

# WHITE PAPER

## **An Employer's Guide** to Mature Employees

*how to recruit, retrain and retain them*

## Kerry Larkan

Speaker ~ Coach ~ Author ~ Consultant

### Tailored presentations

for conferences, seminars, workshops and corporate development programs

The Key to Retaining Talent and Saving Money

What It Takes To Become and Remain Employer of Choice

Good Boss ~ Bad Boss®: Building a Culture People are More Productive Working In

Not Just Surviving the Talent War, but Thriving in It

Your Most Powerful Alliance: Loyal Employees

License to Persuade - Permission to Influence

#### Books

- Sell and Grow Rich
- The Anatomy of Success
- What's the Question? (eBook)
- Good Boss ~ Bad Boss (eBook)

#### For more information and to book Kerry Larkan

w: [kerrylarkan.com.au](http://kerrylarkan.com.au) or

e: [kerry@kerrylarkan.com.au](mailto:kerry@kerrylarkan.com.au)

### What they say about Kerry...

"Kerry maintained the highest standard and generates a relaxed learning atmosphere"

"He shares a wealth of invaluable knowledge and experience in the business world"

"I have gained lifelong skills that are universal to both my professional life and on a personal level"

"As a business mentor, Kerry has the right image and attitude that has proved to be a valuable asset in growing my business"

"Kerry's training courses .. provide practical example which can be put into practice immediately"

"For me the presentation on Talent Retention was a 10/10 and a down to earth approach to a big problem"

## Recruit, Retrain and Retain

In his article *The Future Has Already Happened*, Peter Drucker says that “the dominant factor for business in the next two decades, in the absence of war, pestilence, or collision with a comet, is not going to be economics or technology. It will be demographics.”

Mature workers are a resource we can no longer afford to toss on the scrap heap or ignore. Tighter labour markets require us to make better use of our more experienced and mature workers. This means a change to the status quo. We must change our strategies and practices in the 3R's:

### **Recruit, Retrain and Retain.**

Visibility is key in recruitment. It is important to target this older worker market, and network more effectively. Employers must reach out and become proactive. In many countries the 50 and over age group is the fastest growing group of Internet users, and there are an increasing number of websites aimed at employment opportunities for mature workers. To be successful in recruitment we must also change our image. Ask yourself the question:

*“Are we an older worker friendly organization?”*

*“Why would an older person want to work here?”*

Employees will want to keep working if the work is interesting, challenging and flexible.

Reassessing objectives throughout the employee's tenure will re-enforce their importance to the organization. All employees want to feel valued, and communication

and feedback are key in the retention process. Respect throughout the company can be strengthened through diversity training and an appreciation for what mature workers offer. The second major component of retention is flexibility. We can achieve flexibility through reorganization of both hours-of-work and compensation packages. We can accommodate the demand for a different work/leisure mix through flex-time, part-time, contract, and phased retirement programmes. We can also restructure the compensation and benefits package and even pro-rate benefits.

Training and retraining are directly linked to retaining mature workers and productivity. We must profile the adult learner and stay ahead in the market by requiring all our employees, including mature workers, to be actively learning new technologies and skills. Our investments today will pay off in tomorrow's labour market! People whinge about how tough it is now; however it will get much harder in coming years for all the reasons I've outlined in *The Talent War*<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>The Talent War was written by Kerry Larkan and is available throughout Asia and Australia.

## Even Governments are Concerned

A piece in Channel News Asia (Singapore) stated:

Keeping the elderly employed is a top priority for the Ministerial Committee on Aging, according to its chairman Lim Boon Heng, who will be spelling out the details of the committee's plans in parliament this week. He said he hopes to raise the employment rate of elderly Singaporeans to match that of Japan. It is fitting that the former labour chief has put jobs for seniors as a top priority in his new capacity. According to him, 200 employers have already agreed to discuss with trade unions the way to keep the elderly employed. Mr. Lim said, "If we can get more people at work, then they have income, it solves many problems. Japan has passed a law on reemployment... make it an obligation for employers to reemploy a person when he reaches 60 years old. It was implemented in April last year. The experience is closely watched by the Tripartite Committee. So we have to learn lessons from them to see how we ourselves can do a similar legislation."

This is not news any more. The baby boomers are getting older. In fact, nearly all employed members of this mammoth generation, comprising the 76 million persons born between 1946 and 1964 (Goldberg 2000), can be classified as "mature workers" according to the U.S. government, and are protected by federal regulations prohibiting age discrimination. What is more, the generation following closely on their heels, affectionately referred to as the baby busters, or Generation X, is diminutive by comparison, a mere 66 million.

The fact that the ageing of this workforce has the potential to drastically affect the economy is not a new discovery. What is relatively new, at least on a grand scale, is the level of frustration being experienced by employers, many of whom, emerging from the 'burn and churn mindset,' are suddenly realizing that the labour market has changed.

According to leaders in the field of organizational behaviour and psychology, the key to a company's success will be its adaptability and flexibility – its capacity to deploy resources quickly to seize competitive opportunities and to draw from a labour pool that features a mix of multi-skilled full-time workers, and specifically-skilled contingent employees who contribute on a part-time or temporary basis. Seems easy, right? I don't think so. Maybe twenty years ago. Where are companies today supposed to find these rapid response resources and this bottomless labour pool?

Baby boomers are turned off by the downsizing, rightsizing X Era and ready to collect what is rightfully theirs in the form of benefits, Social Security or Superannuation. Meanwhile, younger people today are entering the workforce professionally under-equipped. Companies will be hard pressed to maintain the status quo, let alone focus on becoming adaptable. This is the scenario unless firms heed the wake-up call and make changes that will convince older workers around the world to participate longer in the workforce. With many older Americans still stinging from the harsh business practices of the recent past, it will require an overhaul in the way corporations do business – starting with attitudes toward mature workers.

## Even Governments are Concerned

“Many businesses are not so much lean and mean as they are anorexic and vicious.”

Author unknown

The remainder of this summary will focus on why, contrary to what popular stereotypes would have us believe, employers should court the ageing segment of our population to fill their ranks, and, more specifically, how they might go about this successfully. Further, it will address the subsequent importance of and strategies for retaining these mature workers.

- There will potentially be more ageing (50 years and over) workers in the workforce than ever before.
- Workers aged 50 years and older will comprise the largest proportion (> 30%) of the workforce during the next 25 years
- There will be fewer younger workers (25 years and younger) in the workforce than ever before
- The workforce participation rates of workers 55 years of age and over is declining greatly
- Age dependency ratios will increase greatly during the next 15-25 years<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Professor Juhani Ilmarinen, (EU Study on ageing workers) Ageing workers in the European Union status and promotion of work ability, employability and employment

## The Reality about Mature Workers

The first truth about mature workers is that one size does not fit all. They vary from one another as much as people from any other age group, in abilities, desires, wants, and needs. This means that from a recruitment perspective, carefully chosen, mature workers can fill a range of company positions, from CEO to consultant to customer service representative.

Do older adults really make good employees? Businesses who employ them say “yes.” In a study conducted by the National Council on Aging (NCOA) and the McDonald’s Corporation, a company renowned for its interest in older adults, 97% of employers surveyed stated that mature workers are thorough and reliable in completing their work. Indeed, despite myths circulated when companies were trying to justify cutting older adults from their payrolls, employers affirmed that, in general, mature workers:

- had low turnover rates
- were flexible and open to change
- possessed up-to-date skills
- were interested in learning new tasks
- did not experience transportation problems
- were willing to take on challenging tasks
- had low absentee rates
- had few on-the-job accidents

Another study, conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in conjunction with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), confirmed the majority of these findings, and added a few of

their own. Of the nearly 400 human resource professionals surveyed:

- 77% agreed that mature workers have a higher level of commitment to the organization than younger workers (only 5% disagreed)
- 68% concluded that training mature workers costs less or the same as training their younger counterparts (6% disagreed)
- 57% reported that age does not affect the amount of time required to train an employee (14% disagreed)
- 49% determined that mature workers grasped new concepts as well as younger workers (18% disagreed)

In fact, the only area about which HR professionals expressed concern when it came to employing older adults was technology. “Sixty-six percent of the respondents agreed that mature workers tend to be more fearful of technology than younger workers.” Yet, is that a fair assessment, or the remnants of older worker mythology? Other studies report that mature workers are trainable in “high technology skills” and are “comfortable” learning them.

According to the American Society on Aging, “50+ Americans love technology.” They are the fastest growing group of Internet users and are well aware (75% agree) that computer skills are necessary to work in the 21st century. If mature workers are shying away from company technology, perhaps it is due to the lack of encouragement and opportunity. What message is sent to employees aged 55 or older if they are afforded the fewest opportunities for training in this technology driven world (Goldberg, 2000)?

## The Reality about Mature Workers

Mounting evidence actually shows that with proper training, mature workers are undaunted by technology and eager to update their skills.

There is also the question of whether mature workers are able to perform jobs that require physical strength, endurance, and quick reflexes. Studies have shown that age, in and of itself, does not affect ability<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, just like members of any other age group, older adults who keep their bodies in good physical condition are fully capable of maintaining positions that require physical strength, endurance, and quick reflexes<sup>4</sup>.

The answer is clear: mature workers do make excellent employees. But is it cost effective to employ them? Countless examples demonstrate that it can be. In a case study of Days Inn of America, researchers demonstrated that the contributions of mature workers outweighed their costs to the company. Although older employees drew higher wages and larger pension contributions, they also quit less often, which, in the long run, saved the company money in recruiting and training costs. Furthermore, even though they tended to spend more time on the telephone with customers, they also had higher booking rates...SALES!

Surveys, studies and anecdotal evidence all confirm that hiring mature workers is an intelligent solution to the impending worker drought. Yet, despite their own very positive reviews, 85% of the same HR professionals stated that they had no special recruitment strategies target-

ing older adults, and 66% still failed to see a reason to encourage these workers to stay on the job. It is therefore critical that we turn our attention to specific ways to reach this under-appreciated and under-utilized segment of the labour force.

<sup>3</sup>Baltes PB, Smith J. Toward a psychology of wisdom.

<sup>4</sup>Stenberg RJ, ed. Wisdom: its nature, origin and development.

## Recruiting Mature Workers

Companies must devise more effective ways to lure mature workers away from other ventures or out of retirement, and back into the workforce. One might expect it to be easy, especially if you consider that one-third of retirees fear outliving their assets. Yet some of these potential workers were casualties of forced retirement and became discouraged by their inability to find work, seemingly due to their age. These dislocated, yet likely very trainable, workers have been out of the labour force for some years and may have given up the idea of ever returning. What's more, they are only one part of a diversified labour market segment. There are also those retirees who are living quite comfortably on generous pensions. And there are those homemakers whose children have all grown and left home and who suddenly find themselves with extra time and in want of some additional companionship. Where can you go to find this diverse group, and, assuming you can find them, what then?

## Selling the company

In her book, “Get the Best: How to Recruit the People You Want,” Catherine D. Fyock states that companies must now take a marketing and sales approach to recruiting. Specifically, organizations wanting to target their recruiting toward mature workers should develop programmes and messages that speak to this demographic.

What can you do to target recruiting efforts and market your company to mature workers?

Conduct information seminars focusing on issues tailored to the older community, such as retirement, financial planning, health and fitness over 40 or 50, and second and third career options. Hold or attend open houses and career fairs geared toward older adults.

Advertise in the business, lifestyle, travel, television, and even obituary sections of the newspaper. Sixty-six per cent of adults 55-64 and 68% of adults 65+ read the paper daily, and 35% of business section readers are 55+.

Hang posters in places that older adults frequent, such as health centres, senior citizen centres, apartment common areas, doctor’s offices, banks, post offices, grocery stores, laundromats, churches, community centres, and even golf courses (“Employers look for new hires on golf courses,” 2000). Posting notices within five to 10 kilometres of the job site It has also been recommended.

Place ads in bargain shopper papers often read by older adults on fixed incomes. Send direct-mail messages to

older adults. Avoid words or phrases that, regardless of your opinion of their definitional accuracy, sound offensive to older adults, such as ‘elderly’; use ‘senior citizen’ carefully. Instead use words like ‘mature,’ ‘experienced,’ and ‘reliable’ to describe the characteristics of the people your company seeks. Form an older worker task force within your organization. Ask current older employees for referrals, as well as for suggestions about how to attract more experienced workers. Not only might this bring in new talent, but it will also demonstrate to current employees the company’s commitment to age neutrality, and its appreciation for older staff. According to one study, 50-80% of the workforce have attained their jobs via informal social networks.

Target mature workers via well-placed media such as radio and or television advertisements. Eighty-five per cent of adults 55+ watch television daily, and 74% of 50+ adults listen to the radio on the average weekday. Radio can be very effective with this demographic. But be careful when putting a face to an advertisement targeting the mature market. Make sure the people in your ad don’t appear too mature, or you will give the impression that you are actually looking for persons older than your target market.

Host an “un-retirement event” and invite retirees from your company, as well as those from the community. Build relationships and try to form a pool of part-time or temporary workers to help meet high demands during exceptionally busy times or when members of full-time staff

## Selling the company

are unavailable. Invite your own retirees back through a targeted mailing, a notice in your retiree newsletter (if you have such a thing) or a personal telephone call.

Also, develop relationships in the community so that recruiters are well received in those places that older adults might meet and, when possible, use older employees to carry out the recruiting and interviewing processes. Emphasize the company's commitment to upholding age discrimination regulations, and have facts and figures ready to demonstrate that commitment.

Get creative with job postings. List the kind of projects for which the employee will be responsible, the skills needed, and, most importantly, the training that will be provided. Post notices at universities, research centres, and government retraining agencies to tap into an already inspired segment of the older population. Emphasize the intangible values of the job, such as variety, independence and social aspects, instead of focusing only on the financial gains, which may not be a concern.

Delivering on your promises to all workers is critical. However, it is even more so with mature workers. Executive general manager of Chandler Macleod Consulting, David Reynolds, said the findings of their recent survey on employers of choice was a wake-up call to employers bearing, or hoping to bear, the Employer of Choice label. More than 93 per cent of businesses still believed being an Employer of Choice was a key to attracting workers, the Chandler Macleod research found, while 57 per cent of the

companies that weren't yet tagged EOC were hoping to be so in the next two years. Mr Reynolds said the 100-odd HR professionals who attended the report's launch in Sydney were astonished by the findings.

"Overwhelmingly it was 'Gosh, we need to have a look this, we need to think about what it means for us and what investment we're making in terms of positioning ourselves and attracting and retaining people'," he said. "One in four candidates have been let down in the past by their employer's empty promises. It was a bit of a wake-up call for HR professionals about what they are doing day-to-day to ensure that they are delivering on that promise, rather than just going through the HR motions."

Mr Reynolds placed some of the blame on business's failure to modify structures for dealing with staff, despite promoting change in the workplace.

Reynolds said, "A company may promise greater career development, for example, but in some cases the day-to-day interactions between staff and management had not been adapted to meet the change."

This brings up another critical element of developing recruitment strategies: Know your target market.

## Know your target market

Researchers are now paying considerable attention to generational differences in order to understand the rift, or intergenerational conflict, that sometimes occurs between co-workers or managers of different age groups. For this discussion, understanding generational preferences and identities can aid employers wishing to woo mature workers. Consider the following examples:

### Generational Identities:<sup>5</sup>

	<b>Matures</b>	<b>Boomers</b>	<b>Gen X - Y</b>
<b>Defining ideas</b>	Duty	Individuality	Environment Future
<b>Celebrating</b>	Victory	Youth	Good company Because we can
<b>Success because</b>	Fought hard and won	Were born, therefore should be a winner	We expect it It's your passion
<b>Style</b>	Team player	Self-absorbed	Flexible Professional
<b>Rewards because</b>	You've earned it	You deserve it	Earned it Just because
<b>Work is</b>	An inevitable obligation	An exciting adventure	Means to an end Social interaction
<b>Leisure is</b>	Reward for hard work	The point of life	To be enjoyed Enjoying yourself
<b>Education is</b>	A dream	A birthright	Essential A way of life
<b>Future</b>	Rainy day to work for	"Now" is more important	Is here To save for

<sup>5</sup>Source: Kerry Larkan © 2007

**Know your target market**

<b>Managing money</b>	Save	Spend	Plan Spend a little, save a little
<b>“Programme” means</b>	Social Programme	Cult de-programmers	On computer Television
<b>Go watch</b>	The Best Years of Our Lives	The Big Chill	The Departed Pretty Woman
<b>The “in” crowd</b>	Rat Pack Nightclubs Hep Zoot suit Kansas City Jazz	“Leader of the Pack” Rock clubs Groovy Bell bottoms San Francisco Rock’n’Roll	Breakfast club Raves Cool Skinny jeans Europe Alternative, Hip Hop

The lesson here is to know your audience. Know your demographic. If you want to recruit workers over 60, you might emphasize the educational opportunities, or highly subsidized education, the social aspects of the job, or even the opportunity to do your civic duty and help support the economy. If, instead, you want to reach the baby boomers, consider focusing on all the fun the extra income would afford, opportunity for adventure if the position involves travel, or even an idea something along the lines of: “Who said you’re too old to keep working? We know you’re as ready to go as you’ve ever been and a lot wiser too.”

## The Internet

Another valuable source for identifying potential mature workers is the Internet. People over 50 are the fastest-growing age group among Internet users, and the increasing number of websites dedicated to mature adults is proof. If some employers have been slow to recognize this, recruiting and placement organizations have not. Employers can choose from websites ranging from ones catering specifically toward retirees who are still ambitious and keen to work to mature worker employment agencies. In addition, employers can access local information about mature workers through their own state governments on ageing and employment opportunities. COTA (Council for the Aging) have studied and represented older people in understanding the changing workforce. More employment web sites like plus40.com will emerge as the demand increases. The Federal Government of Australia provides information through the Department of Labour, Employment and Training website, as does Job Wise in Australia ([www.jobwise.gov.au](http://www.jobwise.gov.au)).

Finally, in addition to the various agencies and organizations accessible on the Internet, companies can also use the web to contact older adults directly. Internet forums and chat rooms “are buzzing with talk of mature workers being unfairly downsized [and] filing age bias suits” (“Boomers fight age bias on the net”). The upside to this is that good news also travels fast. The website community ThirdAge.com ([www.thirdage.com](http://www.thirdage.com)) encourages its users to log on and promote the age-friendly companies they encounter (“ThirdAge solutions to age bias”). What better place than these sites to take your older-worker-friendly company public?

Once you’ve tapped into the older worker pool, you must then make this group want to work for your company even though the majority may not be actively seeking employment. Here your message is crucial; thus, you must know exactly what older adults want and need from an employer. Current employees are a good place to start identifying this message because the principles necessary for being an older-worker-friendly organization are also fundamental to retaining current ageing members of the workforce.

## Retaining Mature Workers

Once you've got them, ideally, you never want to let them go. But these aren't the 1990s; if your employees, of any age, aren't happy, there are twelve or twenty businesses down the street that will give them a job and appropriate recognition. The key to retaining mature workers is to know what they want and need. The second is to offer it. The third is to be sure to deliver on your offer. If you are fortunate enough to already have a staff with some workers over 45, now is the time to talk to them regularly and make sure they are getting what they need from your company. There are basically three essential retention strategies:

- Becoming the kind of company for which mature workers want to work. (Often referred to as an EOC or Employer of Choice.)
- Reorganizing company benefits, programmes, and job structure to meet the needs of a diverse work force that contains some mature workers.
- Keeping all employees' skills current by means of training and re-training.

## Earning Employees' Favour and Loyalty: Becoming an Age-Friendly Organization

Regardless of their income, the last thing that older adults want is to return to, or extend their time in, a workforce characterized by disrespect or lack of appreciation for its mature workers. According to an age diversity consultant, "the most important thing that companies can do is to stop looking at age as a number and really look at the abilities of people." But for this new attitude to completely infiltrate the company, merely declaring it to be so isn't enough.

A recent survey carried out by Watson Wyatt noted one out of three older workers would continue working longer than otherwise planned if their employer offered a phased retirement programme. Phased in the sense of shorter work weeks, flexible hours or the opportunity to try something new that would encourage older workers to delay full retirement.

## Why Phased Retirement?

According to research, more than half (57%) of current workers in phased retirement entered into the arrangement voluntarily to have more leisure time. When asked their primary reason for choosing phased retirement instead of full retirement, 42 percent of these workers indicated they enjoyed their work, while 28 percent said they needed the income.

One-third (32 percent) of workers in phased retirement arrangements retired completely from their career jobs but later re-entered the workforce after becoming disillusioned with retirement. In contrast to voluntary phasers, 40 percent of this group said they returned to work primarily because they need the income, while only 34 percent said they work because they enjoy it. Approximately 10 percent of workers currently in a phased status were forced into phased retirement when their career jobs were eliminated. A majority of these workers (58 percent) said they are working in retirement primarily for the income.

“What was once a three-legged stool of individual retirement income is quickly becoming a four-legged stool, with income from wages constituting the fourth leg,” noted Mulvey. “But it is important to note that extra income is not always the key motivator for phasers — many work because they enjoy it.”

## Respect through Diversity Training

Companies need to implement diversity training programmes in which all employees participate. For while it is imperative that senior management be well-informed about the real abilities of mature workers, the people with whom they will interact daily and who will have the greatest impact on the work environment are their direct supervisors and co-workers. In fact, “disliking the boss” is the main reason that most employees of all ages give for quitting their jobs. According to a survey done by Seek, and my own research, lousy managers don’t help. Some 44 percent said the boss was the reason they left. Engineering seemed to be the worst sector according to Seek. (Economic Watch Nov 2006 IBIS)

Since the workforce has changed and is characterized not only by a growing number of mature workers, but also by a higher percentage of women, such training should address all the “ism’s” including racism, sexism, and ageism.

Diversity training doesn’t happen overnight. Organisations that are serious about changing company attitudes and culture need to implement a step-by-step programme. Begin with an age diversity task force that includes mature workers. This group can assist by keeping company efforts on track and help broaden understanding.

Under this task force’s direction, conduct a cultural audit of your organization. Before you can influence the opinions of your employees, you need to know what they are. What’s more, you want to know how these attitudes play out in the day-to-day work tasks and interactions. Use

anonymous employee surveys and questionnaires that include a question about the respondent’s age, and stress that their purpose is merely to assist in workplace diversity efforts. In conjunction with the surveys, hold older worker focus groups that include current mature employees or recent retirees. Find out how they feel and what they would change, if they could.

After you know where your company stands, formulate an educational programme specifically designed to debunk older worker myths. Many resources dedicated to older workers provide information for the taking. While you are informing all your employees, don’t forget to check back in with management and review managerial practices; corporate culture filters from the top down. As the Finnish proverb states, “a fish stinks from the head.”

Demonstrate to your mature workers that you understand their needs by equipping offices with ergonomic equipment, proper lighting and provisions to accommodate employees whose hearing may not be a hundred percent anymore. Learn to build morale and encourage productivity by showing all your employees that they are respected and appreciated. Implementing mentoring programmes or making honourable mention for outstanding achievement by all workers, including mature workers (without stressing his/her age) in the company publications are just two possible ideas. Your task force can provide many more suggestions.

## Lowering work stress

Second to wanting to work in an atmosphere of respect, some mature workers want a less-stressful work environment. Sure, we all do, but they have served their time in the trenches, and many of them don't need to return to the workforce. Remember you need them. So what can you do to lessen anxiety in the workplace?

These include helping mature workers manage their time and prioritize; supplying clear and up-to-date job descriptions; providing honest, rapid, and frequent feedback, followed by appropriate training when necessary; and maintaining good communication practices. This last point – communication – merits further comment and discussion.

## Keeping the lines of communication

Without painting all older adults as former victims of corporate life, one must take into account the war wounds borne by those who were axed without warning by their long-standing employers. Communicating in a timely manner with all employees about external and internal developments will prevent them from feeling the need to constantly look over their shoulders and will help to stop rumours and half-truths before they get out of control. Likewise, personal communication and interaction with company leaders can go a long way in fostering organizational trust and a spirit of unity. Be available and accessible to your employees when feasible. You might even invite employees to take a break with you; get acquainted with them as individuals to show them your interest is genuine. While you don't want to favour or single out mature workers, these employees, in particular, may appreciate your efforts to get to know them and to establish mutual respect.

These recommendations are just a starting point for companies wishing to retain mature workers. While becoming an age-friendly organization must begin with changes in attitudes toward mature adults, if such changes are not followed by the reorganization of benefits packages, job structure, and company policy, mature workers will not be adequately motivated to stay.

## Reorganizing to Retain Mature Workers

Older adults are not naïve. Organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and COTA (Connecting Over 50s Throughout Australia, Australia's leading seniors' organization) see to it that the mature worker is aware that companies need them. On its website, AARP has various pages dedicated to educating workers about what they can ask for and expect in the way of flexible benefits and retirement plans (AARP, "Flexible ways of working"). Benefits created with a predominantly younger staff in mind or during different economic times will not be as appealing to older employees in the 21st century. It's up to you to change your compensation and benefits packages where necessary.

Benefits that work for older employees: health insurance and pension plans need to be competitive and to demonstrate a commitment to the physical and emotional wellbeing of employees. Providing health insurance is practically a must, especially in developed countries. Furthermore, "the most competitive programmes offer benefits to family members as well." In a survey of 100 HR professionals, nearly all firms provided some sort of family health insurance, including prescription drug coverage, as well as life insurance. What's more, over 80% provided long-term disability, short-term disability, and dental insurance. Other health benefits and programmes that are less common but on the rise include smoking cessation programmes, blood pressure testing, health risk assessments, fitness classes or health club memberships, disease management, weight-reduction programmes, and nutrition counselling. Employers will need to add benefits to meet boomers' retirement needs and their growing

demand for mature workers. Here in Hong Kong, Cathay Pacific is an example of keeping up in order to stay ahead of the insatiable appetite for workers.

Some of the facilities Cathay offers to entice the expat to live abroad include coffee shops, dry cleaners, a bar, and banking facilities. There are counselling services for family members, financial advice, an Immediate Support Group (counselling services) for any staff involved in any sort of crisis; for example, the bombing of an airport or the crash landing of a flight where Cathay staff may be involved. Child care facilities are paid for children up to 3 years of age. Education and housing allowances are paid, based on your role and type of contract. The bill for housing allowances last year was \$700 million HKD or about \$117 million AUD which is a sizeable contribution in any currency or language.

It comes as no surprise that pension benefits are also of tremendous value to mature workers. In a study conducted by Watson Wyatt<sup>6</sup>, more than two-thirds of employees aged 55 or older preferred a defined benefit pension plan over a defined contribution pension. In the former, years of service, salary, and a "generosity factor" were used to determine the retirement benefit, whereas in the latter, both employer and employee make tax-deferred, interest-accruing contributions, the value of which is transferable if an employee changes employer. Clearly, as employers change their pension programmes, they must calculate the impact on ageing workers, and make adjustments that communicate a concern for the employee's long-term welfare.

<sup>6</sup>Workforce Management: The cultural shift

## The Rising Importance of Elder Care

As more baby boomers find themselves caring for ageing parents, elder care-oriented benefits such as long-term care insurance are also becoming a must for some employees. According to a study conducted by the National Alliance for Care giving (NAC) and the National Center on Women and Aging, workers who were also responsible for the care of at least one ageing family member lost an average of \$650,000 USD in total wealth over the course of a lifetime. But employees were not the only group to suffer losses; over half of the workers stated that they felt their ability to work was hampered to some degree. In fact, another study conducted in 1997 by the NAC and AARP estimated that care giving costs U.S. employers \$11.7 to \$29 billion per year in lost productivity (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1997; Timmerman, 2000). Despite these figures, and the evidence that for every \$1 companies spend helping employees care for ageing family members they save \$3 to \$5 in productivity, only five per cent of work/family programmes in 2000 targeted elder care resources.

For those companies that are serious about better serving the needs of older employees, in particular those with elder care needs, several options are available. Some benefits include providing elder care vouchers and nursing home care subsidies. Peugeot provides day care facilities as does The Body Shop in some part of the world. To educate your HR department as you reconsider company benefits, or to assist your employees in locating elder care resources, there are numerous public and private agencies that provide everything from general information to a local client care manager.

The Aging Network ([www.aoa.dhhs.gov/network.html](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/network.html)), for example, provided by the federal government's Administration on Aging, links more than 600 government-supported Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) with thousands of community organizations nationally. It also supplies links to Elder care Locators, online resources for retirement and financial planning, and elderly nutrition plans.

## Flexible jobs

Other benefits that will mean a lot to your employees can be implemented at very little cost to the company. Offer an extended lunch period to allow time for midweek appointments. Increase vacation time for those mature workers longing to travel and/or permit it to be taken by the hour for those who need more personal time. Allow and facilitate short leaves of absence for employees faced with family or personal emergencies or, better yet, opportunities for self-betterment.

Another cost-effective way to increase older employee engagement and keep them in the workforce longer involves restructuring the jobs themselves. Successful work arrangements:

- Flexitime – employees can begin an eight-hour work day any time between, say, 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.
- Job sharing – generally two employees split one full-time position and take it upon themselves to coordinate their schedules so that job needs are always met
- Part-time employment – usually less than 30 hours/week, with corresponding benefits
- Consulting – many employers are finding that their mature workers are more than happy to work on a contractual or part-time basis in a consulting role
- Seasonal work – because mature workers know the company, picking up where they left off a few months ago is often easier than training someone new for one season
- Compressed work week – 20 to 40 hours worked in two to four days
- Short-term projects/Special assignments
- Reduced hours (even with reduced pay)
- Job rotation/Flexible shifts
- Telecommuting – allows employees to do company work, such as data entry, at home

- Mentoring – allows mature workers to help organizations preserve their institutional history and values by passing such elements on to newer employees
- On-call work

Restructured jobs permit employees to maintain or advance their careers while supporting family and personal needs. Like elder care, such programmes benefit the firms as well as the employees by increasing productivity, profits, and, likely, employee loyalty.

In addition to being effective answers to the ‘traditional’ 40-hour work week, some companies have found these arrangements useful in enticing workers planning to retire to postpone, or at least prolong, their departure through phased retirement.

Options such as phased retirement allow mature workers to ease themselves into life outside the workforce, while transferring their expertise to the persons who will eventually take over their positions. Companies have different ways of compensating such employees, but they generally do not involve a reduction in benefits or pension. One organization known for its efforts in retaining and rewarding mature workers is the British company Sainsbury. Under its “flexible retirement and pension protection plan,” employees can choose to take their full pension at any time between their 50th and 75th birthdays, regardless of whether they continue to work or not. If they do continue working, but draw a full pension, Sainsbury will contribute towards a new pension plan. Such reorganization of benefits, job configuration, and even retirement is effective in keeping mature workers satisfied and interested in your company.

## Retraining Mature Workers

A final and crucial element of reorganizing your work practices involves implementing and updating regular training and retraining programmes. According to a survey measuring worker commitment conducted by the Hay Group, the opportunity to learn new skills is directly linked to how long employees plan to stay with their companies. This is not surprising, since increased education generally leads to higher wages, thus creating a financial incentive to remain in the workforce. What is surprising, however, since it flies in the face of negative stereotypes, is that mature workers are among those eager, if not anxious, to update their skills.

As the need for technologically advanced workers rises with the world's increasing bent for the digital, the influx of highly skilled new workers continues to become scarce. In the face of this paradox, managers cannot afford to lose good mature workers who suddenly feel obsolete because their employers have not kept them up to date. Employers take note: "age alone does not account for obsolescence of knowledge, skills, or abilities," rather, obsolescence can be frequently attributed to the failure of companies to provide continuing education to maturing workers. Instead of allowing older employees' skills and jobs to become stagnant, companies must provide up-to-date training and retraining programmes and, like any good instructor, must tailor these to the needs and talents of their students.

## Profiling the Adult Learner

It should not surprise you that two of the most important elements in training sessions, particularly among mature workers, are respect and a lower stress environment. It is imperative that older students be treated as equals and made to understand from the beginning that they are not being singled out for training because the company is dissatisfied with their performance, but rather because they are valued employees who deserve to be kept up-to-date professionally. Since going 'back to school' can be stressful and mature workers may fear failure, some researchers suggest that counselling should be a standard part of the training programme. At the very least, mature workers need encouragement (note: not molly-coddling) and should be made to understand that no one expects them to behave like they just graduated from college yesterday.

Since formal study habits decline with disuse, instructors may want to help students 'brush up' on learning strategies. One way to do this is to distribute a list of simple study tips to trainees of all ages. Such a list could include ideas such as:

- Study in a seated (i.e., not reclining) position at the same time each day.
- Dedicate a space in your home to learning. Make sure it has good lighting, proper ventilation, and no distractions.
- Take notes while you study at home, as well as during lectures.
- Highlight important material and review it often.

Another method to reduce training-related anxiety is to provide such education well in advance of when the new skills will be needed. While older adults are equally as 'trainable' as younger students are, evidence does suggest that they take longer to learn. Their advantage, however, is that once they do master a task, they tend to be more accurate than their faster-learning cohorts.

Another advantage that mature workers have over younger employees is that they are already experienced. In theory, this can significantly reduce the amount of training necessary if instructors build on the already extensive skill-base of these employees. It can also backfire if programmes are not designed on a situational basis and mature workers are forced to sit through hours of what, for them, is purely review and a waste of their time. Unfortunately, such training failures are often blamed on the greater age of the students and their supposed disinterest in learning, instead of on the training material's lack of appropriateness. When companies tailor programmes to the age, knowledge, and experience of mature workers, training proves just as effective and no more expensive than it does for younger workers.

In general, adults need a good reason to learn something new; they see it as a means to an end. This is not to suggest that they are resistant to learning, but rather that their motivation is different. If facilitators present ideas one at a time and demonstrate their practical application on the job, as well as how they function with already existing concepts, older learners will be more likely to assimilate

## Profiling the Adult Learner

and retain new materials. Furthermore, older employees should be given the opportunity to use new skills one or two at a time and integrate them into their daily jobs, instead of being taught ten new concepts at once and set free. Idea overload is discouraging and counterproductive.

Explain the training purpose and process, as well as how it will benefit employees, up front.

Encourage students to answer questions from their own experience and to disagree when a concept contradicts what they know from practice. This will invite group dialogue and help participants to see that all opinions are important.

Ensure that the self-esteem of the students is preserved at all times. Adults, and particularly older adults, will not risk looking stupid. If they feel like they are being set up as an example or shown up in any way, they will not participate. With that in mind, expect participation and make it clear that the training cannot be successful without it.

Set up training in a manageable step-by-step format so that students are able to master the task gradually. (And don't forget, as an age-friendly organization, all your training materials must be accessible to older employees, who may need large print (Shea, 1991).)

Provide constant feedback, including progress reports and tips for improvement. Such feedback should always be coupled with encouragement and positive reinforcement.

Summarize and review often.

Provide a hands-on, task-oriented learning environment. Adults learn by doing.

Finally, remember that adult learners are self-directed. Thus, a trainer must carefully walk the line between providing needed guidance and unwanted direction.

In addition to knowing his/her students' strengths, a good facilitator also knows their 'weaknesses.' In the case of older adults, learning assignments that require rote memorization are less effective than those that allow practice sessions to reinforce a new skill. Furthermore, testing and evaluation generally tend to be very stressful for mature workers who, as mentioned above, fear looking foolish or stupid, and can actually stymie the training process. Regular reviews and group discussion are a better way to monitor students' progress.

## Training Options

As previously pointed out, 'older adults' encompass an especially wide variety of types of people, all of whom have their own learning styles. Companies, therefore, should be flexible in the kinds of training methods they employ.

Many employers opt to provide formal, on-the-job training programmes in the workplace where employees get paid for the time they spend learning. Other companies pay the costs or tuition fees for courses or degree programmes that take place outside the organization. It is up to the company's discretion whether employees must complete such programmes on their own time or on company time. Apprenticeship systems, mentoring, or even lateral moves across the organization in order to cross-train in another area are additional training constructs.

No current discussion of training options would be complete without considering the cyber world. Leaving no stone unturned, software companies are now major players in the training game.

A small sampling of Internet resources follows:

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) ([www.ncver.edu.au](http://www.ncver.edu.au)) is a not-for-profit company owned by the federal, state and territory ministers responsible for training. It is unique in Australia's education system. It is responsible for collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training.

The Mature Market ([www.thematuremarket.com](http://www.thematuremarket.com)) – A Seniors and Baby Boomers website.

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations ([www.dewr.gov.au](http://www.dewr.gov.au)) – The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations provides the government with high quality advice, programmes and services to achieve three outcomes:

1. Efficient and effective labour market assistance.
2. Higher productivity, higher pay workplaces.
3. Increased workforce participation.

COTA – Connecting Over 50s Throughout Australia ([www.cota.org.au](http://www.cota.org.au)) – COTA is Australia's leading seniors' organization, with individual members and seniors organization members in all states and territories. They protect and promote the well-being of all seniors. It's an independent consumer organization run by and for senior Australians.

Manpower Global Learning Center ([www.manpower.com](http://www.manpower.com)) offers self-guided software tutorial training that has proven effective for mature workers.

National Seniors Association ([www.nationalseniors.com.au](http://www.nationalseniors.com.au))

- To provide economic and social benefits for people 50 years and over;
- Represent its members' views to Government at all levels;
- To make donations and provide service and advice to charitable institutions assisting people 50 years and over.

## Training Options

Microsoft ([www.microsoft.com/presspass/](http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/)) has developed the Microsoft Press® Official Curriculum, a self-paced kit intended to help prepare students for certification on the Microsoft® Windows operating system. The kits can be used alone at home, in a classroom, or as part of a distance learning programme (“De Anza College chooses Microsoft Press self-paced training kits to support classroom, distance learning for Microsoft Corporation”).

Green Thumb ([www.greenthumb.org](http://www.greenthumb.org)) and Microsoft have partnered to provide computer training via grants by the U.S. Department of Labor. Delivery methods incorporate instructor and facilitator-led training, as well as Internet-based, self-paced learning.

Operation ABLE ([www.operationable.org](http://www.operationable.org)) designs computer and Internet training for employers, either on or off site, and according to the criteria stipulated by companies (Operation ABLE, “Customized group training programs”).

Smartforce ([www.smartforce.com](http://www.smartforce.com)), once known as CBT Systems, is one of the leading e-providers of interactive software. The company also works in tandem with Senior Staff to find, train, and place mature workers (“CBT Systems and the Senior Staff partner to help senior IT professionals land high tech jobs”).

As was true in the case of recruiting and reorganizing resources, employers who are committed to maintaining an up-to-date, age-diversified workforce can do so more easily now than ever before. Help in designing effective training and retraining programmes for mature workers is only as far away as the PC mouse.

I'd also recommend the works of Glenn Capelli and also Dr Stephanie Burns, both experts at learning to learn. A search on the web will locate them both and their extensive body of work.

## Conclusion

Workers may be greying, but they are healthier than ever and living longer than ever. They are out there – ready, willing and able to fill out your labour force and to ease the current pressure. Eight out of 10 baby boomers expect to continue working in some capacity past typical retirement age. Employers just need to know where to look and how to structure their firms so that mature workers will want to spend their ‘golden’ years there.

After finding older employees, companies must encourage them to continue in the workplace by providing them with the desired work environment, more flexible working hours, and benefit packages that include assistance with maturing-related life issues, such as elder care. In addition to this strategic reorganization, employers must also ensure that mature workers are given full and equal access to training and retraining programmes that are tailored to their unique needs.

By overcoming negative stereotypes and investing the time and effort required to cultivate positive relationships with mature workers, employers can weather the impending worker drought and have more productive, flexible, well-rounded organizations in the end. Historically, value-laden philosophies about age have filtered down from society to industry, where they manifest themselves in business practices. But this time, faced with a shrinking worker pool and knowledge base, it is the companies that must influence society, changing the assumptions about older adults, as valuable employees and as individuals.

**THE RETENTION EFFORTS YOU MAKE TODAY WILL  
ENSURE AND SHAPE YOUR WORKFORCE TOMORROW.**