



Things You May Not Know About Mature Age Workers

Negative attitudes and stereotypes about mature age workers abound in workplaces across the country. Like most stereotypes, when examined closely, they collapse.

This fact sheet examines some of the myths about the abilities and capacities of workers over 45 and looks at the cost in Human Resource terms of not employing this group of people.

- An Australian survey showed mature workers retain information better than their younger colleagues and also have good learning capacity. The Seattle Longitudinal Study directed by Warner Schaie (1998) tracked 18,000 people over a 36 year period (from 1956). It subjected those people to a battery of tests examining five abilities: verbal ability, spatial reasoning, inductive reasoning, numeric ability and perceptual speed.

Peak ages for performance are occurring in the 50s for inductive reasoning and spatial orientation and in the 60s for verbal ability and verbal memory. There is overlap between the performance of young and old workers until the 80's are reached. Broad individual differences exist in the speediness of behaviour (Schaie, 1998: 351).

- The evidence suggests that productivity doesn't decline with age. Some abilities, such as intellectual skills, are said to rise with age and comparisons between active 65 year-olds and active 25 year-olds in memory and learning skills are similar.

Studies have also indicated that as workers become older, their job performance increases.

A 1986 study (Waldman and Alvolio) found that mature workers "output level, accuracy and steadiness of work output" was strongly related to their increase in age. The over 55 age group has the fastest uptake of internet usage.

- Workers between 55 and 69 stay in a job longer than their younger colleagues. In any year 25% of the 20-24 age group change jobs. In the same period, 5% of the 55-69 age group changes jobs. Therefore a younger worker is 5 times more likely to change jobs in a given year than their counterparts over 55.

Attendance records are actually better for the mature age group. A World Health Organisation study showed that those over 45 took fewer sick days. 1998 ABS data showed that of those employees absent on sick leave, only 14% were in the 55+ age group.

- It is true that on average, weekly earnings for the 55-59 age group are higher than for the 25-34 group (\$ 835 compared with \$765). These costs need to be compared to productivity and the costs of recruitment, hiring and training. Research by the Australian Employers Convention (2001) states that the mature age worker will cost an employer less than those under 44.

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