

NOT OLD JUST OLDER

THE AGED WORKFORCE: WILLING AND ABLE

Mature age workers appear to have the government in their corner, but will the Age Discrimination Act and public awareness around the legislation be enough to help them get a fair go with HR and recruiters?

Jean-Paul Pelosi investigates

The Rolling Stones once sang “If you start me up I’ll never stop” and true to their word, they are showing no signs of stopping decades later.

With three of the band members in their early sixties and one in his late fifties, the longevity of The Stones is symbolic of today’s globally ageing workforce. More people are healthier, living longer and working further into their ‘grey’ years than ever before.

According to a 2002 report by the United Nations entitled, *World Population Ageing 1950–2050*, the number of older persons

around the world (60 or over) has tripled from 205 million to 606 million. The report suggests that by the year 2050, more than one in five people throughout the world will be over 60, compared to one in 12 as it was in 1950.

The Council on the Ageing (COTA) measured in its 2001 report, *Australia’s Ageing Workforce: The challenge for human resource management*, that Australia has one of the world’s most rapidly ageing populations, and predicted that in 2050 one quarter of the population will be 65 and over. Similarly, in New Zealand the percentage of ‘older’ people is likely to be around one fifth of the population, according to the report.

The figures translate into an older

workforce the world over, but if some people have it their way (clearly the very same people who are tired of The Rolling Stones), ageing workers will not figure prominently in the Australian and New Zealand labour force of the future.

The federal Age Discrimination Act, enacted in June of last year, made discrimination in Australian public life on the basis of age, illegal. A long-standing issue that has accumulated copious amounts of press coverage and public rhetoric in recent years finally received legal definition.

However, will this Act be enough to change the largely negative attitude held by many towards older workers?

At the Sydney launch of a new CCH 'guidebook' for the legislation, entitled *Age Discrimination: Mitigating Risk in the Workplace*, Pru Goward, the Australian government's Commissioner Responsible for Age Discrimination, urged that mature age workers be treasured, nurtured and treated with respect.

"One of the objectives of the Act is to respond to demographic change by removing barriers to older people participating in society and changing negative stereotypes about older people," Goward said.

Stereotypes in the workplace are obviously nothing new, but the disrespect shown to mature age workers certainly seems a modern phenomenon. As office technology has quickly developed and processes have become more automated, the experience and knowledge of older workers appears to have grown less important in today's corporate world.

Fueling this negative attitude around the elderly is a society obsessed with commercial products and the youthful celebrity. According to advertisers, everything we buy, for instance, must make us look and feel younger. And knowing who Paris Hilton is dating or how many songs can be saved onto an I-pod Mini sometimes seem to be more relevant social issues than anything else these days.

Age Concern in the UK conducted a recent survey, entitled *How Ageist is Britain?* in which it found opinions about older workers can differ from perceptions.

While Age Concern discovered that 93% of people believe older workers should have the legal right to carry on working past age 65, and also found that nearly 50% think employers do not like having older people in the workplace as it "spoils their image".

"We're not keeping jobs away from young people – that's garbage because there's not a lot of people our age that want to work anyhow" – Tom Higgins

To compound this view, one third of people agreed that the ageing trend would make society worse in regards to security, standards of living, health, access to jobs and education.

The local situation is hardly different. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), a greater number of mature aged workers consistently remained out of the labour force than younger age groups in 2004. The ABS suggested that older workers are more likely to



TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION CASES

Kate Eastman, co-author of *Age Discrimination: Mitigating Risk in the Workplace*, explained at the book launch that this guide could assist both young and old workers. "I think the sort of cases that we're likely to see in the near future are those specific cases where people act upon the stereotypical views about older or younger workers and where there's advertising that targets younger or older workers, or where decisions are made about who gets promotions," she said. In addition, Eastman noted discrimination may occur "where decisions are made about access to particular benefits".

become discouraged than younger workers when out of work and may decide to retire rather than continue searching for employment.

David Deans, CEO of COTA, says attitudes are changing slowly but discrimination is still alive and well.

"The critical issue is there are a large number of [older] people out there who go for jobs and don't even get to an interview – yet they have the skills," he says. "Then there are people in companies who retrenchment is directed toward and they're at a very high risk of being unemployed."

Deans says companies should be trying to retain their senior staff but that traditionally whenever retrenchments are scheduled, the HR practitioner goes directly for those people of mature age.

"These days that means someone over 50 – which is young," adds Deans.

When it comes to discrimination there is often rigorous finger pointing. While it is widely accepted that it exists, nobody is prepared to admit to it.



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Juliet Bourke, partner at Aequus Partners, a management consultancy in Sydney, and co-author of *Age Discrimination: Mitigating Risk in the Workplace*, says age discrimination affects both young and old workers.

"You can have a younger worker who is in fact very mature and thoughtful and doesn't live up to a stereotype that younger workers are irrational or fly-by-night," Bourke says. "I don't want to have any stereotypes for older workers too, to say that older workers are necessarily more reliable, more engaged or productive – because I think there's a spectrum of behaviours for older and younger workers, irrespective of age."

In the case of mature age workers, Bourke suggests that employers need to be alert to the stereotyped image they usually suffer from in the workplace.

"If the employer is not sensitised to their own stereotypes and assumptions about what older workers want and what they're capable of, then they can undermine the whole age balance strategy during the recruitment process," she says. "So there needs to be education of recruiters as well as internal folk who are making that final selection."

Many older employees have found that this education cannot come soon enough, with recruiters and HR typically entrenched with stereotypes about the capabilities of the mature aged.

You only need to click onto one of several current job sites to see advertisements asking for someone 'young' and 'dynamic', as Denis Shadlow, 65, a sales rep for Aspen Pharmaceuticals discovered.

Despite almost 33 years in pharmaceutical sales to date, Shadlow was retrenched in the early 1990s and struggled to break back into

the workforce for seven months. Applying for around 70 jobs only seemed to increase his experience of discrimination rather than improve his chances of finding a position.

"You could say the majority of people: a) really didn't care, and b) didn't have the decency to make some sort of response," Shadlow says. "Of the ones that did respond, by the time I got through three or four interviews, I'd invariably be told I had the experience, talent and all the other credentials but they were looking for a younger, dynamic [candidate] and that's basically the terminology they used."

Bourke confirms mature age workers have commonly been neglected and that in the skill short marketplace employers will be forced to give greater consideration to more experienced candidates.

"Older workers bring talent in the same way that younger workers bring talent and we've been ignoring that segment of the market, thinking we can rely on an endless stream of new talent in the workplace," she says. "That's not going to be there in the long term and already it's starting to bite in the shortages."

Fortunately, Shadlow's talents were soon recognised by Aspen, a company that has made a determined effort to employ more experienced and mature staff.

Robert Koster, sales and marketing manager for Aspen, says that in his experience, older workers actually perform better than other age groups.

Rather than just hire young people who frequently use rep positions as stepping-stones, Koster sought long-term sales professionals through a hiring strategy directed at older candidates.

"If you remove all the prejudice, then



Alison Monroe



Juliet Bourke

the people most likely to do the job for you are people with a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge and a lot of relationships developed – so they're the most qualified," Koster says. "You'd have to be a complete idiot to turn your back on them and in fact you focus on getting these people."

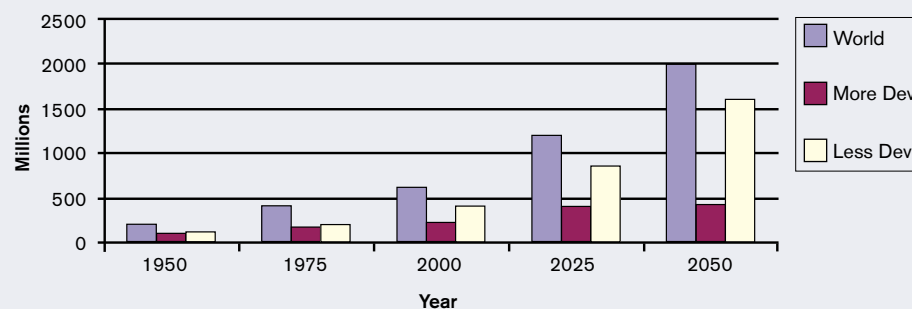
Of 33 Aspen sales reps, the average age is 58, according to Koster. The oldest is 80 in November, and that's just a fraction of the over 800 years of experience in the company's sales team overall.

"We get phone calls all the time asking if there is anything available because we're the only ones that look at these people," Koster says. "We've had zero recruitment costs and zero turnover in the last two and a half years I've been sales marketing manager here."

Tom Higgins, also known as 'Young Tom', loves working for Aspen. At age 69, has no desire to retire just yet. "I've still got enormous, boundless energy and I get round and do my work very well," he says. "And I really love what I do."

POPULATION DIVISION, DESA, UNITED NATIONS

Population aged 60 or over: world and developing regions 1950–2050



Please note this graph has been reproduced from the original and the figures are only approximate

NEW

Age Discrimination: Mitigating Risk in the Workplace

Co-authors: P Thew, K Eastman, J Bourke



Given the demographic of an ageing population, age discrimination in the Australian workplace is a highly topical issue. *The Age Discrimination Act 2004 (Cth)* means that there are enforceable remedies in federal law for people who suffer discrimination on the basis of their age. Business managers must establish workplace practices that remove barriers to participation by workers of all ages, and mitigate the risk of costly litigation.

Age Discrimination: Mitigating Risk in the Workplace is a practical and informative guide to help HR managers, lawyers, and CEOs in any business, and an invaluable professional reference on Australia's age discrimination legislation.

The expert author team includes employment lawyers from Baker & McKenzie, HR practitioners, writers Ilana Atlas and Carol Louw, and Commissioners Pru Goward and Dr Judy McGregor.

- This book provides a centralised resource that enables managers, CEOs and consultants to quickly access the impact of the legislation on their organisations.
- It identifies the issues and gives guidance on best practice policies.
- It discusses dispute resolution and remedies.
- It provides both Australian and international perspectives.

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Still an active surfer and golfer, Higgins says he would be bored stiff at home and does not work because he has to but because he wants to.

"We're not keeping jobs away from young people – that's garbage because there's not a lot of people our age that want to work anyhow," Higgins says. "Once you get over 65 most people think, 'I've had the job thing, I want to enjoy the remaining years of my life doing what I want to do'."

Aspen's approach is a rarity but thankfully there are a couple of other companies also trying to diversify their recruitment beyond 'young and dynamic'.

For example, Donald Matheson, 58, of ING, works in the company's call centre as a customer service specialist. Sixty-four year old Chris Carey works as a manager three days a week for Bluescope Steel, where the arrangement allows him to gradually transition into retirement.

And Westpac is also in on the act, implementing a specific strategy to increase numbers of older workers progressively. In 2002, the bank publicly committed to hiring 900 mature age workers over three years.

So there is some hope. And to assist this positive movement toward the employment of older workers, recruitment website adage.com.au, which launched last May, specialises in the placement of older candidates.

Alison Monroe, co-director of the company, says organisations are beginning to realise

that they need to tap into the mature workforce to sustain their business.

"It [the mature workforce] is an under utilised talent pool and particularly mature females – they represent a fast growing talent pool," Monroe says. "So I think from the corporate perspective there are a number of business drivers that are resulting in this change."

While Age Concern discovered that 93% of people believe older workers should have the legal right to carry on working past age 65, they found that nearly 50% believe employers do not like having older people in the workplace as it 'spoils their image'

Monroe adds that the risk of not acting on the opportunity to hire older workers is becoming too great for competitors in the same field.

"These organisations already know there's an issue and they're taking proactive steps to address age balancing," Monroe says. "They're aware and they realise that it's imperative and they're positioning themselves to attract the talent of the future."

Certainly the message needs to penetrate even further into the minds of employers, however. Awareness is one thing but action is another. At the CCH launch, Bourke informed the audience that the age

discrimination issue needs to be felt, not just thought about.

"I don't think we act on intellectual arguments, I think we have to feel the issue before we come on board," she said. "And even though we're staring down this barrel of an ageing demographic and we know there are reduced entrants coming into the market, the only sectors that seem to be acting on this information are sectors that are already hurting, like the finance and healthcare sectors.

"The other sectors are operating under this delusion that there's going to be an endless stream of talent coming through the door."

Deans agrees that progress is a matter of changing the general mindset of employers and employees.

"If you're in a company and all of a sudden you can't get employees who are of a younger age group, you need to be considering more mature people," Deans says. "Of course, if you get to that stage without having learnt that fact, then you've got a problem."

Koster sums up the success of Aspen's hiring strategy as "an absence of prejudice" and in support of this it should be noted that while the majority of workers at the company

are 'older', they also have one staff member who is 28 and several others in their thirties and forties.

In other words, the absence of prejudice spans across all ages.

But perhaps the last word should go to Shadlow, who hopes to continue on the job until he's at least 70.

"What I see is, the rapport and stature that I've built over 30 years is second to none and you can't get that sort of experience anywhere," he says. "That's what Aspen are doing, getting all these very experienced males and females, utilising their expertise, going out there and getting the job done." **HC**