



Making the most of an ageing workforce

Many employers believe that as employees age, they are certain to become less productive. The experience of these organisations shows clearly that this is not the case.

Boston Scientific

Boston Scientific's plant in New Jersey manufactures highly engineered surgical products.

A risk analysis of plant operations revealed fewer than 25% of key managers and professionals could be replaced at short notice. With some employees in their 60s and 70s, management recognised that the loss of these skills could cost the company millions of dollars in lost production. In 2004, Boston Scientific began a plant-wide succession planning programme. The company launched a knowledge-transfer initiative, promoting four apprentices to begin training under their veteran craftsmen. This meant increasing labour and training costs significantly for new employees, who would not be productive for some time. The company recognised this was cost-effective.

When they identify specialised jobs for which replacement would be very difficult, management creates back-up resources by hiring a more junior professional to work with a veteran in the role, sometimes recruiting even though there is no immediate opening.

ZyloTech

This small business (16 or so employees) is a technology and hardware equipment company. Their product manager, Grant, is aged 62 and has had a chronic low back condition for over 25 years. He used a drill press but found that it was too low for him. The company made a number of low-cost adjustments to prevent excess bending and to facilitate the moving of heavy equipment.

Pitney Bowes

In the US, Pitney Bowes introduced a range of initiatives to improve the physical environment for older workers. The company uses a technology called JES (Job Evaluation Suite) to support risk identification and injury prevention. This focuses on problems associated with computer workstations, lifting and upper extremity stress, using a questionnaire from individual employees to assess their difficulties. The JES then provides individual self-service ergonomics training, including suggestions for hand movement or frequency of breaks. The tool also provides trend information for the Pitney Bowes safety group so that they can review the need for potential additional interventions.

SSAB Tunplat

This Swedish steel manufacturer realised some years ago that early retirees had much better mental and physical health than workers who remained. They took a number of initiatives that resulted in many older employees being able to work up to the normal retirement age. For instance:

- Workplace lighting was improved.
- Site examinations were provided and employees were given special spectacles for specialised work.
- Conference rooms were equipped with hearing loops and ergonomically unsuitable working places were rebuilt.
- Specially devised overhead cranes for packaging steel coils and sheets were introduced.
- Staff were rotated to different workstations to avoid overstraining of muscles and so on.

In addition the company looked at different attitudes towards shift work between older and younger workers and realised that older workers preferred fewer night shifts in succession, while younger workers had no problems working successive night shifts. They developed new shift schedules after consulting with employees and having trial runs.

Managing a physically ageing workforce is one of the greatest concerns of Singapore employers. These top tips have been drawn together from the learning of many companies around the world. Age does not need to be a barrier to productivity.

Top tips

- 1 Carry out a risk analysis of future skills needs to ensure the business is prepared for potential future shortages, if your workforce is ageing.
- 2 Identify business-critical roles and develop succession planning – not just at senior levels.
- 3 Put in place mechanisms to guarantee knowledge transfer from older generations – for instance by investing in mentoring or apprentice schemes.
- 4 Reassure older workers that passing on knowledge is not about cost-cutting.
- 5 Audit sickness rates to establish if there are different patterns of absence among different ages of worker.
- 6 Where absence is occurring because of age onset impairments, work with occupational health or medical staff to identify the causes.
- 7 Bring in ergonomic experts to develop solutions to prevent injury – these may well benefit workers of all ages.
- 8 Talk to employees, who may also be able to suggest practical and low-cost alternative ways of working.
- 9 Invest in training all staff in safe operating procedure – younger workers may well absorb this information more willingly and have been known to then influence and change the behaviour of older workers.
- 10 Consider rotating staff to different workstations and think about implementing new shift patterns.

Want to know more about these examples of good practice? Here are the links:

Boston Scientific

METLIFE MATURE MARKET INSTITUTE and DAVID DELONG & ASSOCIATES. (2007) *Searching for the silver bullet: leading edge solutions for leveraging an aging workforce [online]*. Westport, CT: MetLife Mature Market Institute. Available at: http://www.metlife.com/FileAssets/MMI/MMIStudiesSearchingSilverBullet.pdf?bcsi_scan_8CB51C24B19595DD=0&bcsi_scan_filename=MMIStudiesSearchingSilverBullet.pdf

Zylotech

NSW DEPARTMENT OF AGEING, DISABILITY AND HOME CARE. (2006). *From awareness to action: mature workforce retention project [online]*. Sydney: NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care. Available at: <http://www.jobwise.gov.au/Jobwise/Employers/PracticalGuide/casestudies.htm>

Pitney Bowes

PITNEY BOWES. (2004) *Pitney Bowes makes AARP'S list of best employers for workers 50+ [online]*. Press release, August 31. Washington: Pitney Bowes. Available at: http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/econ/intl_older_worker_1.pdf

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EUROPEAN FOUNDATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS. (2004) *Inclusion of ageing workers: four company case examples [online]*. Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Available at: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/emcc/content/source/eu04009a.htm?p1=country&p2=SWEDEN>



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