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The new grey workforce

SMART employers are putting up the welcome signs for mature workers, realising that soon, an advertised job will attract one candidate under 45 – and seven over 45. This is nothing short of a revolution. Meet today's top 20 employers of new workers.

These startling figures come from Access Economics. Access suggests that, by 2020, we will be in what is called 'negative market growth.' The decade leading up to this will see fewer and fewer young people available for all the jobs we need to fill.

According to Catriona Byrne, director of change management organisation Sage Company and mature workers' employment agency Adage, 85% of the growth in the labour market will come from mature workers (defined as over 40 years old).

These workers will be the presently 'unaccounted for' labour force – those returning to the labour market after having kids, after being retrenched and unable to find work for a while, and from those who retire at 55 and then decide to return to work due to lack of fulfilment in retirement.

These mature workers will want something very different from their work life.

They are not climbing the ladder, trying to prove themselves (or kill themselves) with long hours. They want to be challenged, sure. They want to learn new skills or even a new profession – but they want time for their hobbies, grandkids, and to care for a sick partner or parent. They won't be bullied, taken advantage of, or work for slave wages. Heck, they may not even need the money!

Why employers need to change

To attract and accommodate mature workers, there is going to have to be a corresponding revolution amongst employers.

Catriona says that Adage decided to run an inaugural award in 2007 and name 20 companies who are not just paying lip service to the matter, but are truly doing something.

The Adage Awards results are intriguing.

The judges looked at four criteria:

- Strategy;
- Level of implementation – tangible steps taken;

- Leadership within the company for each area, and a willingness to share with other employers; and
- Measuring the contribution the strategy is making to the bottom line.

The judges found the least progress in the last criteria and yet considered it vital for the contribution to be measured, as companies need to see the benefits. "This is not just about being nice to old people," says Catriona.

"However, we found pockets of real innovation – with Brisbane City Council the standout entry."

Innovation is the key

Brisbane City Council has 46% of its employees aged over 40. They have a 'Wise Heads' project for phased retirement for those over 60 years old, and flexible work arrangements.

"Flexible work arrangements aren't that rare, but in this case they had a team leader who was approaching 55 and wanting to retire," Catriona explains. "When they approached him to job share they matched him with another staff member. He is now 61 and still working there."

Another company named by the Adage Awards has a robust framework for succession – with good overlap periods between older workers and new recruits.

"The one thing we have learnt is that a broad brush approach doesn't work – this is about meeting individual's needs."

Brisbane City Council job sharer, Kirsten deHesse

Catriona also says that the old stereotypes have to be smashed.

She cites cases of recruitment firms saying their clients don't want older people. This mindset will need to change to the point where HR are even comfortable with the idea of a 45 year old career change 'apprentice.'

Kirsten, who works in Marketing Strategy for Brisbane City Council, says they are now working on a 'talent pool' approach rather than focusing on just a match between job and candidate.'

"We also see being great employers as being a good marketing tool."

Adage Top 20 firms for mature workers

Abacus
 AMP
 ANZ
 Aurora Energy
 Westpac
 Brisbane City Council
 Commonwealth Bank
 Careers MultiList
 Gold Coast Water
 Insurance Australia Group
 JP Morgan
 IBM

Masonic Care Queensland
The Salvation Army
SA Water
St George Bank
St Vincents & Mater Health
Sunstate Cement
TACTICS Consulting
360HR

Where to find out more

The Australian government's primary employment service provides quality tailored assistance for all job seekers, including mature people. Visit the Job Network Information site

In recognition of the issues that mature job seekers face when returning to work, the government introduced Employment Preparation, which provides individually tailored assistance to mature job seekers (aged 50 and over), along with parents and carers. It may include skills assessments; access to training courses to upgrade skills; and courses/training to improve self-esteem, confidence or IT skills. In addition, up to 5000 Employment Preparation places a year are available to mature job seekers, parents and carers who are not on income assistance. To find out more go to www.jobwise.gov.au