

# Older workers critical for future skill-base



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**W**e are all getting older. And nowhere is this more obvious than in Australia's library and information sector.

Fifty-six per cent of librarians and fifty-two per cent of library technicians are over 45 years of age. Almost one in five is already past minimum retirement age. Less than a quarter are under 35. To put these data in perspective, of all Australian workers less than a third are over 45 and close to half are under 35 years of age.

## Age profile of Australian library workers

Category	< 35	35-44	45-54	55 >
Librarian	25%	19.4%	38.1%	18.3%
Library technician	18.6%	29.4%	34.7%	17.3%
All workers	42.5%	24.9%	21.8%	10.8%

Source: ABS and DEWR 2003

So this is clearly an ageing profession. That simple fact presents a major challenge for the future. Obviously, separation rates must soon increase rapidly as retirement beckons. While this should open up opportunities for many younger professionals to find work and for others to gain promotion, it is also threatens a disturbing loss of knowledge, skill and experience. Put simply, there will be insufficient younger workers to meet a mass exodus.

If this problem is to be managed well, an intrinsic feature of future human resource planning will need to be flexible accommodation of those many older people who wish to 'retire' without losing all contact with the labour market. Many will seek part-time jobs. Others may prefer a sequence of discrete, short-term projects. Either way, employers will need to be creative in arranging work to fit the very different workforce on offer. And they will need to be mindful of the momentum gathering behind anti-age discrimination law.

In moving towards a national age discrimination act, the federal government recently produced a discussion paper [<http://www.law.gov.au/ageinfopaper>]. Among many proposals, it advocates total prohibition on either direct or indirect discrimination on grounds of age in relation to employment. The only significant exemptions would cover circumstances where the inherent nature of the job made it impractical to employ older people [not an issue likely to have much relevance for libraries].

To date Australia has not seen anything like a flood of age discrimination complaints. But it is likely to do so soon if the American experience is anything to go by. There the number of formal complaints to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has grown by more than twenty-five per cent in the past two years. And that figure actually un-

derstates the volume of litigation. Many cases are multiple complaints joining large numbers of employees in high profile actions involving multi-million dollar claims. The Ford Motor company, for example, recently found itself paying out \$US10.5 million to older managers who sustained a claim that the company's performance evaluation system discriminated against them. Another icon organisation, McDonnell-Douglas is paying \$US36 million to more than a thousand former employees who were terminated to reduce the employer's pension and medical costs.

To combat the trend, major research has been conducted in America to establish what older workers are looking for in the labour market [see, for example, *Staying ahead of the curve: The AARP work and career study* — <http://www.aarp.org>]. This indicates that — like Australia — the United States of America faces a critical retirement-induced shortage of qualified workers unless they can be encouraged to stay in the workforce beyond the traditional retirement age. The research suggests that almost seventy per cent wish to do so, but very much on their own terms. Most believe age discrimination is apparent in the present labour market. If these experiences are replicated in Australia, which seems highly likely, there is clearly a gulf between what older workers will want and what is available to them. This does not augur well for their retention.

Further American research on flexibility at work also suggests problems. At a recent BPW/Brandis University conference, separate analyses by law, economics, social work and gender specialists all reached similar conclusions: flexibility in the workplace is distributed very inequitably. Many workers who need genuine flexibility to mix their personal and work goals simply do not get it. Australia is little different in this regard, as many ALIA members can testify. Writing in CCH's latest *Work Alert*, Juliet Bourke, co-director: WORK+LIFE Strategies, describes this uneven allocation of workplace flexibility as often 'based on power rather need'. She is undoubtedly right to warn Australian employers that such unfair systems almost certainly infringe anti-discrimination laws.

The sum of all this is that, while fairness and equity are necessary in their own right, the looming age-driven crisis in the library and information sector will soon make them essential on prosaic, practical grounds too. If older workers' needs and preferences are not seriously addressed, they will simply walk away into complete retirement. And much of the sector's skill base will disappear with them. ■

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