



# What's old is new again

As the number of older workers increases, there are strategies employers can use to maximise this participation and to retain this valuable resource. *By Rachell Bugeja*

**M**ore people are staying in the workforce longer – some because they want to simply continue their careers, others because they need the regular work. Either way, organisations can do more to support older workers and get ready for the reality of an ageing workforce.

Data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that the proportion of people in the labour force aged 65 years and over has increased from 9.4 per cent in 2006 to 14 per cent in 2016. One in every five people aged 65 to 74 participated in the labour force in 2016. The proportion of 55- to 64-year-olds in the labour force increased over the same period (58 per cent to 66 per cent), a strong indicator that the number of older people in the workforce will continue to rise.

This increase in Australia's ageing workforce can be attributed to a number of factors. Many workers continue in paid employment, as they thrive on the opportunities that the work environment offers – a social connection with others, the utilisation of current skills and knowledge sharing. These experiences can encourage social participation, the use and development of knowledge and a feeling of camaraderie, all of which can contribute to improved overall mental health and wellbeing. There is also a group of workers who continue working as they get older due to financial reasons.

Advances in health and medical care, increased life span and increased costs of living are also factors that are likely to have

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influenced older workers and their decision to remain in the workforce for longer. Changes made to the age at which people can access their superannuation and other government payments like the pension have also had an impact on the average age of retirement, contributing to an extended working life.

Given these statistics around the ageing workforce, employers are becoming increasingly aware of the need to consider the

implications around the recruitment and retention of older workers. This group of employees are at increased risk of poor mental health and mental injury due to age-related physical health decline (ie reduced mobility, chronic pain) and other factors including isolation, financial concerns and stress relating to carer responsibilities or bereavement. Neurological disease such as dementia can also have an impact on an individual's behaviour and overall wellbeing.

The Ageing Workforce Ready (AWR) project provides a great example of this emerging research. Activities will target human resource and executive decision makers, policies and procedures and the upskilling of managers and employees. Blended learning approaches will also be explored for scalability and sustainability. Long term, research like this will ideally act as a benchmark for how businesses can engage with and support an age-friendly workplace. This engagement with and in support of older workers can improve overall wellbeing, encourage productive participation in paid employment, and ultimately reduce mental health risks within this group.

Other benefits of supporting an ageing workforce include:

- **A positive organisational culture:** A positive organisational culture is known to improve employee health and wellbeing. In addition, specific organisational practices can address the needs of older workers.
- **Tackling age discrimination:** Implementing initiatives to directly decrease age discrimination will have a positive impact on older people in the workforce and those seeking to re-enter the workforce.
- **Better transition-to-retirement options:** Creating an environment in which people can proactively decide how they would like to work as they age allows them to experience a better transition to retirement.

Older workers often have difficulty in initiating conversations with their employer for fear of appearing difficult and being



Older workers bring valuable skills and maturity to the workforce.

perceived differently by management and colleagues. This is exactly why it is so important that employers help lead the discussion with their older staff. By encouraging conversation around the ageing workforce, a progressive employer will demonstrate that they have a genuine interest in making their organisation a great place for everyone. **IRW**

### Top tips for businesses

With the CSIRO identifying the ageing workforce as one of the six megatrends in work health and safety over the next 20 years, it is vital that Australian employers address the realities of an ageing workforce.

Employers can implement a number of strategies to assist in the recruitment and retention of older workers:

- Lead by example and encourage open discussion around the needs of the older worker. Demonstrate that the business is happy to accommodate flexible working and able to make appropriate changes to a person's job duties.
- Implement age-friendly policies and practices that actively encourage the recruitment and retention of older workers. Periodically review these processes to ensure that they stay relevant and continue to be successful.
- Maximise the use of the skills and knowledge that older people can bring to the table and encourage skill sharing and cross-training. Older and younger workers have a wealth of experience and knowledge to share with each other.

For more information about the Ageing Workforce Ready project visit: [tinyurl.com/y5xeyrzo](http://tinyurl.com/y5xeyrzo)

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