

Age shall not weary them

Many managers have a negative view of older workers. But with support from CEOs, diversity management programs and proper utilisation of experienced workers’ skills, a more positive image emerges, write Sally Howell , Donna M. Buttigieg and Wendy Webber .

To counteract problems with ageing populations and skill shortages, policy makers have encouraged workers to remain in the workforce past the usual retirement age of 55 or 60. This is more feasible because of improvements in health knowledge and technologies and longevity.

But ageism exists in organisations despite legislation prohibiting age discrimination and older workers face negative stereotypes from managers that impact on the worker’s employability and their training and promotional opportunities.

Research shows that many managers view older people as unproductive, resistant to change, attracting higher pay costs, slow, absent minded, suited to jobs that are low skill and repetitive, suffer from diminishing health and mental capabilities and have less enthusiasm for technology. They believe that the presence of older workers would not bring a decrease in conflict or increase in productivity.

But in reality, older workers are staying healthier for longer, are active in families and community and want to work longer. Also, they are often more reliable, careful, responsible, stable and better communicators. Hiring older employees results in lower recruitment and training costs, lower turnover,

higher profitability, more experienced workers, higher organisational commitment and quality of service.

From a random sample of five hundred Victorian HR managers in workplaces with greater than 20 employees and a response rate of 13.6 per cent, it was clearly demonstrated that many employers held stereotypical attitudes that resulted in discrimination against older workers. The study discovered that attitudes of managers were positive where there was top management support for diversity with respect to age. An interesting finding of this research was the relationship between effective utilisation of older workers and attitudes. The study showed that when older workers were treated fairly and given jobs requisite with their skills, negative stereotypes broke

down. One explanation for this is that older workers are able to work to their capacity and are able to demonstrate their acquired knowledge.

The study concluded that diversity management programs to create an awareness of the need to cater for differences between people, coupled with CEO support, effective monitoring and utilisation of older workers’ labour can substantially change attitudes in managers towards their older workers.

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Presence of diversity management programs

