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Engaging the mature aged workforce

Recently there has been lots of discussion about older workers and their impact on the Australian workforce. It's been well documented that Australia’s population is ageing rapidly and this means the workforce is also ageing. This produces a number of challenges as well as some great opportunities. A larger pool of retirees is contributing to a skills shortage and will put pressure on government resources, particularly in the area of social security.

The benefits of a more engaged mature age workforce

One way of mitigating the impact of the ageing workforce is to maintain and increase the engagement of mature aged workers. Keeping older workers more engaged may have benefits for employers by maintaining a workforce that provides a wealth of corporate knowledge and experience, as well as higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment. Governments also benefit by having a larger percentage of the mature aged population who are not just self-sufficient but contributing to national productivity for longer. Higher engagement levels have also been linked to important organisational outcomes such as productivity and turnover. Finally, mature aged workers themselves benefit by enjoying better health and well being.

“Older workers were more satisfied, committed and had a stronger intention to stay with their organisations, which is good news for employers who are seeking to attract or retain mature-aged workers and provides incentive for other employers to do so.”

Finding the key to engaging mature aged workers

Recent research conducted by Voice Project at Macquarie University was aimed at unlocking the key to keeping older workers more engaged. Specifically, the research attempted to identify those management practices that are associated with higher employee engagement amongst mature aged workers. Engagement has been described as a direct result of an employee’s sense of purpose, the degree to which the employee feels they are participating in the organisation and the degree to which they see the organisation making progress towards important outcomes. The measure of engagement used for the purpose of the research was a combination of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and resignation intentions.

The results showed that whilst there are some similarities for those practices driving engagement across all age groups (eg. belief in the organisation’s mission...
and values, as well as career opportunities), there are also some differences. Most notably Wellness (handling work demands with acceptable stress levels) was the strongest driver of engagement amongst the 60 plus age group, but did not have a strong influence amongst younger employees (less than 30 years old).

This indicates that managers may need to use different strategies to engage older workers as opposed to younger workers. The results suggest that older workers are looking for less stress in their working lives and that this may be related to the nature of the role rather than the number of hours worked. Older employees may be happy to work full-time hours if it means they can be exposed to less stress or at least maintain a sense of well-being. If older workers could wind down whilst continuing to work it may be that many would continue to work full-time rather than part-time. As other researchers have suggested, a move to another role, even if it means less status and money may be attractive if it involves challenge, interest and reduced responsibility. Therefore, the key to keeping older employees engaged, may be allowing them to take on positions of reduced responsibility and less stress.

The results also confirmed that older workers were more satisfied, committed and had a stronger intention to stay with their organisations which is good news for employers who are seeking to attract or retain mature aged workers and provides incentive for other employers to do so.

What age is mature aged?
A common definition of ‘mature age worker’ is those over 45 years of age. However the research suggests that this may not be the most accurate way of categorising an employee as a ‘mature aged worker’. In terms of practices driving engagement there was more similarity between the 30 to 39 year age group and 40 to 49 year age group than there was between the 40 to 49 year age group and those over 50 years old. It may be time to start redefining just who is considered a mature aged worker. It has also been suggested recently that the definition of mature aged depends on the age of the person you are asking. Many 65 year olds, for example, do not consider themselves to be ‘old’.

The challenge
At this point, from a manager’s perspective it may seem simple – ‘to keep my mature aged workers engaged I put less demands on them; but won’t this happen if I simply allow them to work fewer hours (as I believe they want to do?)’. Well, ‘yes’ fewer working hours may result in less stress for employees, but not if they’re expected to produce the same output, and maybe not if they’re at the same level of responsibility as they previously were. Managers may need to allow employees to take positions that are less demanding, which may not necessarily be achieved by reducing the number of hours of work or even allowing flexible working hours. Another consideration is how these mature aged employees (who may have been in senior positions) may be seen by other staff given that they may still be working in the same organisation but in a different capacity. ‘How will I feel working alongside somebody who was previously my manager or supervisor?’ Developing working solutions to these types of scenarios may require some lateral thinking and change of attitudes, but ultimately provide a win/win outcome for managers and employees.

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