

Engaging Older Workers Effectively



Understanding organisational preparedness for an ageing workforce



NEW ZEALAND

WORK RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Engaging Older Workers Productively: Understanding organisational preparedness for an aging workforce

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Summary of Findings

- The average proportion of older workers (55 years and over) in an organisation's workforce was 25%. Respondents had relatively positive perceptions about attitudes and behaviours in their organisations toward older workers. The majority of respondents (around 70%) felt that in their organisations older workers were appreciated and managed in an age-neutral way. A relatively small proportion of respondents felt that in their organisations there were pervasive negative stereotypes about older workers (11%), biases that affected decisions by managers about older workers (17%), and/or age-discriminatory behaviour in specific aspects of managing older workers (8-15% depending on the aspect).
- Some 45% of respondents had concerns about the medium-term (5 years) impact of an aging workforce on their industry sector or their organisation, or could see their organisation facing a shortage of highly experienced/skilled workers. Of less concern to respondents was whether the organisation was currently well prepared to adapt to an aging workforce (26%) or effectively engaging with this situation in the short term (next 2 years) (22%).
- Compared to the general workforce in the organisation, older workers were perceived to be more likely to remain with the organisation and, to a lesser extent, to be more committed to the organisation and more engaged with their work. Older workers were not generally perceived to be more productive than the general workforce.
- Half of the respondents reported that there were disadvantages to their organisations as a consequence of negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers. A range of negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers were reported, including the perceived inability or unwillingness to adapt to change, lack of technology skills or reluctance to embrace technology, and inability to do the job.
- Negative consequences of such stereotypes and attitudes include loss of older workers or failure to employ them, loss of or untapped knowledge and skills, conflict, failure to address older workers' needs, and reduced service quality.
- The greatest perceived benefit of employing older workers was retention of their job-related skills, expertise, knowledge and experience. Related to this was the role that older workers play in knowledge transfer to other workers and mentoring. Other perceived benefits included their reliability and dependability, their stability (leading to lower staff turnover), and commitment to the organisation.
- Just under half of respondents' organisations currently had or planned to put in place an age strategy or a diversity policy promoting older workers. Around 70% of respondents' organisations currently had or planned to implement flexible work arrangements for older workers, or using older workers in a training or mentoring capacity. Other practices targeted at older workers were less prevalent, or even uncommon, in respondents' organisations.
- The most common suggestion for optimising work for older workers and extending their working life was offering them flexible work arrangements, such as flexi-time, part-time work, telework, sabbaticals, unpaid leave, casual work, and graduated retirement. Other popular measures suggested included job design, valuing and respecting older workers, training and professional development for older workers, and creating mentoring opportunities.
- Older workers were not necessarily perceived as a resource to address personnel shortages. While some 46% of respondents' organisations currently had or planned to encourage their

older workers to work beyond retirement age, very few respondents' organisations were contemplating recruitment of more older workers.

1. Background

In common with most industrialised nations, New Zealand faces the challenge of an aging workforce. In 2011, among OECD countries, New Zealand recorded the second highest employment rate of people aged 55-64 years and fourth highest of people aged 65-69 years (OECD, 2012).

The EEO Trust Quarterly Diversity Survey (EEO Trust, 2013), undertaken by the NZ Work Research Institute in conjunction with the EEO Trust and Chamber of Commerce, Northern, consistently shows that older workers is an area of priority for New Zealand organisations across all industry sectors surveyed and for both large and small sized organisations. Moreover, of the approximately 1,000 organisations surveyed, few report that they had either a policy or programmes and initiatives in place to address the aging workforce. Other research from New Zealand and elsewhere has highlighted concerns around negative stereotypes within organisations concerning older workers, and a lack of preparedness for engaging an aging workforce positively and productively (e.g. Grey & McGregor, 2003; Conen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2011).

The Engaging Older Workers Productively Survey¹ was undertaken as a direct response to the findings of the Quarterly Diversity Survey. Because so little is known about how New Zealand organisations are engaging with older workers, the research was exploratory. Two main research questions underpin the study:

- (i) What systems and practices do organisations use to manage older workers' retention, productivity, wellbeing and health?
- (ii) How do organisational attitudes impact on these outcomes?

The Engaging Older Workers Productively Survey², conducted in partnership with the EEO Trust, provides an up-to-date picture of how prepared New Zealand organisations are to engage and manage an aging workforce, and the policy, HR practices and attitudes within the organisation that support the positive and productive engagement of older workers in the workforce. Findings from this survey will be considered alongside those of a follow-up study looking at the perceptions and experiences of older workers employed within a sample of participating organisations.

Taken together, we believe that the benefits of these research studies will impact individual workers (engagement in employment, wellbeing and quality of working life), organisations (workforce retention, and performance), society (positive aging) and the economy (economic outcomes of maintaining a productive workforce).

2. Method

The Engaging Older Workers Productively Survey was an anonymous online survey developed within Qualtrics. The survey was administered during July 2014. An invitation to participate in the survey was distributed by the EEO Trust to all of its members (>5000 individuals). The email invitation contained a Web link to the online survey, which directed respondents to an introductory Web page about the survey (including an information sheet about the study). Respondents were then directed to the survey

¹ For the purpose of the study, older workers were defined as employees or contracted workers aged 55 years or over.

² The study was approved by the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC Reference number 14/178).

itself, which was completed online and submitted upon completion directly to Qualtrics. Respondents had three weeks to complete the survey from the date of receiving the email invitation to participate. An email reminder about the survey was sent out to the EEO Trust mailing list seven and fourteen days after the distribution of the initial invitation. Quantitative data were cleaned and analysed using Excel, while qualitative data were analysed using NVivo.

3. Characteristics of respondents and their organisations

A total of **272** people responded to the online survey. A further 95 people opened the survey but did not answer any questions, and are regarded as clear refusals to participate. While respondents were presented with all of the questions in the survey, not all those who started the survey completed all the questions relevant to their role.³

The email invitation was distributed to over 5000 EEO Trust members. The open rate for the email invitation was 21%, meaning that approximately 1100 people engaged with the survey and a similar number of people opened the reminder emails. In addition, the EEO Trust also publicised the survey through social media and shared the survey link through a couple of different organisations.

Organisation size

Just under half of the respondents (48%) worked for organisations that had more than 200 employees (Table 1), although a number of smaller organisations were represented in the study, with over 30% having less than 50 employees.

Table 1: Respondent population by organisation size

Organisation size (full-time equivalents)	Number of respondents (N=270)	%
0-19 employees	40	14.8%
20-49 employees	42	15.6%
50-99 employees	24	8.9%
100-199 employees	34	12.6%
200+ employees	130	48.1%

Industry sector

Although a wide range of industries were represented in the study (Table 2), the respondent population was dominated by organisations from the following industry sectors: health care and social assistance; other services; education and training; public administration and safety; and professional, scientific and technical services.

³ In the findings presented in this report, all responses to any given question are used; this means that the number of responses in a given instance varies from 272.

Table 2: Respondent population by industry sector

Industry sector	Number of respondents (N=270)	%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	0	0.0%
Mining	1	0.4%
Manufacturing	16	5.9%
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	6	2.2%
Construction	5	1.9%
Wholesale Trade	2	0.7%
Retail Trade	5	1.9%
Accommodation and Food Services	4	1.5%
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	7	2.6%
Information Media and Telecommunications	10	3.7%
Financial and Insurance Services	14	5.2%
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	1	0.4%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	31	11.5%
Administrative and Support Services	5	1.9%
Public Administration and Safety	32	11.9%
Education and Training	40	14.8%
Health Care and Social Assistance	45	16.7%
Arts and Recreation Services	3	1.1%
Other Services	43	15.9%

Urban location

Over 70% of respondents' organisations were located in or near Auckland or Wellington (Table 3). The three most common industry sectors of the Auckland-based organisations were health care and social assistance (16.5%); other services (15.7%); and education and training (13.0%). The three most common industry sectors of the Wellington-based organisations were public administration and safety; professional (26.4%), scientific and technical services (16.7%); and other services (16.7%).

Table 3: Respondent population by nearest urban location

Location	Number of respondents (N=263)	%
Whangarei	3	1.1%
Auckland	115	43.7%
Hamilton	9	3.4%
Tauranga	8	3.0%
Rotorua	8	3.0%
New Plymouth	4	1.5%
Napier	3	1.1%
Palmerston North	12	4.6%
Wellington	73	27.8%
Nelson	4	1.5%
Christchurch	15	5.7%
Dunedin	4	1.5%
Invercargill	5	1.9%

Organisation age

The ages that respondents reported for their organisation ranged from 1 to 178 years (Figure 1), with an average age of 52 years (sd=47).

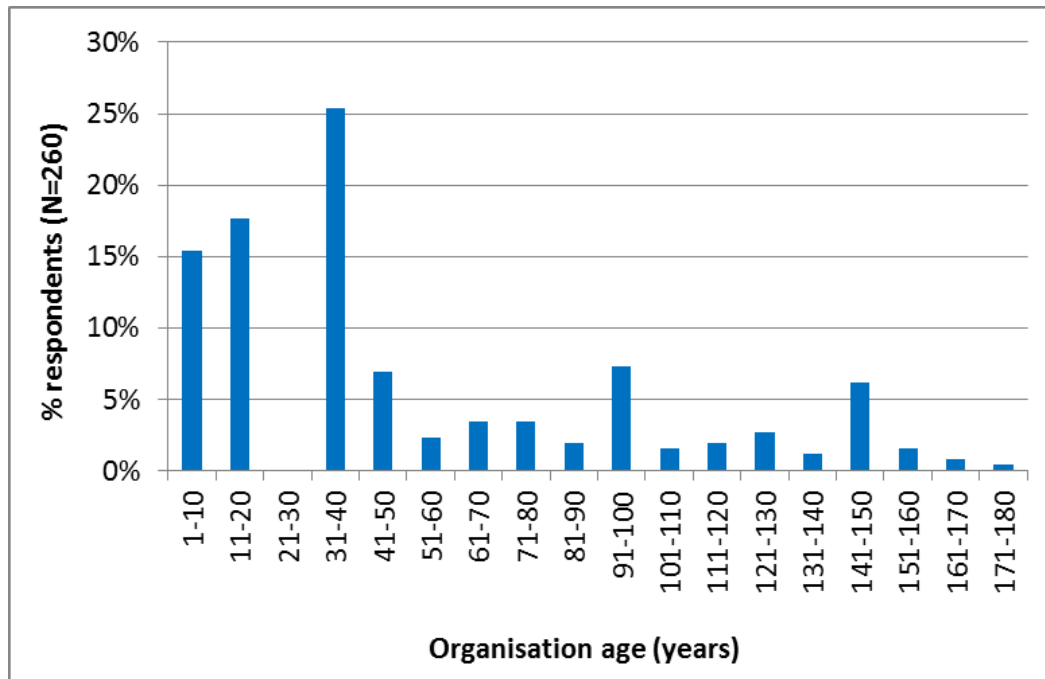


Figure 1: Organisation age

Respondents' job role and length of service

Respondents reported a range of job titles, which were grouped into four categories. Some 13% of respondents had CEO or managing director roles, one third (33%) were HR professionals of some type (from senior managers to advisors), and 27% had a management role other than HR manager. A further 27% of respondents had non-managerial roles other than in HR.

The average length of service with an organisation that respondents reported was 10.7 years, with an average of seven years in the current job role.

Nearly 80% of respondents had worked in their current job role for up to 10 years. Some 137 (51%) respondents had worked in their current job role for as long as they have worked for their organisation (i.e. they have only ever worked in their current role for their organisation).

Proportion of older workers

The proportion of older workers in an organisation's workforce ranged from 0 to 100% of workforce (N=263 respondents). The mean proportion of older workers in an organisation's workforce was 25% of the workforce (sd=18). As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of older workers in an organisation's workforce was clustered between 6-30% of the workforce (66% of respondents' organisation lie within this range), above which the proportion tails off.

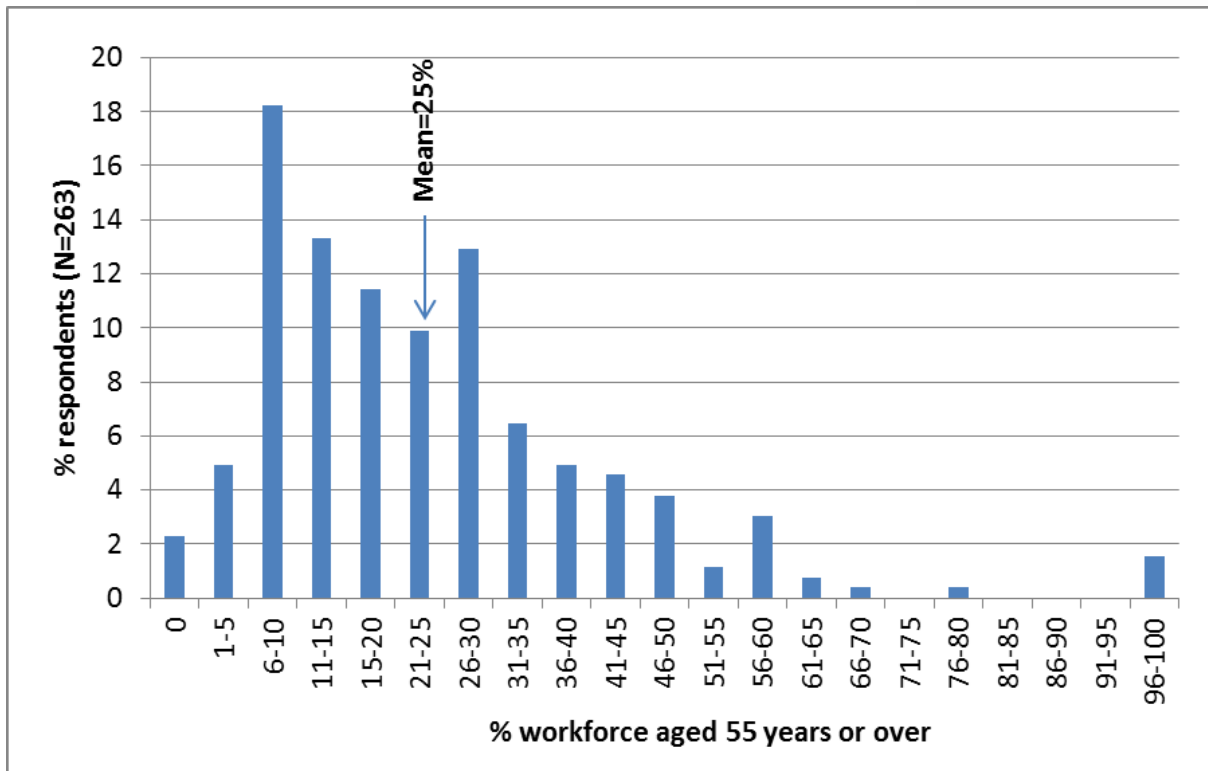


Figure 2: Proportion of organisation's workforce aged 55 years and over

4. Attitudes and behaviours toward older workers

Attitudes toward older workers

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements about attitudes and behaviours in their organisation toward older workers. Respondents generally had fairly positive perceptions about each of the items (Figure 3), indicating a low perceived level of age-discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

Older workers appeared to be well-valued within their organisations. A large proportion of respondents (71%) agreed (aggregated strongly agree and agree ratings) that in their organisation there was a strong appreciation of the value of older workers. Conversely, only 11% of respondents agreed that in their organisation there were widely held negative stereotypes about older workers.

In terms of managing older workers, 68% of respondents agreed that there were age-neutral management decisions and practices in their organisation, while 17% agreed that there were biases held by managers in their organisation that affected decisions about older workers. Only a relatively small proportion of respondents agreed that there were age-discriminatory behaviour in relation to specific aspects of managing older workers: in the daily leadership of older workers (10%); in job assignments (11%); in relation to opportunities for personal and professional development of employees (14%) or for individual promotion (15%); and in performance evaluation (8%).

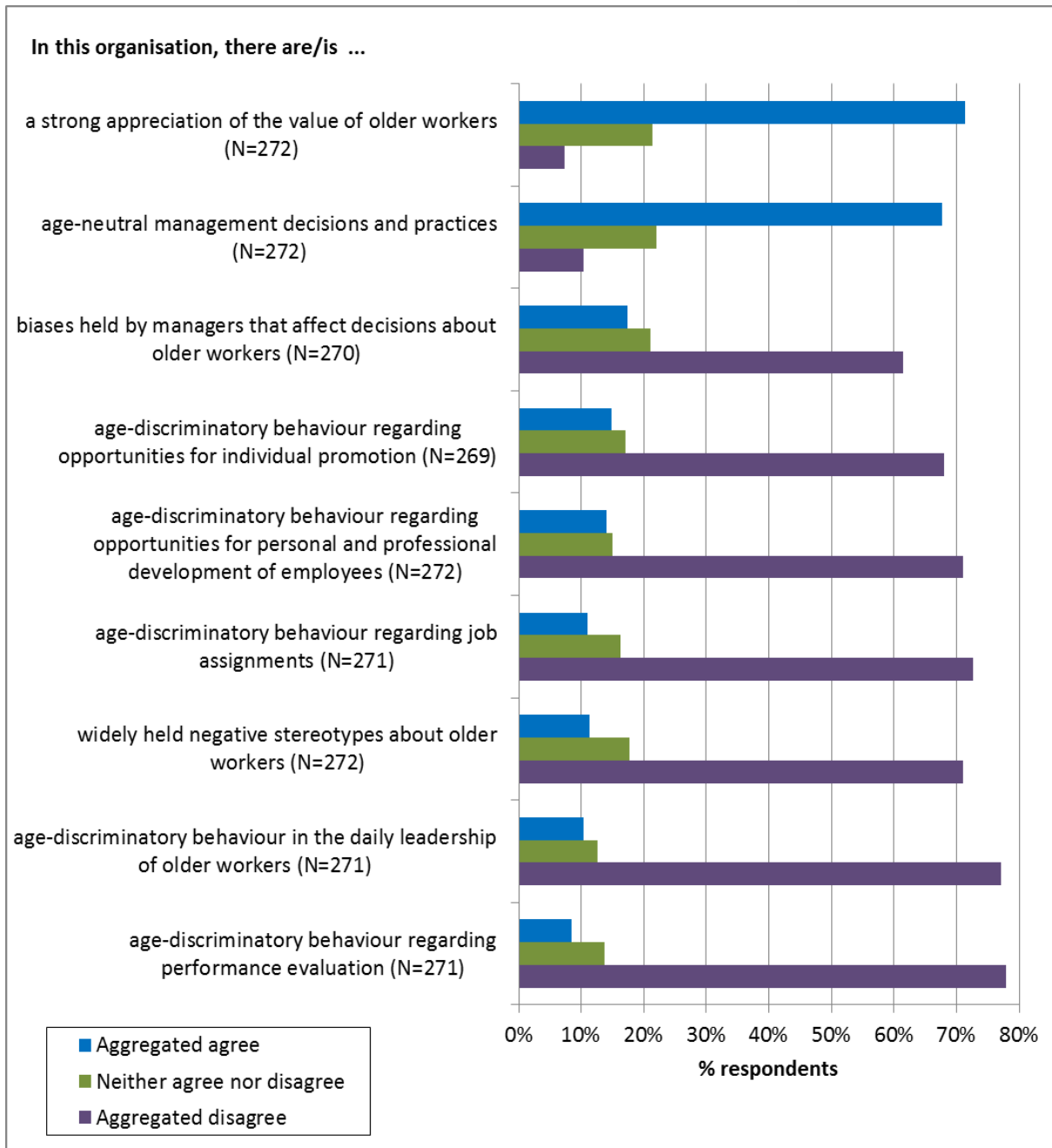


Figure 3: Attitudes and behaviours towards older workers

Concerns relating to an aging workforce

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements about concerns within their organisation relating to an aging workforce (see Figure 4). Clearly, for many of the sample, an aging workforce will have implications for their organisation and industry sector. Around 45% of respondents agreed (aggregated strongly agree and agree ratings) that there were concerns that an aging workforce will strongly impact their industry sector, or their organisation, over the next five years, while nearly one third disagreed that there were concerns in this regard. Some 45% of respondents agreed that their organisation faced a shortage of highly experienced/skilled workers, while nearly 40% disagreed that that their organisation faced such a shortage.

About one-quarter of respondents felt that their organisation is not currently well prepared to adapt to an aging workforce effectively, nor will they be within the next two years.

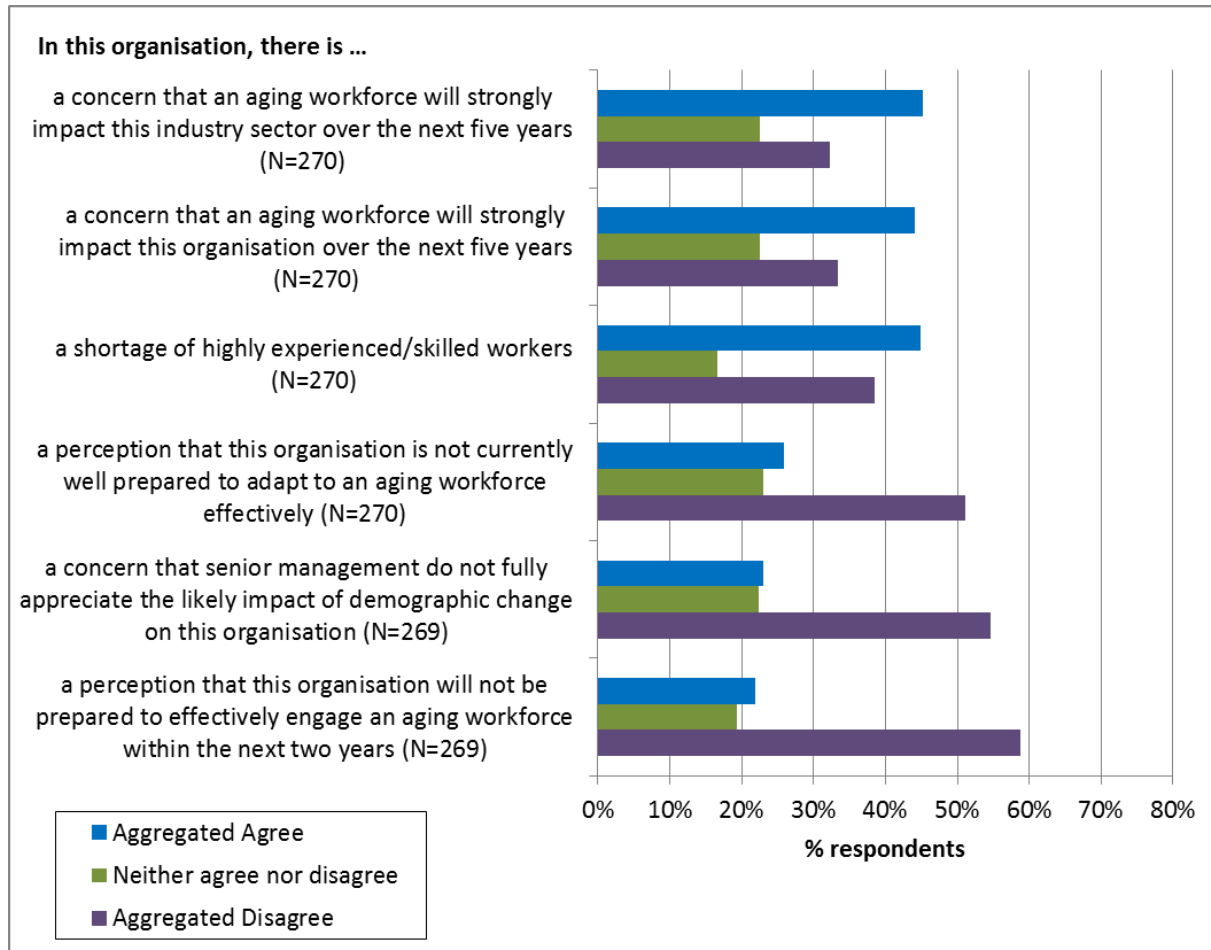


Figure 4: Organisational concerns in relation to older workers

Perceptions about older workers in relation to the general workforce

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements about perceptions about older workers in relation to the general workforce in their organisation. Although responses to these statements were fairly varied (see Figure 5), they tended towards agreement that older workers were more likely to remain in the organisation, were more committed, engaged, and productive. Indeed, levels of disagreement with each of these statements were generally fairly low (4-17%; i.e. most respondents tended to agree or were neutral).

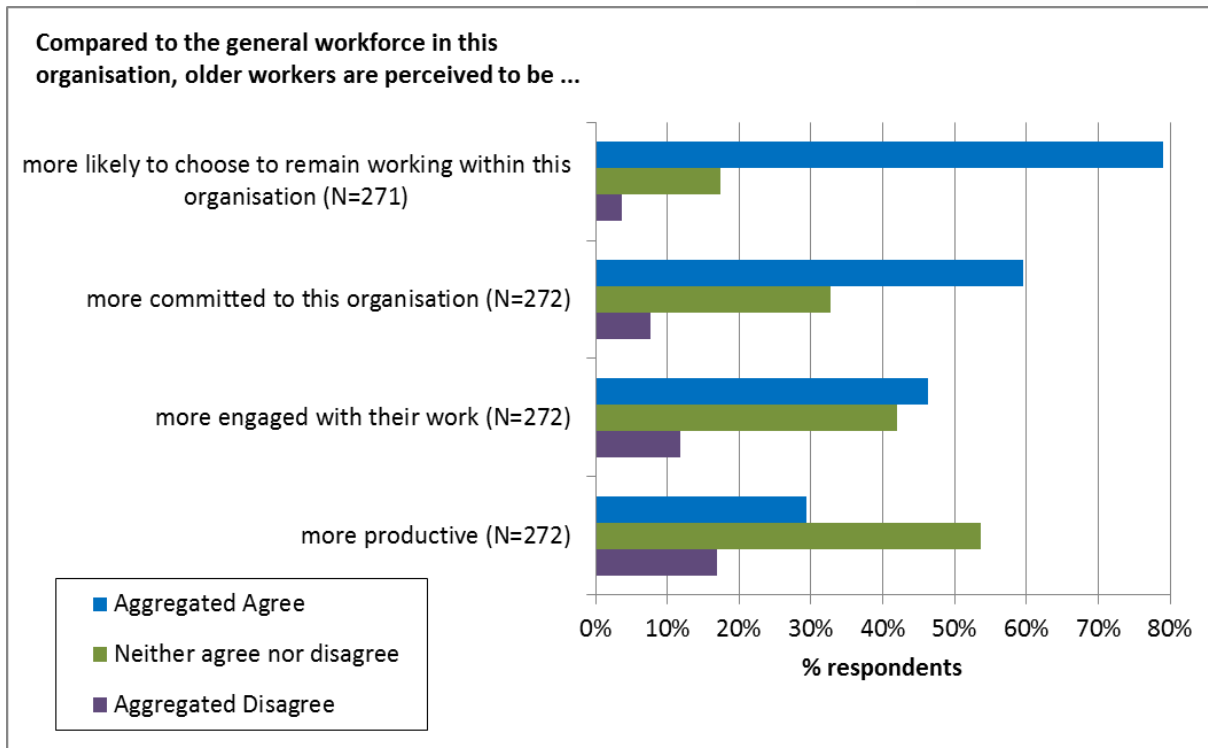


Figure 5: Organisational perceptions about older workers relative to the general workforce

Negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers

Respondents were asked to identify the ways in which negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers disadvantage their organisation. In total, 146 respondents reported usable responses to this question. Of these, half (73 respondents) did not believe that their organisations were disadvantaged from negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers, nearly one third (48 respondents) reported negative stereotypes or attitudes towards older workers, and just under one fifth (26 respondents) reported disadvantages to their organisation arising from negative stereotypes or attitudes towards older workers.

The most commonly reported negative stereotype or attitude towards older workers was that they are **less able or unwilling to adapt to change**, either in general or in relation to specific changes (e.g. new management styles, HR initiatives, learning styles or practices) (see Table 4). In some cases, this was linked to a wider negative perception about older workers' **lack of technology skills or reluctance to embrace new technology**:

"Not likely to change their habits and move with new technology or practices."

"That they are unwilling to change, that they will not be able to cope with new technology etc."

Related to this, was the perception in some organisations that **older workers do not want to progress** and so are not being offered as many training or professional development opportunities⁴.

⁴ In contrast to such perceptions, two respondents reported that within their organisations there are some older workers who have kept up-to-date and other who have not. One of these respondents felt that older workers need to take some responsibility for maintaining their professional development.

Table 4: Perceived negative stereotypes or attitudes towards older workers

Stereotype or attitude	Number of respondents
That older workers are less able or unwilling to adapt to change	16
Older workers' experience and knowledge are not valued	13
That older workers lack of technology skills or reluctance to embrace technology	8
That older workers are unable to do the job	7
That older workers do not want to progress	6
That older workers block the advancement of younger workers	5
That youth is better	3
That there are greater health and safety risks associated with older workers	3
That older workers are not as productive as younger workers	2
That older workers are less likely to follow process	1

A number of respondents reported that in their organisations, older workers' **experience and knowledge** were not valued. In other cases, there existed negative perceptions about older workers' **ability to do their job**, ranging from not being able to manage their workload, not being physically capable of doing the work required of them, to lacking energy, or being lazy or slow⁵:

"The physical nature of the work is a concern and may lead to stereotyping physical ability to do the job."

"Discriminatory attitudes around the productivity and speed with which older workers perform."

Some respondents reported that older workers were perceived to **block the advancement or career opportunities of younger workers**, e.g. *"stopping promotion of younger people"* or *"getting in the way and taking jobs of younger people."*

Other negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers that were reported by a small number of respondents included the perception that **younger workers are better**; that older workers pose **greater health and safety risks**⁶; that they are **less productive**; or that they are **less likely to follow process**.

The most commonly reported organisational consequence of such negative stereotypes or attitudes (see Table 5) was **losing or not employing older workers** who, for example, leave earlier than they may have (such as where there is no graduated retirement scheme), are more likely to be made redundant, or are not recruited in the first place:

"There is a perception that long service is an impediment not an advantage. Result is early exit of older workers. I can safely say I've observed that every restructuring sees older, experienced workers dropped in favour of younger inexperienced workers."

"Overlooking strong talent in recruitment practices."

⁵ In contrast to such negative perceptions, seven respondents cautioned that there are aspects of particular roles or professions in their organisations that can pose physical challenges to older workers.

⁶ In contrast to such negative perceptions about health and safety risks, four respondents reported actual instances of health and safety issues with older workers.

Somewhat related to this issue, is the **loss of older workers' knowledge and skills** or “*untapped skills and knowledge*” of existing older workers:

“We don't capitalise on the knowledge that older workers have to offer newer workers and historical knowledge is also lost because of poor succession planning.”

“The loss of the institutional knowledge has a huge impact on their delivery of services to the public.”

Table 5: Disadvantages for organisations of negative stereotypes towards to older workers

Disadvantage	Number of respondents
Losing or not employing older workers	12
Loss of or untapped knowledge and skills	6
Conflict	4
Failure to consider older workers' needs	4
Reduced service quality	3
Lack of engagement with older workers	1

A few respondents reported that negative stereotypes or attitudes led to **reduced service quality** (as indicated by the previous quote), and **conflict** or division: “*[It] creates a ‘them and us’ environment.*” Other consequences for an organisation that were reported included **failure to engage with older workers** and **failure to consider older workers' needs**: “*Blindly adopting new ways of working that take little cognisance of older workers' needs for organising their work and knowledge.*”

Three respondents also reported concerns about their organisations' ability to recruit a range of staff. These included “*the challenge of replacing these workers*”, the “*difficulty is attracting a wider range of ages*”, and that “*younger people are less willing to work for low pay and low hours.*”

Perceived benefits to organisations of employing older workers

Respondents were asked to identify what they believed were the business benefits or advantages for their organisation of employing older workers. In total, 155 respondents reported usable data on the perceived benefits or advantages of employing older workers (see Table 6)⁷.

The greatest perceived benefit of employing older workers was **retention of their job-related skills, expertise, knowledge and experience** (these were often framed in relation to the industry sector, profession, or job role). Some respondents related this to reduced cost of recruitment or retention of specialist skills: “*It can take up to 10 years to fully train someone.*” Other respondents highlighted the value in retaining older workers' institutional knowledge, history and memory, enabling organisational learning from past experiences: “*The biggest advantage has to be ‘experience’ - a long history in the department and great knowledge of what has worked and not worked in the past.*” Related to older workers' knowledge and experience, is the organisational benefit of **knowledge transfer to other workers and mentoring**: “*Key would be their knowledge and skill base; i.e. using older workers to mentor, train and coach inexperienced workers and young workers.*”

⁷ In contrast, seven respondents provided negative comments about older workers in their organisation, including moves to replace older workers with younger staff and perceived disadvantages of employing older workers.

Table 6: Perceived business benefit or advantage of employing older workers

Benefit or advantage	Number of respondents (N=155)	%
Retention of job-related skills, expertise, knowledge & experience	112	72.3%
Older workers' maturity and life skills or life experience	46	29.7%
Reliability of older workers	36	23.2%
Knowledge transfer and mentoring	30	19.4%
Commitment of older workers	27	17.4%
Lower staff turnover	25	16.1%
Better client service	17	11.0%
Workforce diversity	15	9.7%
Older workers' attitude	9	5.8%
Access to older workers' networks and contacts	6	3.9%
Higher productivity	5	3.2%
Workforce flexibility	4	2.6%

Another important perceived benefit of employing older workers was the **maturity and life skills or life experience** that they can bring to a job role. This was often framed in terms of specific qualities, particularly wisdom, composure, confidence, judgement, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and relationship management. For example:

"Older workers tend to have a more balanced world view – a broader life experience – and this is an advantage ... where we are called upon to make considered judgements."

"Because of the type of work we do the maturity and enhanced emotional intelligence that is acquired as a result of life and work experience is highly regarded."

Older workers were perceived to be **reliable**, often framed in terms of their dependability, work attendance or work ethic: *"The older worker is reliable, takes less sick leave and generally has a committed work ethics."* Similarly, they were considered to be stable and less likely than other workers to leave, leading to **lower staff turnover**: *"Older workers are more likely to stay in an organisation than younger workers due to attitudinal factors and the stage of life they are at. That leads to a stable workforce."* Respondents also valued older workers' loyalty and **commitment to the organisation**: *"The older staff are generally more committed to the success of the business overall and in their personal performance."*

Another perceived benefit of employing older workers was providing **better client service** through, for example, having greater credibility or established relationships with clients, or empathising with older clients:

"For our business our strength is our customer relationships. We find older workers tend that have reasonable length of service with the business are well respected by our customer base who themselves are often older business people. A bit of 'grey hair' helps our business be successful."

Related to this, older workers may have industry **networks and contacts** that some organisation perceived as valuable: *“Older workers in our organisation are often high skilled, experienced group with extensive networks who bring work and connections to our organisation.”*

Older workers can also provide **workforce diversity**, for example in diversity of thinking and perspectives, or helping to represent community demographics: *“They help provide greater diversity in the workplace and a broader view and greater depth to ideas and problem solving.”* A few respondents also noted that employing older workers can enable **workforce flexibility**, for example, where such workers opt for graduated retirement or flexible work arrangements: *“[They] can job share with reduced hours, more readily work part time and so reduce staffing costs.”*

Other perceived benefits that were highlighted by a small number of respondents were **older workers’ attitudes** (e.g. adaptability, positivity, and *“a ‘get on with it’ attitude”*) and **higher productivity**.

5. HR strategy and practices regarding older workers

HR strategies or practices

Respondents were asked to indicate whether various HR strategies and practices related to older workers are currently in place, planned to put in place within next two years or unlikely to be put in place in the next two years (Table 7).

Flexible work arrangements were the practice most frequently in place, with nearly two-thirds of respondents’ organisation offering flexible options to their staff, and almost three-quarters when organisations planning to put this practice in place in the next two years were taken into account. Other practices with relatively frequent adoption included using older workers to mentor, train and coach inexperienced workers and young workers, with more than one-half respondents’ organisations adopting this practice.

Less than half of respondents had or planned for an effective age strategy (i.e. strategy and planning around an aging workforce), or a diversity policy that promotes respect for older workers. Nearly one third of respondents’ organisations respectively were unlikely to put in the next two years either an effective age strategy or a diversity policy that promotes respect for older workers.

Only a low percentage of respondents’ organisations currently have in place practices related to job recruitment practices targeting older workers, productivity improvements among older workers, performance-based compensation for older workers, and training for managers on managing older workers. While a proportion of respondents’ organisations plan to put these in place in the next two years, a substantial proportion (48% or more) are unlikely to put these in place in the next two years.

Table 7: HR strategies and practices currently in place or planned

HR strategy or practice	N	Currently in place	Plan to put in place within next two years	Unlikely to be put in place in the next two	Not sure
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				years	
Flexible work arrangements (part-time work, telework, etc.) for older workers	224	62.05%	11.16%	15.63%	11.16%
Using older workers to mentor, train and coach inexperienced workers and young workers	225	56.00%	14.22%	16.89%	12.89%
Development of older workers	225	48.44%	4.89%	27.11%	19.56%
Training for older workers	226	48.23%	6.64%	26.11%	19.03%
Technology skills development for older workers	224	38.39%	11.61%	27.68%	22.32%
Graduated retirement for older workers	223	37.67%	14.80%	26.46%	21.08%
Health and wellness programmes for older workers	226	35.84%	12.83%	30.53%	20.80%
A diversity policy that promotes respect for older workers	226	35.40%	13.72%	31.86%	19.03%
Older worker retention practices	226	30.53%	10.18%	38.50%	20.80%
Job design/over-fatigue prevention measures (workload, stress, work-time, or ergonomic adjustments) for older workers	225	28.89%	12.89%	35.11%	23.11%
Performance-based compensation for older workers	225	21.33%	2.22%	52.44%	24.00%
An effective age strategy (i.e. strategy and planning around an aging workforce)	226	17.70%	26.11%	34.96%	21.24%
Productivity improvements among older workers	225	12.89%	6.67%	50.22%	30.22%
Job recruitment practices targeting older workers	226	9.29%	6.64%	57.52%	26.55%
Training for managers on managing older workers	226	6.64%	15.04%	48.67%	29.65%

Importance placed on HR strategies related to older workers

Respondents were asked to rate the importance placed on specific HR practices regarding older workers (Table 8 and Figure 6). The perceived importance level for the HR practices was typically in the mid-range (i.e. moderately important).

The two practices that a majority of respondents perceived to be of high importance were using older workers to mentor, train and coach inexperienced workers and young workers (59%) and providing flexible work arrangements (part-time work, telework, etc.) for older workers (52%).

The four practices that a majority of respondents perceived to be of least importance were productivity improvements among older workers (53%); training for managers on managing older workers (55%); performance-based compensation for older workers (60%); and job recruitment practices targeting older workers (65%).

Table 8: Perceived importance of specific HR practices regarding older workers

HR practice	N	Not at all important 1	2	3	4	Extremely important 5	Mean [¶]
Using older workers to mentor, train and coach inexperienced workers and young workers	221	9.96%	14.48%	16.74%	35.29%	23.53%	3.48 ($\sigma=1.27$)
Flexible work arrangements (part-time work, telework, etc.) for older workers	222	10.36%	16.22%	21.62%	35.14%	16.67%	3.32 ($\sigma=1.23$)
Graduated retirement for older workers	223	15.70%	20.63%	24.22%	25.56%	13.90%	3.01 ($\sigma=1.29$)
Health and wellness programmes for older workers	221	14.93%	20.36%	28.51%	25.34%	10.86%	2.97 ($\sigma=1.22$)
Training for older workers	222	15.77%	18.47%	31.08%	23.42%	11.26%	2.96 ($\sigma=1.23$)
Development of older workers	222	15.77%	18.02%	30.18%	27.03%	9.01%	2.95 ($\sigma=1.20$)
Job design/over-fatigue prevention measures (workload, stress, work-time, or ergonomic adjustments) for older workers	221	15.39%	20.81%	30.77%	21.72%	11.31%	2.93 ($\sigma=1.22$)
Technology skills development for older workers	221	15.39%	21.27%	28.96%	24.43%	9.96%	2.92 ($\sigma=1.21$)
Older worker retention practices	219	18.72%	19.18%	32.88%	21.46%	7.76%	2.80 ($\sigma=1.20$)
Productivity improvements among older workers	219	25.57%	27.40%	28.77%	13.24%	5.02%	2.45 ($\sigma=1.15$)
Training for managers on managing older workers	220	28.18%	26.36%	29.55%	13.18%	2.73%	2.36 ($\sigma=1.11$)
Performance-based compensation for older workers	222	33.33%	27.03%	23.87%	10.36%	5.41%	2.27 ($\sigma=1.18$)
Job recruitment practices targeting older workers	220	30.91%	33.64%	28.64%	5.91%	0.91%	2.12 ($\sigma=0.95$)
¶ Values assigned to rating: 1='Strongly disagree', 2='Disagree', 3='Neither agree nor disagree', 4='Agree', and 5='Strongly agree'							

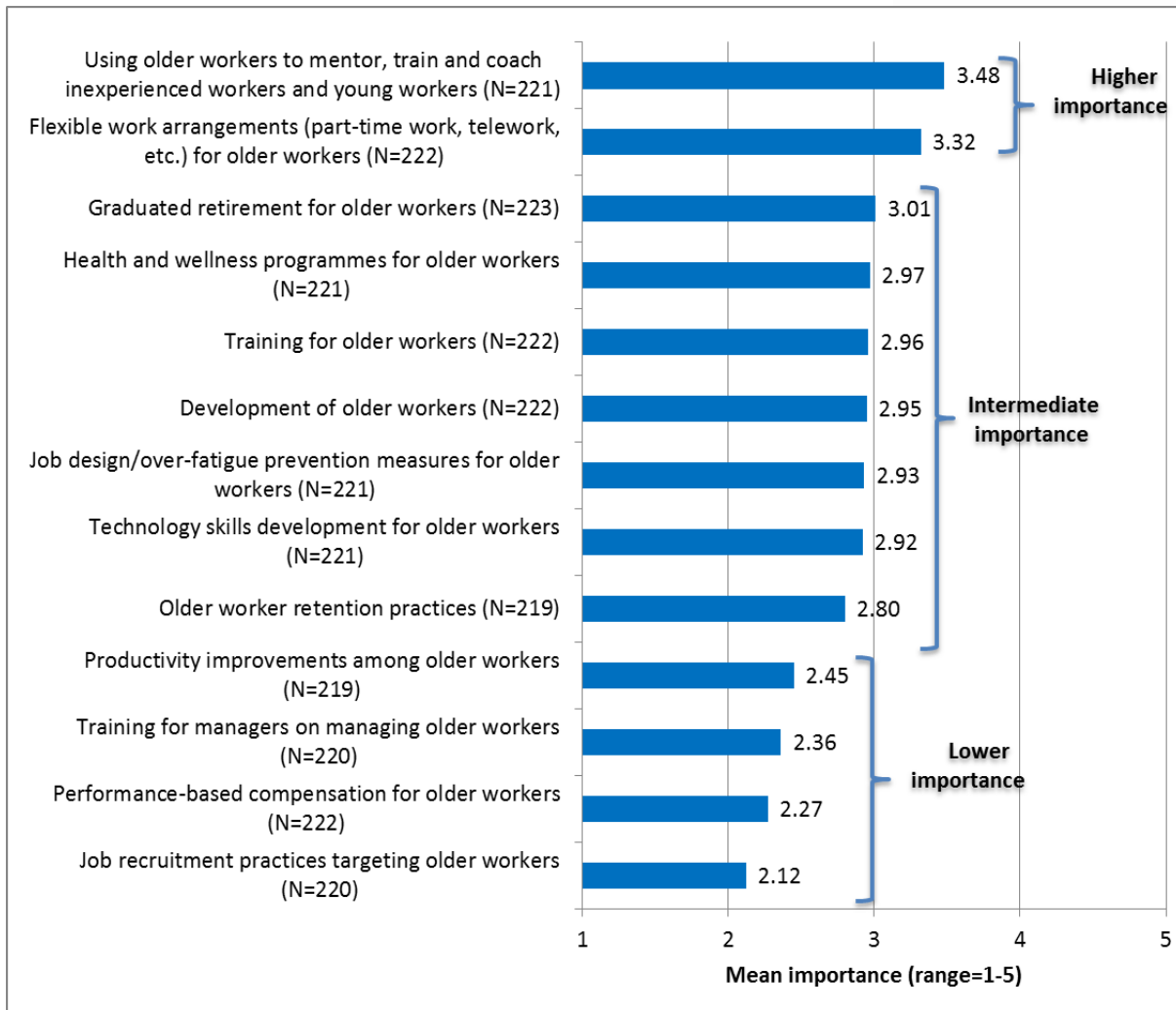


Figure 6: Perceived importance of specific HR practices regarding older workers

It might be expected that the importance that organisations placed on specific HR practices would be reflected in whether or not these had been instituted as a policy or practice by the organisation. As Figure 7, this would appear to be the case.

It should be noted that, in responding to the various qualitative questions in the survey, some 41 respondents highlighted that in their organisations all employees are recruited and treated according to their needs. For example,

“We treat all our team in the same way, regardless of age. They may have children to care for, or be more elderly, and we would structure their work around their needs.”

“We don't have specifics in place for older workers – all our employees are treated as individuals and we therefore work with all ages to engage, develop and look after needs.”

“We don't single older workers out in regard to training, development, recruitment, retention, flexible work arrangements, job design, performance based compensation, productivity. We do this for all our staff.”

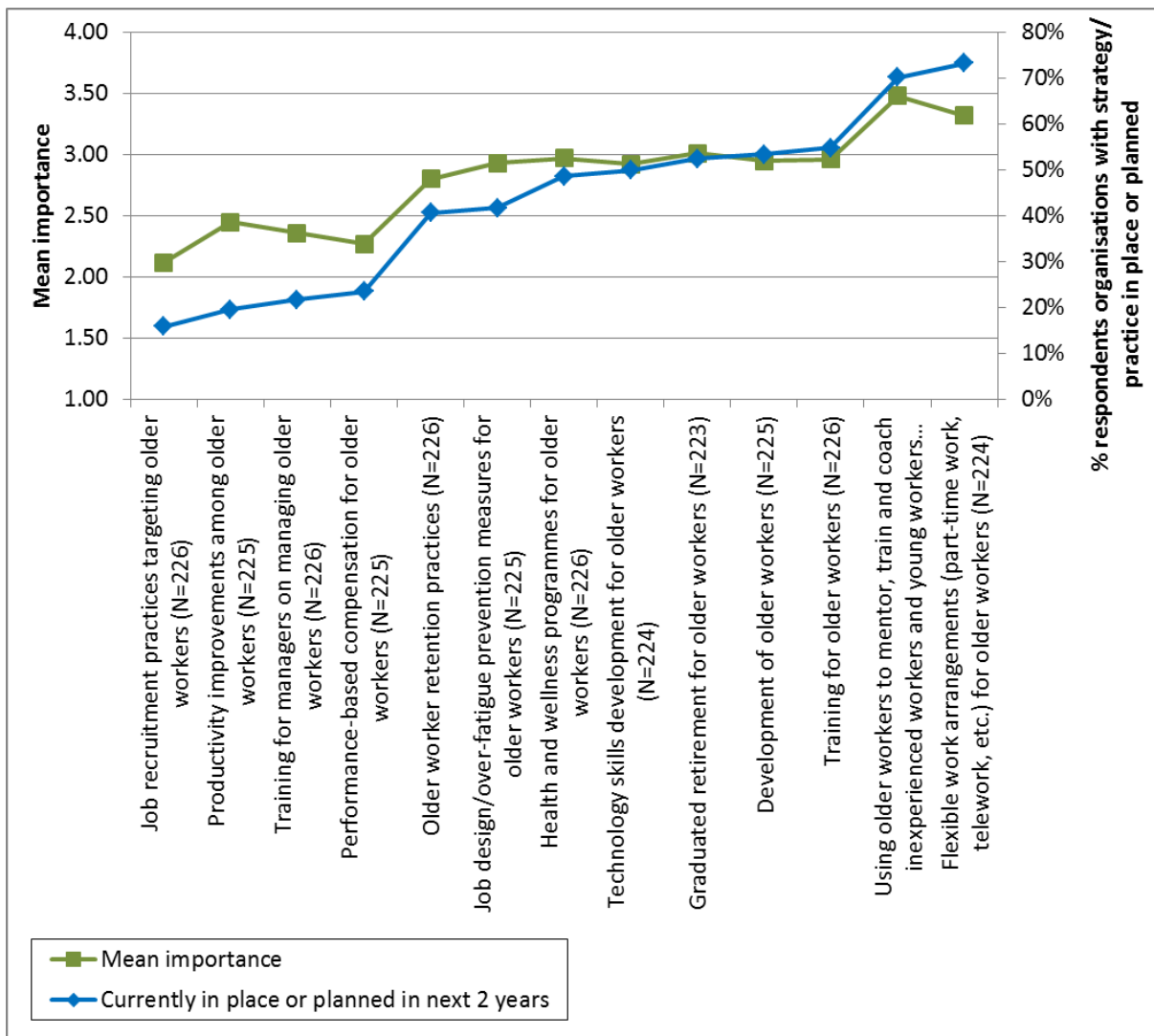


Figure 7: Linking mean importance of HR strategies and practices related to older workers to institutional practice

Optimising work for older workers and extending their working life

Respondents were asked to outline any ideas that they had on how best to optimise work for older workers and effectively extend their working life. In total, 121 respondents reported usable data on this (see Table 9), in many cases referring to the HR strategies related to older workers outlined above in Table 7.

The most common suggestion (62 respondents) was offering older workers **flexible work arrangements**, such as flexi-time, part-time work, telework, sabbaticals, unpaid leave, or casual work (if so desired):

“Increased ability to accommodate part-time and job share opportunities, along with ability to work from home, or take extended periods of unpaid leave/regular sabbaticals, or participate in fixed term project work on more contractual basis.”

Of these respondents, thirteen specifically referred to graduated retirement as an option for older workers. Flexible working arrangements were seen as enabling older workers to continue to be productive, while meeting their own needs:

“Flexibility is the key ingredient to allow older people to enjoy a life out of work whilst still continuing to be productive in jobs.”

“Flexible working and graduated retirement are all good ways to help an older person continue to add value to the business, whilst finding a good way to shift the work life balance towards spending more quality time at home.”

Table 9: Ways to optimise work for older workers

Suggestions	Number of respondents (N=121)	%
Flexible work arrangements for older workers	62	51.24%
Job design	28	23.14%
Value older workers	24	19.83%
Training and professional development for older workers	24	19.83%
Creating mentoring opportunities	23	19.01%
Communication	16	13.22%
Education around the value of older workers	10	8.26%
Education about their future options	8	6.61%
Health and wellness programmes for older workers	7	5.79%
Recognition of different needs	7	5.79%
Training for managers on managing older workers	5	4.13%
An effective age strategy	5	4.13%
Creating opportunities for interaction between older and younger workers	4	3.31%
Community-based or volunteering activities	4	3.31%
Performance-based compensation for older workers	3	2.48%
Alumni schemes	2	1.65%

Some 28 respondents suggested providing **job design** or over-fatigue prevention measures for older workers. This included either adjusting roles by creating specific roles and responsibilities (e.g. project-based roles), or adjusting individuals’ workload, for example, by job sizing, providing access to less labour-intensive roles, or providing appropriate work for older workers. Other suggestions included measures to reduce stress such as monitoring work/life balance and adjusting work-time through flexible work arrangements (see above). Some of these respondents suggested health and safety practices such as ergonomic adjustments and the provision of suitable technology or equipment: *“Provide more technology to assist in workplace settings, e.g. larger monitors/software for magnified viewing of documents, voice recognition and enhanced audio software.”*

Valuing older workers and treating them with respect was seen as another important way of optimising work for older workers: *“Respect for the value an older worker can offer a workplace would make more older workers feel valued as team members and likely extend their working years.”* To this end, ten

respondents highlighted the need for **greater education and publicity around the value of older workers**, both within an organisation and more widely:

“I think for this organisation there needs to be a shift in management culture and education of a younger workforce who seem to have been supported in their views that older people should ‘just move on and retire’.”

“Education and information sharing for employers on research showing the benefits of employing older workers.”

Some respondents highlighted the need to provide **training for managers on managing older workers** in order to, for example, get the best out of their workers, communicate with their workers and advise them, and to overcome bias and encourage diversity.

Ensuring access to **training and professional development** for older workers was also seen as important, including both job-related training (e.g. on products and services, changes in the business) (16 respondents), and training in technology skills (13 respondents). Some respondents suggested offering older workers **education about their options** as they approach retirement or on planning for their future (e.g. financial literacy, health).

Creating mentoring opportunities for older workers was suggested as a means of recognising their value, as well as facilitating knowledge transfer:

“We often use our older employees as mentors to younger upcoming branch managers. I think this makes them feel valued and the combination of a wise head and young gives us a better outcome at the end of the day.”

Related to this, some respondents suggested creating opportunities for interaction between older and younger workers, both socially and in the workplace, in order to encourage respect for older workers’ skills by younger workers and to ensure older workers *“are integrated well into the workforce”* and *“get exposure to younger thinking.”*

Other suggestions included encouraging older workers to participate in **community-based or volunteering activities** outside of work, or maintaining links with workers once they retire through **alumni schemes**.

Some respondents highlighted the need for open **communication** with older workers about their expectations or needs and working with them to achieve their plans:

“Communicate with these workers, identify what their plans are, support these plans, be open to flexible work arrangements, reduced hours, etc.”

“Working with them to understand what they would like to continue to contribute to the organisation and the organisation working with them on how this can happen.”

Similarly, other respondents stressed the importance of **recognising the different needs of older workers**:

“I believe it’s about asking/understanding the needs of each specific older person and working to meeting those needs without causing compromise to company requirements, standards or performance expectations.”

Other organisational measures suggested by a small number of respondents included developing an **effective age strategy** (e.g. *“plans, systems and programmes in place to ensure the older workers continue to be respected member of the workforce”*); providing **health and wellness programmes for older workers** (e.g. dietary advice; gym or swimming club subsidies; free annual flu vaccinations; subsidised eye exams, corrective lenses or hearing aids); and ensuring **performance-based compensation for older workers** (e.g. performance based rewards or incentives for years of service).

Measures in place to address personnel shortages

Respondents were asked to indicate whether various measures to address personnel shortages were currently in place, planned to put in place within next two years or unlikely to be put in place in the next two years.

In terms of measures related to older workers, just under half of the respondents’ organisations (46%) were either currently encouraging workers to continue working beyond retirement age do this or planned to do so in the next two years; in contrast, 28% of respondents’ organisations were unlikely to put this in place in the next two years. Only a very small proportion of respondents’ organisations (15%) were either currently recruiting more older workers or planned to do so in the next two years, whereas just over half (56%) were unlikely to do so in the next two years.

In terms of other measures to address personnel shortages, around 40% of respondents’ organisations were either currently recruiting more female workers or planned to do so in the next two years. A similar proportion were either currently recruiting more immigrant workers/non-nationals or planned to do so in the next two years.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided an insight into the preparedness of New Zealand organisations to effectively engage an aging workforce. As such engagement is dependent upon the absence of age-discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, it was pleasing to observe that most respondents believed their organisational members held positive perceptions of older workers. Indeed, the majority of respondents felt that in their organisations older workers were appreciated and managed in an age-neutral way. Related to these perceptions, respondents also believed that older workers were more committed, loyal and engaged than the general workforce. Given these findings, it was unsurprising to find that most respondents felt their organisations were currently well prepared to face and adapt to an aging workforce.

The study was also interested in the strategic and practical approach of organisations to support an aging workforce. Just half had or planned to put in place an age strategy or a diversity policy promoting older workers, suggesting a key area for attention for organisations in the future. The most popular HR practices to support older workers were the implementation of flexible work arrangements for older workers, and using older workers in a training or mentoring capacity. Most of the other HR practices we asked respondents about were less prevalent, or even uncommon. Ideas for optimising the work environment and experience for older workers included offering them flexible work arrangements, such as flexi-time, part-time work, telework, sabbaticals, unpaid leave, casual work, and graduated retirement. Other popular measures suggested included job design, valuing and respecting older

workers, training and professional development for older workers, and creating mentoring opportunities.

A full paper will be produced in the coming weeks that will consider these findings in relation to those of previous research in New Zealand and internationally, along with implications for theory and practice in this field.

End.

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