



TRAINING OPTIONS FOR THE AGEING WORKFORCE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to determine if there are training options that can assist in retaining skills and experience in the ageing workforce within the Construction Industry.

DESKTOP RESEARCH

This research examined papers from several countries and included: Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America.

FINDINGS

In 2007, research undertaken in South Australia by the NCVET and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU)¹ found that older construction workers, aged 45 and over were highly valued within the industry. Of those surveyed, 86.1% said that it was likely or highly likely that 'Train the Trainer' courses would assist older workers in training or mentoring younger workers and pass on the benefits of their experience.

According to the 2011 Construction Sector Councils report², retaining older workers with the right skills, attitudes, dependability and work ethic, is a critical part of keeping construction companies competitive. The report again highlighted the benefits of mentoring and coaching programs that can connect the experience and knowledge of older workers to younger workers.

In 2013³, New Zealand research found 10% of the construction industry was made up of workers aged over 45 years. These workers could provide support, guidance and mentoring/training for younger tradespeople. Research also concluded that to attract and retain older workers there would need to be flexible working arrangements to balance health needs, 'caring' responsibilities and lifestyle preferences

Similarly, the 2013 report 'Engaging Older Workers'⁴, highlighted that older workers have the ability to provide 'on the job' mentoring to their younger counterparts.

The report also emphasised that older workers in the industry were perceived as adding value in the areas of:

- Skills – older, experienced workers bring with them invaluable knowledge and skills of their trades.

¹ Older workers' perspective on training and retention of older workers: NCVET and CFMEU, Australia (2007)

² Strategies and best practices for the recruitment, retention and employment of older workers in the construction industry: The Construction Sector Council, Canada (2011)

³ Older workers in the construction Industry: Building and Construction Industry Training Organisation (BCITO) New Zealand (2013)

⁴ Engaging Older Workers, Focusing on the Construction and Property Services Industry: CPSISC, Australia (2013)

- Workmanship – older workers are perceived to take greater pride in, and to produce higher quality work than younger workers.
- Work ethic – older workers are perceived by both management and workers as having a better ‘work ethic and mentality’ than younger workers.

Both management and workers themselves have recognised the value of retaining older workers within the industry.

The Construction Skills Queensland (CSQ) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), (2016)⁵ report identified the number of construction workers aged 55 and over in Queensland had increased from:

- 8% of full time workers in 1992 to 14.2% in 2015⁶.

The research identified that an ageing workforce is likely to increase the need for less physically demanding jobs. New technology and automation of construction processes may address these issues which reaffirms the need for new training programs to assist with employee retention.

Conversely, in a 2017 article written by the Australian News⁷, it was reported that technology in the construction industry is advancing at a rapid pace, with increasing use of:

- Drones to plan, monitor sites and show clients the progress of their build.
- Building Information Modelling (BIM) which allows companies to see the blueprints of their projects in 3D and manage their work more efficiently.
- Cloud-based software that enables workers on site and project coordinators to communicate in real time, which in turn increases efficiency and productivity.
- Driverless vehicles that use radar sensing and GPS navigation to perform work on construction sites.

A 2017 editorial written for The Guardian newspaper⁸ acknowledged that the population of Australia is ageing with one quarter of Australians reported as being over the age of 55, with a predicted increase to one-third in the next decade. The article suggests that older workers bring a lifetime of experience, networks and tacit knowledge.

Companies such as Bunnings, recognise the value of older workers with a construction background, who can provide expert customer assistance in areas such as home renovation.

The article also reiterated similar reports sentiments, that younger workers stand to benefit from the experience of older workers who could mentor and help develop younger people in the workplace.

⁵ *Are you ready for change? Foresight for Construction: CSQ and CSIRO, Australia (2016)*

⁶ *Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015)*

⁷ *Australian Construction Trends for 2018: Australian News Daily Bulletin, Australia (2017)*

⁸ *Age discrimination: older Australian workers viewed as slow to learn, The Guardian, Australia (2017)*

SUMMARY

Universally it was acknowledged across the research papers that older workers are valued in the industry, but there were limitations as to the type of training options available to this cohort.

The principle options being:

- Train the trainer programs that would allow older workers to mentor younger workers and pass on to them the benefits of their knowledge and experience. This could be in the workplace or within a formal training setting.
- New training programs – computer and technology skills.
- Move to less demanding roles in retail or wholesale, but still utilising their construction skills and experience.

With the Australian Construction Industry embracing new technologies and older workers considered valuable to companies, evidence suggests that training opportunities in new technologies and automation would be beneficial along with mentoring programs.