

Dealing with an Ageing Workforce



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While today's workplace is unique in that it is represented by five generations of workers, research indicates that in 2011, 42.4% of the working-age population in Canada was 45–64 years old and that employees over the age of 55 will comprise 18–20% of the workforce in 2021.

While this ageing workforce presents several challenges to employers, there are also certain benefits that come with having older workers in the workplace.

Advantages of Older Workers

Older workers have Institutional knowledge and corporate memory. As a result, they know “how things work” and “how to get things done”. Other advantages include the fact that older workers:

- are more stable and more likely to stay on with the same employer;
- are conscientious;
- require less supervision;
- produce a higher quality of work, because they know the job well; and
- have a good work ethic

Challenges of an Ageing Workforce

- Increased wages – generally older workers have more seniority and get higher salaries than newer, younger workers.
- Age related physical and mental decline – as employees age they are likely to have more health issues.
- Tension between older workers and younger workers.
- Performance issues related to new ways of doing things and a reluctance on the part of older workers to accept change.
- Discomfort with new technologies.

- Reluctance on the part of employers to train older workers.

Key Issues

In addition to the challenges described above, some of the key issues that employers need to think about in the context of the ageing workforce, relate to:

- human rights and accommodation
- benefits
- severance
- succession planning
- retention

Human Rights

While many employers are reluctant to hire older workers because of the increased costs of benefits and wages, employers must be careful not to discriminate against older workers when they are making decisions around hiring, promoting, or terminating employees.

This does not mean that an employer can never terminate an older worker, or that an employer must always hire, or promote, an older worker over a younger worker. It does mean, however, that an employer must be able to defend its decision, if the decision is challenged.

With the elimination of mandatory retirement in BC on January 1, 2008, requiring an employee to retire when he/she reaches a certain age, would also amount to discrimination except in certain limited situations, for example, if the employee is working in a safety sensitive position.

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Heather is a lawyer, investigator and mediator, with a unique combination of legal expertise and extensive hands-on human resources management and labour relations experience. Prior to being called to the British Columbia Bar, she was a Human Resources Manager at the University of British Columbia and Labour Relations Advisor to Vancouver Community College.

Heather provides legal advice on all aspects of employment and labour issues arising in the union and non-union context through her law firm, Integritas Workplace Law. Heather also provides workplace mediation services, general human resources support to employers, and workplace investigation services. Heather is a frequent speaker and webinar presenter and regularly contributes articles on workplace issues.