

Capturing brain power

Anneli Knight | January 21, 2008 - 0:50AM

The Australian workforce is rapidly ageing and employers can reap the benefit - if they've got the right attitude.

Catriona Byrne, partner at Adage, a recruitment agency that specialises in mature-age placements, says the skills shortage has increased opportunities for older employees.

"Between 2002 and 2012 the over-45s are the fastest growing labour candidate pool. For every one candidate under 45 there are seven candidates over 45," she says, quoting an Access Economics report.

Byrne says small business tends to be less prejudiced against older people than the corporate world, because it sees the benefits of employing more mature workers. "They recognise if they get someone with experience who has done the role before there is less risk. Small business can't carry the risk that a corporate can. They like to get it right the first time," she says.

"Small businesses also like the reliability factor and work ethic of older employers," she says.

"When you see someone with a 20, 30-year work history you know they are going to turn up and do the work."

Jennifer Goddard, from the Buzan Centre, an organisation that teaches mental techniques, says the ageing workforce is one of the most serious problems facing Australian employers.

"As an ageing workforce becomes Australia's reality, it is essential that new cognitive skills are learnt and practiced to maximise the resources of mature workers. The good news is we can arrest cognitive decline," Goddard says.

Goddard says one of the key ways employers can maintain mental agility among their ageing employees is through a positive attitude and work culture.

"One thing is to help reinforce the value that the older employee gives to the organisation. Most people are concerned that their skills are getting too old so employers can help support their confidence as well as offer them training," she says.

Goddard says the work culture of an organisation can have a huge impact on how productive and happy their employees are.

"Just giving employees the sense that it doesn't matter what age you are, that you can learn new skills, new technology and that you can easily learn to be more creative - it's part of the culture in the organisation," she says.

The Buzan Centre's founder, Tony Buzan, will present seminars titled *Age-Proof Your Brain* in Australia next month, on techniques for sharpening the mind, memory and learning skills.

"Memory is the basis for everything. It is the basis for relationships, understanding products and services and even basic things like remembering names and faces. A lot of people will say they've got a shocking memory and that can be improved," Goddard says.

Some of the simple techniques for improving memory include making sure your mind is active and stimulated, eating well, staying physically fit and avoiding stress, Goddard says.

Good managers can maximise the output of their older employees by constantly setting new challenges that keep them stimulated.

Goddard says social networks and social engagements also help keep the mind sharp.

"One of the major reasons people will go back to work or stay at work once they are 60 is because of the social interaction and so managers and employers have to create an environment that is stimulating and also productive," she says.

Adage's Byrne says that the most attractive jobs for older employees are ones that offer them flexibility and allow them to balance other responsibilities and enjoy their lifestyle.

"With the push in the last 18 months during John Howard's reign for people to work longer, people were saying, 'We've worked hard all our lives, we'd be happy to work longer but we are looking for flexible work options'."

It is up to employers to create the right work environment and design the right role to attract and keep older employees, Byrne says.