



Older workers: Employers speak out

**“Age and experience is actually
a good thing.”**

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Key points

- The key theme to emerge during the interview process was that older people were perceived as valuable employees. Their reliability, good work ethic, maturity, experience, expertise, institutional knowledge, stability, loyalty and their ability to mentor younger workers were all mentioned.
- Some respondents, mainly in the manufacturing sector, reported an improved perception of the value of older workers.
- Some respondents said the attitudes of some managers and co-workers were barriers for older workers in some workplaces. Education and creating a culture of inclusion and respect were suggested as ways to address these barriers.
- While physical capacity and IT capability were seen as the main limitations for older workers, both issues were seen as resolvable in order to retain the workers' skills and experience.
- The expertise of older people in physically demanding roles was being retained by shifting them into training roles, enabling them to work reduced hours, or providing equipment to reduce the physical demands.
- Most organisations had not noticed any changes in the number of older people applying for jobs, but some said older people were becoming more successful in obtaining jobs. While this was partly due to the skills shortage, some respondents attributed it to better presentation by older candidates.
- Some respondents noted that older job applicants were more confident than they were a few years ago. Others suggested that older workers needed to promote themselves more effectively.
- Few organisations were changing their employment practices to cater to an ageing workforce. The general consensus was that the needs of older workers could be met through existing EEO practices, and that targeting older workers could breach the Human Rights Act.
- Some respondent organisations were broadening their advertising approach, both in terms of the media used and the wording of advertisements, in order to attract a wider age range or to encourage older workers to apply.
- Many respondents noted that older workers are staying in paid work longer and transitioning to retirement through reduced hours or less physically-demanding roles.
- Flexibility measures such as reduced hours, part-time work, special leave, extended leave, job redesign and a culture of inclusiveness and respect encouraged older people to stay at work.
- Efforts to retain older workers were driven by the skills shortage, awareness of the changing age profile of the workforce, and recognition of the benefits of older workers.

- Some pension schemes were seen as a barrier to a gradual transition to retirement. They were based on earnings over the years immediately preceding retirement and paid out only at full retirement.
- Respondents' experiences with recruitment agencies were mixed, with some reporting no issues related to age and others saying agencies were more likely to promote younger candidates.
- Training and promotion opportunities were available to older people working in all the organisations covered in this study. Older workers were also seen as suitable for overseas appointments as they no longer had family commitments.
- The perception of the point at which someone becomes an older worker has shifted from 40 or 45 years in the 1990s to 50-55 and older.
- Most organisations collected data on the age profile of their workforce. About half the organisations in this study had workforces skewed towards older ages. The rest were skewed towards younger workers or had a relatively even distribution of age groups.

Introduction

This project tracks trends in employers' responses to older workers, with a particular focus on the benefits and challenges of employing older people and on practices which enabled them to contribute fully at work.

It builds on research undertaken by the EEO Trust in 2006 which explored employers' perceptions of an intergenerational workforce and is being released alongside a new guide to help employers make the most of mature staff.

Valuing Experience: a practical guide to recruiting and retaining older workers was produced by a group comprising the EEO Trust, the Human Rights Commission, the Retirement Commission, Business New Zealand, the Council of Trade Unions and the Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce.

This 2008 research project involved semi-structured telephone interviews with 26 members of the EEO Employers Group. The respondent organisations operated in 10 industry sectors with employee numbers ranging from 100 to more than 18,000 people.

We undertook this research in order to get a sense of how well prepared employers are for the ageing workforce – still the most striking employment demographic. Almost a quarter of New Zealand's workforce is in the 50-64 years age group and the number of workers over 65 years was 65,000 in 2006. This is projected to increase to 105,000 in 2011 and to 160,000 in 2021.

In this report, we largely let the respondents speak for themselves. They provided valuable information on the many benefits of employing older people, outlined some of the challenges, and suggested solutions. Some respondents were happy to be identified, while others asked that their comments remained anonymous.

We began by asking our respondents what age group came to mind in response to the term "older worker". The most common response was around 45-55 and over, with most saying over 50. There were no differences by industry sector in the perception of the age at which a worker becomes "older". The total range of ages given was 40 to 65+. This is higher than was prevalent in the literature on older workers in the 1990s, and is consistent with a move to 50 or 55+ in more recent literature and research. The upper age-range mentioned by some respondents was 80+.

Workforce profiles and data collection

Almost all the organisations interviewed for this study collected data on the age profile of their workforce, but only about half knew the age profile of particular occupational groups within their organisation.

Analysis of national census data showed wide variation in the age profile of different occupational groups in the New Zealand workforce. This was reflected in the different industry sectors represented in this study. Academia, local government, the health sector and some manufacturers reported a workforce skewed towards older workers.

Retail and telecommunications organisations reported workforces skewed towards younger workers. They attributed this to low pay in the retail sector and in telecommunications call centres. The banking sector and some manufacturing organisations reported a relatively even spread over the age range.

Benefits of employing older people

Many respondents spoke very highly of older employees. They commented on their knowledge, expertise and experience, their ability as mentors, their work ethic and their stability.

For example, GM Employment Solutions at Telecom, Jo Copeland, said, “Older workers are really valuable in this labour market. The talent pool includes such a broad range nowadays, which employers ignore at their peril.”

Similarly, Lisa Jurgens, Senior Resourcing Consultant at Vodafone, speaks positively of workers, their stability in particular. “They’re capable, have common sense and experience, and have demonstrated good successes in the past.

“Maturity, stability and reliability are important to us. They’re looking to build the rest of their career within a company, rather than moving around like some younger people do.”

Stability was also important to Richard Westney, Senior HR Manager at KPMG. “They bring experience and maturity. Most of our older workers have been with us 10 to 40 years, so they also have that institutional knowledge. Plus they tend to be more steady and reliable so don’t move on so quickly.”

HR Manager of Projects at Fonterra, Kate Dunn, said older workers had lots to offer their work teams. “Out in the factories it’s a close team, a family-like environment, so it’s pretty natural for older workers to take a certain place within that team.

“They provide balance in the team, improve team dynamics, create mentoring opportunities, have professionalism and a wise head.”

A respondent from the retail sector also had high praise for older workers’ “experience, maturity, loyalty, respect for the company and perhaps discretionary effort. They’ve gone through their working life expecting that’s what you do – that you’re employed to go above and beyond.

“They have longer-term commitment to the organisation. They’re not clock-watchers and are more committed to doing the task. They role-model loyalty, discretionary effort and respect for co-workers. The younger ones look up the older ones.”

The ability to match the age of staff with customers or clients was mentioned by just two respondents, from the banking and professional services sectors, as a benefit of attracting and retaining older workers.

For example, a respondent from a major bank said the company liked to have older staff “to match our customer base, so [clients] see people like them when they come into a branch.

“For example, if you’re 55 and want to ask about retirement planning and the person behind the counter is only 21 years old, you’ll probably feel that they won’t understand your needs very well. A young student coming in about a student loan would probably rather be dealt with by a younger person who has experience of that and can talk to them about their own experience.”

One retail sector manager said, however, that this was not necessarily an effective strategy. “An older person may not be the best person, because younger people know more about some of the technology we sell. But we have to have an even distribution of staff ages and other characteristics to meet the needs of all customers.”

For most respondents, employing someone with the necessary skills and experience generally overrode any desire to match customer demographics.

Said Henry Pipkin of Southland District Council, “We think more about getting good skilled people.”

Adds Lisa Jurgens of Vodafone, “We’re typically looking for people in the technical and finance areas who are hard to find regardless of age, so we struggle to do that. We have to take whoever has the skills and cultural fit, values, passion and can deliver. It’s more a conscious drive to hunt out people we know are good, regardless of age.”

Attitudes towards older workers

Respondents were evenly divided three ways on whether attitudes and perceptions towards older workers were changing in their industry, with no apparent similarities within industries. About a third of respondents said they had not noticed any change. Another third said there had been no change and that attitudes had always been positive.

For example, Jo Copeland of Telecom said, “There has always been recognition of the skills of older workers in our industry. We’re more worried about losing them in retirement. You can’t replace their experience very easily.”

The other third noted a positive change. For example, Bill Shields, Executive Director of HR at the Open Polytechnic, appreciates the value of older people in the education sector. “This is a knowledge-based industry so experience has always been important but in today’s employment market that seems to be even more the case.”

One respondent suggested that the banking industry was becoming more open to older people. “I think there’s not the focus on generational differentiation anymore. There’s more openness in financial services to ‘we want the best talent’ and that is based on skill set, experience and cultural fit, and age has no place in terms of selection.”

Fewer than half the respondents thought that some managers discriminated on the basis of age. For example, an interviewee from the oil industry said age discrimination did not occur in his company. “We have a policy of an open talk programme, with a global ombudsman who anyone can take such issues to. Discrimination is not condoned at all.”

Similarly, an interviewee from the banking industry referred to the importance of education. "In HR we have to help them understand diversity and how to manage it. I think that's what's behind it. They don't feel they know how to deal with managing different groups of people."

Where the possibility of discrimination was acknowledged, respondents said it was often related to the need for long-term career commitment or the need for fit with a predominantly young team.

Employment policies and practices

Few respondent organisations had any specific policies or practices related to employing older people. A number mentioned that it would be discriminatory to target a specific group.

A few respondents said that the specific needs of older workers in relation to flexibility, such as gradual retirement or leave to support elderly parents, were mentioned in their flexibility policies.

Said Jo Copeland of Telecom, "We don't have initiatives targeted specifically at older workers. Flexible working is available for all workers and for all reasons, including easing into retirement. That is specifically stated in our policies. Therefore, some older workers are working part-time."

A few respondents from different industry sectors noted they did not need to do anything special in relation to older workers as staff numbers were stable. However, another respondent said their organisation was developing a programme to retain specific skills, and another was focusing on succession planning due to an ageing workforce.

Recruitment

Only about a quarter of respondents had noticed any changes in their recruitment in relation to older applicants over the past two to three years, despite workforce statistics showing that the workforce was ageing.

The few who said there had been an increase in older applicants, as well as the vast majority who had not noticed any change, acknowledged that they were basing their comments on perception rather than statistical data.

As there was little perceived change in the numbers of older applicants, little change had been made in recruitment processes in response to an ageing workforce. A couple of interviewees said they had changed their recruitment advertising strategies to ensure older people felt included.

For example, Air New Zealand HR Manager Chantelle Reyland said Air New Zealand had changed the wording in some print advertising to refer to the value of life experience, as demonstrated in the example below.

Life Experience not always valued in today's tough job market

Do you find your life skills count for little when job hunting?

A lot of job ads in this paper make it difficult for people who have been out of the workplace for sometime, often raising families, to meet the requirements. Some of the ads openly promote jobs to younger audiences, leaving older applicants feeling too intimidated to apply for fear of competing against people who appear more confident or experienced. Also the process of applying for these jobs – sending a CV and covering letter – often makes it difficult for people to promote their life experience. Instead you end up with a CV that looks somewhat blank for the last 4 or 5 years.



So what's the solution?

Well Air New Zealand thinks it's simple. The National Airline is looking for Customer Service Agents with life experience to work part time shifts at both Auckland Domestic and International Airports. They don't want you to go online to apply or even put together a CV, instead they just want you to send them a text from your mobile phone. Within five days they will call you back to discuss this varied role which involves dealing

with customers face to face and assisting them through the airport. The phone call will not be an interview but more of a conversation.

"A five minute chat can often tell us more about a candidate than their CV – after all that's the Kiwi way," says Simon Pomeroy, Air New Zealand's Recruitment Manager.

Air New Zealand want to attract candidates who have a love of travel and people who

can demonstrate the Kiwi charm that we're admired for around the world.

Pomeroy believes that the roles are ideal for people who love day to day contact with others and who have a knack for making people smile.

"Not only can you expect full training, but the flexible shift patterns, varied work, good rates of pay and free parking make it ideal for part timers."

"Our staff don't get to stand still for long, especially during busy periods. They are often surprised their shifts have finished so quickly as four hours can feel like one in our airport environment."

"Every customer has a different story, a different personality, a different culture, so you'll always be doing something new."

It certainly sounds like an interesting environment and the jobs offer most of the attractive characteristics of Customer Service roles, so if this sounds like you, pick up your mobile phone and text 3071 right now.

Air New Zealand also placed radio advertising on stations with a mature audience.

One respondent from the banking sector mentioned plans to review interview processes. "We gather diversity stats on the application process and that helps us drive the development of new initiatives we're looking at. We're also working on refreshing our interview processes in line with our future business direction, and the ageing workforce will be considered in that."

About a third of respondents thought that older applicants were becoming more successful in the recruitment process. Many believed that they were better-prepared and presenting themselves more effectively in interviews. A couple of respondents also noted that older applicants were more "tech-savvy" than was often assumed, saying that where online or text applications were available, older people were just as likely, or more likely, to use these options.

Only a few respondents said they were seeing greater numbers of older applicants for entry-level or graduate positions. However, their responses indicated that they were referring to people they viewed as comparatively older, such as mothers returning to work and mature students.

Recruitment agencies

About half the organisations interviewed used external recruitment agencies. The majority of these had not noticed any problems related to the age of candidates put forward.

Some said that it was important to tell agencies that they were open to, and valued, candidates of all ages. The youth of some recruitment consultants was also mentioned.

For example, an interviewee from the oil industry said that his company used agencies "to get screening and guarantee of CV information. Age is not an issue, as we use ones where we work with mature consultants. Gone are days when agencies had raw young consultants".

The minority who did note concern around recruitment firms said that some agencies thought clients preferred younger candidates. They either did not put older candidates forward, or attempted to disguise the age of the candidate.

Said Simon Pomeroy, Air New Zealand Manager Sourcing Inspiring People, “Agencies often try to second-guess what employers look for. Unfortunately, this leads many to pick younger people who appear, on paper, to be more dynamic.”

Added a banking industry manager: “I think age is an issue for agencies. We ask for a diverse range of candidates to be short-listed, and we ask to see other candidates and ask why they weren’t included in the short-list.

“I think it’s easier to sell a younger worker, so we have to say we don’t want to end up with having all 35-year-olds in our team.”

Retention

Flexible work options to enable people to work on a part-time or casual basis are the most common means of retaining older workers.

For example, Group Manager of HR at MidCentral DHB Anne Amore said, “Particularly with our nursing staff, we’re able to accommodate most working hours by allowing the ability to work in a relief team to get better work-life balance and flexibility.”

And this from the banking sector: “We have a few things available to all our people, but they’re not age-focused. For example, a career break could be used by an older person who’s thinking about retiring but not sure, or part-time work could allow an older person to work here half-time, and half-time in their own business venture.”

Other initiatives used by older workers were compressed hours and extra leave, or trading a pay increase for extra leave. Benefits such as superannuation and health insurance were seen as an attraction for older workers. The importance of providing older workers with challenging work was noted by some respondents.

An oil industry manager said, “We give consideration to project work where they can take a lead role to provide job diversity and new challenges, so they’re not just going through the motions.”

A couple of respondents noted that they were not doing anything specifically for older workers yet, but might develop something in future. Richard Westney of KPMG said the firm had “an awareness of future needs. We are conscious that the demographics are changing and that will be an issue for us in the next 10 years.

“The supply of graduates is going to reduce and we’ll need to look at different ways to support our clients.”

Respect for age and experience

Some respondents felt that older people were influential in creating a respectful workplace culture through their positive attitude. They earned respect from their willingness to share and pass on their knowledge.

A manager in the manufacturing sector said, “Older workers are respected and liked. It’s their attitude to the younger ones, their preparedness to share knowledge and experience, and that they know change is inevitable. They accept change has to happen and don’t harp on about the good old days.”

Actively recognising the value of older workers was thought to be a factor in creating a positive working environment for them. A retail sector manager said, “We value their experience through the acknowledgment of long service and recognising the value that our older workers add.”

Other respondents talked about an overall culture of respect and inclusiveness.

“There’s a general culture of respect in our organisation,” said a banking sector manager. “One of our values is to respect each other, but this is not singled out by age. We also have a diversity and inclusion agenda with a strong focus on respecting different groups.

“We also use storytelling on our intranet around people’s different work and life experiences.”

Career paths and training

Respondents agreed that a career path and training was important for all employees, including older workers.

A manager at a local body said that her council held six-monthly reviews to help people determine their career goals. “These reviews are not related to age, but to building retention and job satisfaction across the board.”

However, some respondents noted that some employees did not want to progress their careers. Said Richard Westney of KPMG, “Many older workers don’t want a career path any more, but we don’t exclude them from opportunities.”

Just one response, from the manufacturing sector, was not wholly supportive of continued training and development for older workers. This respondent said training was only available in certain roles. “Site superintendents are all 54+. It’s a trade-based regime. Some extend to new learning, but generally the role doesn’t require it.

“They would struggle with it anyway. They have a younger person with them to do physical work. We may offer training for them in communication skills, but generally, personality and style are well engrained at that age. It’s hard to change people then.”

A number of respondents specifically mentioned IT as a training issue for older people. Some believed that older workers needed a different training approach, with more one-on-one training at a slower pace.

A retail sector respondent said, “Everybody gets the same training when, for example, introducing new systems. In terms of how we deal with resistance to change from older workers, this is often a confidence issue, so it’s a matter of ensuring managers are empathetic and aware of people’s individual barriers and ensuring enough support is provided.

“We also need to allow them to learn at their own speed and provide plenty of encouragement.”

On the other hand, Gillian Anderson from Dunedin City Council gave an example of an older person having more commitment to learning new technology than younger staff. “We have a policy that everyone has to do something to upskill, which includes new technology. I haven’t noticed any differences by age in response to this.

“For example, in relation to the introduction of a new electronic system, everyone was scared that [name withheld] – age 60 – wouldn’t be able to do it, but he was quicker and better and worked harder at picking it up than anyone else, so it was just other people’s expectations and perception.”

Job redesign

There was generally a strongly positive response to a question on whether job redesign would be considered for an older worker who had most, but not all, of the skills and abilities for a position. However, respondents said this was available for all workers and positions, not just for older workers, and more often applied to existing workers than new recruits.

Bill Shield said that the Open Polytechnic commonly redesigned jobs. “We have done that with any age. Two jobs can be reconfigured to fit the skills of the people applying.”

A construction industry manager said that redesign was often necessary to get roles filled. “We have to do that, especially with more difficult-to-fill roles and specialist roles. We’re coaching managers on that a lot, but it doesn’t apply just to older people.”

Said Jo Copeland of Telecom, “We redesign jobs if necessary to keep them as we value their expertise and knowledge.”

Kate Dunn of Fonterra spoke of the importance of role-sharing. “Certain heavy manual parts of a shift are not done by some older workers, someone else does them. I haven’t seen any problems with that. Other workers seem to accept that, and know older workers bring other things to the team.

“We have also mechanised quite a bit of the heavy manual part of the job, which makes it more accessible for older workers. So workers are operating machines rather than doing heavy lifting.”

Anne Amoore of MidCentral DHB said problems could occur, but jobs could always be changed. “It can be difficult as it puts unreasonable demand on others, but tweaks to jobs happen, bearing in mind [the goal is] achieving a reasonable outcome for all those in the team.”

One manufacturing sector manager said he could not see how job redesign could work in that particular industry.

Overseas appointments

A number of organisations which offered overseas appointments said that older workers were often willing to relocate. Shell NZ HR Manager Lynne Beaumont said, “Older workers have a wealth of experience and often meet the needs for overseas postings where the business needs seasoned professionals. Older people also often find moving easier at their stage of life than someone younger with a family.”

Training for younger managers managing older staff

Although this has been identified in the overseas literature as a potential issue, none of the organisations in this study provided specific training for younger people who managed older staff. Most were unaware of any issues arising from such a situation.

If there were issues, they were attributed to the two individuals involved rather than age differences. Most thought that general training in managing different individuals and diversity covered the situation.

A manager from a professional services firm said, “We do have younger partners managing older staff, but there are no problems with it. Problems that arise between managers and staff are just due to two personalities, the skill of leadership of the manager and the employee. It is not due to an age aspect.”

Succession and retirement planning

In our previous study, many managers mentioned the importance of good planning so that skills and institutional knowledge were handed on as people moved towards retirement. However, few respondent organisations were active in this area.

Many were afraid of breaching the Human Rights Act by broaching the subject of retirement with their employees. Others were trying to manage the issue through the performance review process, or by running retirement seminars which were open to all staff.

The only shift in the past few years appeared to be the increasing use of performance reviews and retirement seminars to help staff make the transition to retirement.

Richard Westney described KPMG's approach. "With no standard retirement age, it's hard to plan as you can't be seen to be pushing people out. So unless they indicate they want to finish working, we don't generally force the issue.

"Older workers will let you know in good time when they're ready to retire. If they're in a senior position, there's a planned and staged exit process over several months where a replacement is identified and transitioned into the role. But not so much for lower-level workers, as institutional knowledge is not so important."

Lynne Beaumont of Shell described a special programme for staff in their late 50s and older called an 'age 60 offer'. "This involves offering employees the option at age 60 to take an early retirement and assists us in planning for employee succession.

"This provision is communicated in our policy documents and via a formal offer to all employees approaching their 60th birthday. We get about a 50-50 uptake of this offer."

Catherine Brabbs, an HR Manager in the banking industry, said, "One thing we have in the pipeline is retirement planning workshops for all staff aged 40+ which cover financial planning. But we don't differentiate about people and age, so they advise us when they're planning to retire. We don't raise it with them. It may come up in biannual development reviews, but we don't pre-empt that."

Some managers said that some superannuation schemes were incompatible with a gradual transition to retirement, as the schemes' payouts were based on earnings during the previous five years. This was a strong deterrent to working part-time or doing lower-level work before full retirement.

Mentoring

Part of the succession-planning process for many organisations involved older staff mentoring younger staff. Most organisations in this study had some form of mentoring, but it was not always specifically by older people, and was sometimes informal.

Some respondents noted that not all older workers were suited to a mentoring or training role. Others said that mentors were chosen for their experience rather than their age.

HR Manager at Briscoes, Lynda Webb, said, "We buddy people up, older workers and new young ones. But the older workers do that not because of their age, but because of their longer service and experience, and they pass that on."

Jo Copeland of Telecom said that in the sales area, "a couple of older guys with long service and lots of experience have moved out of sales management roles and they're now sales coaches. We call it the Telecom Sales Academy. It works well and they love it.

"We also recognise the contribution of our long-time senior people in our sales awards. We call them 'Telecom legends' and each year we admit a couple of new people to the Legends Hall of Fame. These are always the people who have lots of wisdom, share their knowledge and are known as the go-to people for advice."

Work-life provisions

Most organisations in this study provided gradual retirement options such as reduced hours, job-sharing and transition into less-demanding roles. These tended to be covered within the flexible work options available to all employees.

An oil industry manager said, “As part of our succession planning over 18 months to two years of a hand-over period, they may move to three or four days a week if they want to. It’s a win-win for them and us. They may come back on contract after six months.”

Some organisations discussed retirement options informally with their older staff.

Lynda Webb of Briscoes said some mature workers were working towards retirement by reduced hours. “We informally help people prepare for shifting gradually into retirement. Each store has a relatively small number of staff, and managers and people talk to each other. I’m not aware of any problems arising because of raising the issue through informal chats about plans.”

All respondents said that their work-life or flexible work options could be customised to the needs of older workers. Bill Shields of the Open Polytechnic: “We accommodate needs to provide care and support for elderly family members, and to reduce to part-time hours to transition to retirement.”

Downshifting to reduced hours or less demanding roles was not thought to have increased markedly in recent years as a result of an ageing workforce.

Kate Dunn of Fonterra said, “There probably have been quite a few requests of this type, but I haven’t noticed it becoming more common. Recently one of our senior managers stepped down to a less-demanding role and that has sent a strong message that it is okay to do that.”

An internal diversity survey at one bank found that staff had increasing needs in relation to eldercare. Other respondent organisations did not collect information on the reasons for flexible work requests, but some other respondents were aware that eldercare was an emerging issue.

Henry Pipkin of Southland District Council said he was not aware of any staff asking for specific help with eldercare, “interestingly not. I say interestingly because there have been a number who have ageing parents, but I can’t think of them coming and asking for accommodation in terms of their work because of it. If they did, we would certainly accommodate it if we could.”

And this from the retail sector: “We’ve been hearing more about it recently, so we’re aware that it might come through and we need to be flexible to that.”

The Open Polytechnic’s Bill Shields said eldercare issues were increasingly common. “It has always been there, but is increasing as we get more people in the older ages. But [it is] also because they hear someone made a request and got a positive response, so they feel comfortable coming forward and asking.”

Performance problems and other barriers

While one-third of respondents said that older workers had more performance problems than other employees, the main problem was reduced physical capabilities and was referred to by managers working in the manufacturing, retail and health sectors.

Problems with mastering technology were mentioned by only two respondents, one working in professional services, the other in the retail sector. They both acknowledged this issue was relatively easily to address.

One professional services firm manager said, “We have to face the fact that children are much better at technology than we are. When we’re introducing new technology we spend a lot of time on it. The youngies are no trouble. The mid-age group need some training, and the older ones need more and get one-on-one – learning at their own pace – because it is a much greater challenge for them.

“Often older people are sensitive about feeling dumb in this area, and that reduces their morale, reducing the possibility of retention, so we tread very carefully.”

A retail sector respondent was optimistic about older workers’ ability to overcome learning hurdles. “With new technology they may be slower to learn and need more support, but they can do it.”

About a quarter of those interviewed for this study did not perceive any barriers to employing older people in their organisation or industry. The main barriers identified by the other respondents were perceptions of employers, managers and younger workers, and the way older workers presented themselves in interviews and on resumes.

A respondent from the manufacturing sector said older people sometimes missed out on jobs due to people’s perceptions. “If we had a job going and a young-versus-older applicant and all else was equal, the younger one would get picked because of the perception they will stay longer, be more energetic and won’t have as many health issues.”

In reality, older people tend to stay longer in jobs than younger people, as mentioned by Lisa Jurgens and Richard Westney earlier in this report.

A banking industry manager said determination was needed to overcome such perceptions. “There may be some perceptions from younger workers and a clash in values and work ethics. The challenge will be to ensure that all skills and experience are respected and leveraged to achieve high performance.”

A few organisations from different industry sectors mentioned that a workplace with a youthful image could make it harder to attract older workers, while some respondents referred to a lack of confidence and enthusiasm among some older workers.

Said Lisa Jurgens of Vodafone: “A person’s attitude is so important, and being able to demonstrate some passion. Some people might think to themselves, ‘I’m only going to be in the workforce another 10 years’. Regardless of age, we look to hire people who

can commit two years to the role, so if someone has 10 years before they retire then that's good.

"They're thinking 'it's not much to offer, no one will want me', but that's not how we see it. They need to change their attitude.

"Age and experience is actually a good thing. We don't have an attitude of older workers being past their use-by date, so they shouldn't either. What is important, however, is that they can demonstrate resilience and a willingness to work in an environment where there is constant change."

Said Lynda Webb of Briscoes, "Sometimes older workers' approach and perception is the issue. If they're a young-thinking sort of person, there's no reason for any barriers, but if they're stuck in their ways, they're putting their own barriers up."

Solutions

In terms of improving recruitment outcomes for older people, interviewees mainly focused on how older people could improve their chances of being selected, but the roles of employers and recruitment agencies were also mentioned.

Candidates

Respondents said that older candidates needed to be better prepared and present themselves better in interviews, demonstrating more confidence and the ability to sell their positive attributes. They also needed to focus on matching their skills, abilities and experience with those required for the position.

Lisa Jurgens, Vodafone: "A lot of them in the administration area are not necessarily used to presenting a resume or being interviewed by young people. Older applicants need to recognise their strengths, such as maturity and reliability, and market that.

"Some tend to lack confidence, so need to be aware of the skills shortage and that having the right attitude and being dependable are important – and that their experience means a lot to offer."

Richard Westney, KPMG: "One thing I often see is older people who have been out of the workforce for a while who don't present themselves and their CVs very well. Generally, recruitment agencies prepare them better, but direct applicants are often not so well-prepared for interviews or up to speed with how to best present their skills and experience to a potential employer."

A banking industry manager said, "I think organisations have made a mind-shift about what older workers can do. Now the older people themselves need to make a mind-shift about what they can do."

Agencies

Respondents thought that recruitment agencies could help older candidates by preparing them for the application and interview process, particularly in targeted selection and competency-based interviewing. They also suggested that agencies ensured candidates had up-to-date computer skills.

Employers

A broader approach to recruitment could overcome barriers by focusing on formal qualifications and traditional advertising methods.

One respondent working in local government suggested that tertiary qualifications should not be mandatory for some positions. “It’s important to recognise that a significant number of years’ experience can be of equal value to a tertiary qualification.”

Bill Shields of the Open Polytechnic said employers should focus on the critical skills required “and then those applying can identify the skills they have against those required”.

Regarding other barriers faced by older people at other stages of employment, some respondents said it was just accepted that older workers did not have the physical ability to do some things. Others said that this limitation was balanced by other attributes.

Respondents suggested a range of ways to retain older workers in more physical roles, including job redesign, changing roles, flexible work options and introducing equipment to reduce physical demands.

According to Anne Amooore of MidCentral DHB, this meant structuring work around physically-demanding aspects. “Since the no-lift system was introduced there’s the potential for older workers to stay in the workforce longer. We’ve also been able to recruit older workers because we can ensure the workplace is safe by providing suitable equipment.”

Some respondents said the benefits of older workers easily outweighed any physical limitations. For example, HR Director at Solid Energy Bill McDonald said that older employees might have physical limitations, “but people who have been with us for a number of years are by far and away our best and most reliable workers”.

Added Lynda Webb of Briscoes: “We’re mindful of the fact older people can’t do some of the physical things and we just accept that. People work well as a team here and are supportive of others’ shortcomings. We create an environment of valuing colleagues.”

Education on intergenerational differences and the value of older workers was suggested by some respondents as a way to change negative attitudes from managers and colleagues.

A banking industry manager said the key was “increasing knowledge on where each party is coming from and understanding and respecting differences, and the needs and motivations of each group”.

Lynda Webb said supportive training was instrumental in retaining older employees at Briscoes. “Some of our older workers have been with the company for over 20 years and have been resistant to changes we’ve introduced recently. But we offer training and ongoing support.

“They don’t like change being imposed on them, so we give them time, but are also firm that the new system is being introduced because it’s necessary. So our approach is fair but firm. They coped very well and we retained them all.”

Gillian Anderson said Dunedin City Council was determined to recruit the best person for every job. “If an older worker comes in with drive and enthusiasm, they’re as likely as a younger person to get it. Often older people come in with a battle-weary type attitude which doesn’t help sell themselves.”

Conclusion

Employer attitudes to older workers appeared to be generally very favourable, with a perception that the positive attributes older people brought to work were increasingly sought-after. Reliability, a good work ethic and stability were frequently mentioned.

Some respondents acknowledged that older people faced some barriers from managers and from co-workers. Some of this could be a result of their own doubts about their abilities.

Managers suggested that older workers prepared themselves well for interviews, with a particular emphasis on developing their self-confidence in recognition of the fact that they have a lot to offer employers.

Physical capabilities and IT skills were seen as the main limitations among older workers, but the employers interviewed for this project were willing to overcome these through providing lifting equipment, teaming up older workers with younger workers, and providing appropriate training.

With older people staying in paid work for longer, gradual retirement options were offered by most of the organisations involved in this study. They included reduced working hours, job-sharing and the option of working in less-demanding roles.

Some respondents felt that some recruitment agencies tended to put forward younger candidates in the belief that clients preferred them over older people. They suggested that employers tell agencies to present candidates of a broad age range to ensure they tapped into the skills of older people.

This research is being released alongside a new guide to help employers make the most of mature staff. *Valuing Experience: a practical guide to recruiting and retaining older workers* was produced by a group comprising the EEO Trust, the Human Rights Commission, the Retirement Commission, Business New Zealand, the Council of Trade Unions and the Canterbury Employers’ Chamber of Commerce. It is available from www.eeotrust.org.nz.