

Age Friendly Workplaces

Retaining and recruiting older workers



Government
of South Australia

SafeWork SA



Is ageism alive and well in your workplace? Smart organisations see ageism for what it is: ill-informed prejudice that hurts individuals, families and communities. And it's also bad for business.

Ageing populations

Australia's population is ageing. As a result, we will see more mature age people in our community, including in our workplaces.

Forward thinking employers know that recruiting and retaining older workers is a smart response to a shrinking labour pool. Through the promotion of flexible working arrangements, mature age workers will choose to stay in the workforce or seek to enter it.

Ageism in the workplace

If workers are discriminated against, or stereotyped, on the basis of their age, they are experiencing ageism. Discrimination can be direct or indirect. Employers should ensure:

- training and promotion opportunities are offered equally to all workers
- flexible work opportunities are offered equally to all workers
- workers are aware of workplace behaviours that could be perceived as harassment, discrimination or victimisation on the grounds of age

- attention is given to the specific health and wellbeing needs of workers as they get older
- age is not a factor in staff recruitment procedures
- policies and practices are in place to promote and support age diversity
- managers are trained in age-friendly employment practices
- when filling new positions, consideration is given to full-time, part-time and casual job share arrangements.

Attracting older workers

An age friendly workplace will attract older applicants. The kinds of facilities and support services older workers value include:

- recognising and accommodating carer responsibilities
- working from home
- worker autonomy
- time off in lieu
- flexible shift arrangements
- flexible hours, including job sharing, part-time work, compressed working weeks
- leave without pay, seasonal leave
- flexible leave and salary arrangements, such as trading salary for additional leave
- phased retirement
- salary sacrifice options.

safe, fair, productive working lives



We are in the midst of the most significant demographic shift in modern human history where populations across the globe are ageing.

Advertising and interviewing

When advertising, be sure to use age inclusive language and focus on the requirements of the position. Place the advertisement in a suitable range of publications to attract a mixed age response.

You can source older workers through:

- local newspapers and websites
- local clubs and community centres
- letterbox drops
- school and other newsletters
- older worker websites and recruitment agencies
- shopping centre notice boards.

Age friendly job advertisements should avoid phrases like 'applicants should be 25-35 years of age'. Be direct and inclusive with a statement such as 'people of all ages are encouraged to apply'.

Don't set unnecessary standards for experience, personal qualities or qualifications. Make it clear you welcome older applicants, by replacing the terms 'senior' or 'mature person' with 'experienced' or 'able to work unsupervised'.

You should also:

- state that your business is age friendly, and values and respects skills and experience
- include working hours, salary range and other benefits
- state if training is available
- avoid youth oriented references such as fast paced, high energy, or images that are not demographically diverse.

When interviewing applicants:

- train interviewers to recognise the value of age diversity
- use people of different ages on the selection panel
- prepare questions that explore applicants' life skills
- consider providing applicants with interview questions prior to interview
- communicate the benefits of working for your organisation – if you believe you can provide specific advantages for older workers, say so
- focus on skills and experience, not age
- conduct reference checks and verify qualifications.

Retaining older workers

Losing experienced staff to retirement can hurt your organisation. You incur the costs of recruiting and training new workers, and your business and clients lose valuable knowledge and expertise.

You will improve staff retention if you:

- directly address ageism in the workplace through an anti-discrimination policy – effectively promoted and widely available – accompanied by training for supervisors
- restructure work practices to include options such as job sharing, part-time and casual work, telecommuting and phased retirement
- provide opportunities for workers to become involved in decision making
- develop a mentoring program in which older workers have the opportunity to pass on their knowledge and expertise to less experienced workers
- consider alternative work arrangements in situations where a worker's priorities have changed (e.g. no longer wishing to pursue promotion opportunities)
- don't make assumptions about when older workers may be retiring.

Older workers benefit from opportunities to upgrade their training and skills. Don't assume they have less interest than younger workers in extending their skills, or in new job challenges.

Ensure training is offered to all staff regardless of age, and that it caters for different learning styles. Consult with training organisations that specialise in programs for older workers, and provide a variety of training options such as job rotations and on the job coaching.

A flexible approach will help you structure work to accommodate business and individual needs. It isn't difficult, but it requires planning to canvass the options and assess the needs of your business and your workers. Consider which flexible working options best suit your business and ensure your managers and supervisors know how to consider requests fairly and as positively as possible.

Most importantly, communicate with your workers about their role in your business, their needs and their plans for the future.

Benefits for employers

Australians are ageing and consequently our labour pool is shrinking. Therefore the business case for recruiting and retaining older workers is strong – they can deliver substantial 'bottom line' benefits to employers. These benefits include:

High retention rates

- Workers aged over 55 are five times less likely to change jobs than workers aged 20-24¹.

Low rates of absenteeism

- Over 75% of Australians aged 55-64 report their health as 'good, very good or excellent'². ABS data shows that older workers are less likely to take days off for illness or to care for others, and less likely to experience work-related injuries than other workers³.

Decreased recruitment costs

- Experts estimate the cost of replacing a worker to be 75-150% of salary when recruiting, training, specialist knowledge and productivity are taken into account.

Productivity

- A recent study found that workers aged 55 years and over performed at their best for approximately 7 hours out of an 8-hour day – higher than all other groups in the study⁴.

Flexibility

- Older workers can often be flexible in relation to part-time work, or other flexible work arrangements, when needed.

Workplace mentoring

- Older workers can be excellent workplace mentors or coaches.

Experience

- Older workers typically have a broad base of transferable knowledge and skills. Their contribution to a workplace can be well beyond the bounds of their role.

Ability and adaptability

- A recent OECD study shows that verbal skills, communication and intelligence remain unchanged as a person ages⁵. ABS data shows older people are the fastest growing users of information technology⁶, and adjust well to new technologies in the workplace⁷.

Low risk

- The risk of a poor appointment is reduced with older workers because work history and performance background can be checked.

¹Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), *Labour Mobility Survey*

²Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), *National Health Survey: Summary of Results, 2004-05*

³Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), *Work-Related Injuries, Australia*

⁴Australian Health Management (2006), *Baby boomers give employers a bang for their buck*

⁵Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006), *Live Longer Work Longer*

⁶Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005), *Year Book Australia*

⁷Eric Digest (1991), *Older worker training: an overview*



A flexible approach will uncover innovative ways employers and workers can agree to structure work to accommodate business and individual needs.

The South Australian Government is committed to mature age workforce participation through South Australia's Strategic Plan Target 48 'Ageing workforce participation: Increase the proportion of older South Australians who are engaged in the workforce by 10 percentage points by 2020'.

Further information and resources

Myths and stereotypes about older workers are widespread and deeply entrenched. Worse still, they are accepted within our workplaces, creating a hidden barrier; a form of age discrimination.

Education, awareness raising and information can highlight ageist misconceptions and help bring about changes in both attitudes and actions.

For additional information, resources, activities and ideas on engaging older workers and supporting mature age participation in the workforce, visit these websites:

SafeWork SA

www.safework.sa.gov.au/worklifebalance

- a three-part series of webisodes which takes a light-hearted, comedic look at stereotypes and myths surrounding the older worker (on YouTube)
- an E-learning training package on age discrimination in the workplace
- print resources and case studies.

Department of Employment

www.employment.gov.au

Department of Further Education, Employment,
Science and Technology

www.skills.sa.gov.au

DOMÉ (Don't Overlook Mature Expertise)

www.dome.org.au

Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia

www.eoc.sa.gov.au/eo-business/employers



Eighty-five per cent of new labour force growth in Australia is from workers aged 45 and over⁸. This percentage will increase as the population ages. Organisations that develop policies now to recruit and retain older workers will reap the benefits.

⁸Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (2009), *Experience Pays: Employer Guide*, p 4.

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