

'Grey' now the hot worker

By Kate Southam

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OLDER workers are back in fashion according to research by a peak employer group.

The Recruitment and Consulting Services Association carried out in-depth interviews with 50 of its members across Australia to discover that the swing back to experience was driven largely by the skills shortage.

Another main driver for the change in employer attitude was a growing dissatisfaction with younger workers, who were more demanding and changed jobs more often.

RCSA members collectively represent millions of the job placements made across Australia each year.

Chief executive of the RCSA Julie Mills said respondents rated older workers for a range of reasons.

The recruiters surveyed noted that clients value older workers very highly because they have good life experiences to apply to decision making, are good mentors for younger employees and have a good skills base," Ms Mills said.

"They also found older workers to be more stable employees with a lower rate of job turnover," she said.

Most RCSA respondents classified a "mature aged employee" as aged 50-plus.

Of the RCSA members surveyed, 91.7 per cent said older workers had good skills; 87.5 per cent felt mature workers had more life experience to apply to decision making; 87.5 per cent did not believe mature workers cost more to employ; and 85 per cent of those surveyed reported that mature workers stayed longer in the job.

Despite the glowing report for the older workers already employed, 62.5 per cent of the recruiters surveyed said they had encountered difficulties in convincing clients to employ mature candidates.

Employer prejudice included believing older candidates were less likely to acquire new skills, particularly technology skills and that older workers were more difficult to retrain.

Specialist human resources consultancy Sageco focuses assisting employers to recognise the value to the bottom line of both retaining their existing older workers and attracting new ones.

Director Margaret Seaberg said companies that failed to address the issue of older workers would pay the price.

"We have seen a big turn around in the last year in employer attitudes but particularly over the last six months as organisations start to realise that their futures depend on their ability to attract and retain older workers," Ms Seaberg said.

"In the next decade 85 per cent of new labour market growth will come from the over 45s so it is a critical issue for businesses," she said.

Ms Seaberg said the recruitment industry was also taking steps to improve the attitude of consultants toward older candidates and employees.

Results from a survey of 1000 mature professionals released by Sageco last month found more than half had suffered discriminatory practices at the hands of recruitment consultants.

The RCSA admits the need for education and has developed a mature aged program to provide consultants with training both as recruiters and as employers of older people. The national program is being developed with funds from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations as part of its Mature Age Industry Strategy.

"This program breaks new ground and is the first time the recruitment industry has sought to develop life-long age management skills," Ms Mills said.

The Federal Government is trying to encourage better employment opportunities for older people to boost Australia's labour supply.

More than 4.1 million Australians were expected to retire in the next decade and some experts have predicted a labour shortfall of up to a million workers within 15 years.

Kate Southam is the editor of careerone.com.au.