," he said.

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