

Centre for WHS

The ageing demographic of the Australian workforce: prevention of work health and safety harm

Horizon Scan

November 2020

In 2017, 15% of the Australian population were aged over 65 (n≈3.8 million), a proportion expected to increase to 20% by 2037. The ageing population has been accompanied by a larger participation of older Australians in the workforce (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). There are many reasons for this which include:

1. Lower than expected wealth, as many do not possess enough wealth to fulfil their retirement expectations;
2. Better than expected health, due to advancements in medicine and healthcare;
3. Government policy, and the increase in the qualifying age for the Age Pension;
4. Organisational demand to retain key skills needed to achieve strategic goals (Deloitte, 2013).

Concurring with the above, the World Economic Forum (2019) published a recent article that outlined some of the reasons the global workforce was ageing:

“Science is making longer lives possible and as people live longer, they are continuing to learn, to be productive and to contribute to society. For many people, that means continuing to work. Today, a key part of extended middle age is the freedom to work. More and more, people want to keep working past traditional retirement age because they want to continue to contribute to society and find meaning in their own lives – and work does that for them.”

More recently, older working Australians may be facing the real prospect of delaying retirement and working for longer having been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ormsby, 2020). This has seen a reduction in wealth from the fall in capital and real estate markets. In addition, a significant proportion of people who have retired in the past few years, may have to re-join the workforce, as the significantly reduced dividends being paid by listed companies will not guarantee them an adequate income stream. Also noteworthy, a proportion of pre-retirees in Australia have withdrawn money from their retirement savings through the Government’s early access to the superannuation scheme to get by during the pandemic. This means that they too may have to remain in the workforce for longer.

Older workers may be disadvantaged, not only in terms of employment mobility and in finding and adapting to new employment, but also in relation to Work Health and Safety (WHS) compared to younger workers. Older workers may be exposed to potentially psychologically harmful stereotypes around their capabilities (Bersin & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). It is also a fact that neurological (i.e. psychological) and physiological changes do occur with age including a decline in intellectual ability (Botwinick & Siegler, 1980) that can potentially jeopardise their WHS (WorkSafe Queensland, 2019). However, the characteristics of the work itself is argued to be more critical than the worker’s individual capacity (Bohle, 2010), highlighting the need for innovative ways of working.

Organisational systems and practices may require adjustment to support the WHS of older workers. Many adjustments have been suggested to date however relatively little is empirically known about them, including their efficacy and how to best implement them. There may also be solutions that have not yet been considered.

The Centre for WHS is interested in research that will provide greater understanding of how to prevent psychological and physical harm among older workers. Research proposals focussing on industrial relations and on education will be deemed to be out of scope of the current work.

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