



Media Release

Wednesday 3 September 2008

Redesigned work helps keep older workers - study

Smart organisations are redesigning jobs to retain older workers and keep their years of experience, according to research by the EEO Trust.

"Employers are making big efforts to retain skilled staff," says Dr Philippa Reed, EEO Trust Chief Executive. "Many tell us that they're ensuring older people get the training they need, reconfiguring roles to ensure people's skills and expertise are retained and mechanising manual jobs."

The research, called *Older Workers: Employers Speak Out*, is the result of 26 in-depth interviews with employer members of the EEO Trust, a not-for-profit organisation that supports workplaces to make the most of New Zealand's diverse talent pool.

The research found that the perception of the age at which someone becomes an "older" worker has shifted from 40-45 years old in the 1990s to 50-55 and older in 2008.

"The research also found that employers value older workers' reliability, work ethic, expertise, institutional knowledge, stability and loyalty," says Dr Reed. "They also appreciate their ability to mentor younger workers."

Many employers already do their best to retain older workers by providing flexible working hours and redesigning roles, she says.

"We're currently asking recruitment agents about their perceptions of older workers to add even more depth to this research."

The research is released alongside a new guide to help employers make the most of mature staff. *Valuing Experience: a practical guide to recruiting and retaining older workers* provides tips for employers as well as information on older workers' rights and responsibilities.

The guide was produced by a group comprising the EEO Trust, the Human Rights Commission, the Retirement Commission, Business New Zealand, the Council of Trade Unions and the Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce.

Valuing Experience also includes examples of how companies such as Genesis Energy, ANZ National and Orion have made the most of their older workers in a tight labour market where the workforce is ageing.

"This new guide complements our research findings by providing helpful, practical information to employers who want to ensure they get the best from all their staff," says Dr Reed.

Retirement Commissioner Diana Crossan says the guide was produced in response to demand from business and older workers themselves.

“Almost a quarter of New Zealand’s workforce is in the 50-64 years age group and the number of workers over 65 years was 65,000 in 2006,” she says.

“This is projected to increase to 105,000 in 2011 and to 160,000 in 2021. So we need to get better at employing older workers.”

The guide is based on the experience of several major New Zealand employers who participated in a year-long project to identify and address issues related to older workers.

It covers how organisations can position themselves to employ older workers and provides information on recruiting and retaining older workers, work design, job structure, effective supervision, managing performance, training and development, and motivation and rewards.

“It’s a comprehensive, easy-to-use guide that will answer many of the questions employers ask about the benefits and challenges of employing older people,” says Dr Reed.

Download the EEO Trust’s research *Older workers: Employers speak out* from www.eeotrust.org.nz/research/index.cfm and the guide *Valuing Experience: a practical guide to recruiting and retaining older workers* from www.eeotrust.org.nz/toolkits/index.cfm.

Highlights of *Older workers: Employers speak out*

- Older people are valuable employees. They bring reliability, a good work ethic, maturity, experience, expertise, institutional knowledge, stability, loyalty and the ability to mentor younger workers. Some respondents, mainly in the manufacturing sector, reported improved perceptions of the value of older workers.
- Some respondents said the attitudes of some managers, co-workers and older people themselves were barriers for older workers.
- While physical capacity and IT capability were seen as the main limitations for older workers, they were seen as issues that were easily resolved to retain their skills and experience.
- The expertise of older people working in physically demanding roles is being retained by shifting them into training roles, enabling them to work reduced hours or providing equipment to reduce the physical demands.
- Some respondents noted that older job applicants were more confident than they were a few years ago. Others suggested that older workers needed to promote themselves more effectively.
- Some employers were broadening their advertising approach in terms of media used and advertisement wording to attract a wider age range or encourage older workers to apply.
- Flexibility measures such as reduced hours, part-time work, special leave, extended leave, job redesign and a culture of inclusiveness and respect encouraged older people to stay at work.
- Training and promotion opportunities were available for to older people working in all the organisations covered in the EEO Trust study.

Twelve top tips for employing older workers - from *Valuing Experience: a practical guide to recruiting and retaining older workers*

1. Age-proof your organisation by identifying what you want to achieve, such as retention of skills and knowledge for competitive advantage.
2. Identify the current age profile of your organisation so that you know of retirement intentions and can effectively plan for succession.
3. To encourage job applications from older workers, consider different forms of flexible work arrangements including shorter weeks, extended leave periods and quality part-time work.
4. Ensure job advertisements and job descriptions do not refer to age in either words or images and do not directly or indirectly discriminate against older workers.
5. Commit at CEO and senior management level to ensure a business culture that values age and experience in the workforce.
6. Equip managers and supervisors to enhance the performance of older workers through awareness training, career discussion tools and effective communication.
7. Focus on performance, not age, to ensure workers have the skills, knowledge and motivation for the job, and ensure your performance management system is flexible to cater for a diverse range of employees.
8. Address performance issues proactively as soon as possible to avoid hard conversations about poor or deteriorating performance, and ensure all employees are treated fairly and with dignity.
9. Consult older employees about decisions that affect them.
10. To ensure your organisation has up-to-date skills, actively offer older workers appropriate training and development opportunities and ensure different learning styles are catered for.
11. Redesign jobs to reduce physical demands such as risk of injury or physical burnout while retaining experience. Consider older workers for mentoring, pairing or "buddy" systems.
12. Offer phased retirement opportunities to extend the working lives of valued older employees.