

# Abilities, not age, are what must count in hiring

Employers think workers in their 60s can't keep up with the times, but that isn't true, group says

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

New research reveals that nearly half of all mature workers want to continue working in some capacity beyond age 65, but employers need to do more to eliminate systemic age discrimination in their corporate culture.

The study, conducted by Ceridian Canada Ltd. and the Canadian Association of Retired People (CARP), polled more than 5,000 CARP members age 50 or older. When asked when they intend to fully retire, 45 per cent said by age 70 or older. Of this group, 10 per cent planned to work beyond age 75.

These results do not surprise CARP advocacy vice-president Susan Eng.

"With the recent economic downturn, many people haven't saved enough to retire," Eng says. "They are also taking on more debt to help out their kids who are not able to get jobs right out of school."

But many mature workers who want or need to work beyond the traditional retirement age of 65 report that age discrimination is still a reality, even with the elimination of mandatory retirement. For example, employers assume these workers cannot keep up with the times or may cost a company more in benefits.

"A lot of those beliefs can be challenged. The more mature worker has the same capability to learn and improve themselves as younger workers," says Estelle

Morrison, Ceridian's vice-president of clinical and wellness services.

Morrison says employers should consider each employee's knowledge, experience and ability rather than make assumptions based on age.

Nevertheless, working seniors want more work-life balance. If given the choice, 47 per cent would work part-time or on contract. Among those polled, a four-day work week was the most preferred option.

While it may appear that seniors looking for more flexible work alternatives are competing for the same lower paid retail and service jobs as unemployed young people, Eng believes this is generally not the case.

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"The type of part-time work the people we surveyed had in mind was phasing out of their current workplace rather than dropping that job altogether and going to serve coffee at Tim Hortons," she says.

Other survey results show that staying healthy and not running out of money in retirement are the two top concerns for older workers.

But the good news for employers is the overwhelming majority of mature workers rate themselves as being in excellent or good health: just 4 per cent report

chronic health issues. And they are enthusiastic about workplace health and wellness programs that will help them stay in good shape.

One way employers can help to alleviate mature workers' concerns about health and money is by offering a workplace employee assistance programs, says Morrison.

"EAPs give employees and their families valuable access to resources like nutritionists, financial counsellors and an extensive library of online resources."

While the onus is on employers to review their recruiting practices and eliminate age as a factor in the hiring and promoting of older workers, employees who want to work longer can also take steps to enhance their perceived value to the company.

Lorna Hegarty, a senior human resources consultant at the Greater Toronto Airports Authority says lifelong learning is the key.

"Workers of all ages should take courses online or in person or attend industry conferences and seminars. They should also embrace new technology," says Hegarty.

She also recommends that older employees promote their personal brand by wearing appropriate clothing and an up-to-date hairstyle.

But for Eng, ending age discrimination is simply a basic premise of human rights.

"If you are comparing two people of equal qualifications distinguished only by their age, there must be no underlying assumption that the younger person should have the job."



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Susan Eng, vice-president of advocacy for CARP, says ending age discrimination is a basic premise of human rights.