

# THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

## Managing an aging workforce

*Canada's workforce is aging. Given this universal truth, employers are well advised to consider how to adapt workplace health, wellness and other practices to ensure they guard against risks and take full advantage of opportunities that reside in this demographic shift.*

The fact is, there are more older employees in Canada's workforce than ever before. According to Statistics Canada, from 1996 to 2018, the proportion of workers aged 55 and older almost doubled, from 10 per cent to 21 per cent of the workforce. Over this period, the proportion of older workers increased across virtually all major occupations, largely because of workers delaying retirement or returning to work during their retirement years.

While this increase in labour force participation among older Canadians may initially raise some business planning concerns, it also comes with benefits. Like most industrialized countries, Canada is experiencing both lower fertility rates and longer life expectancy.

### The impact of the aging workforce on Canadian business

With proportionally fewer young people joining the workforce to replace older individuals, skill and labour shortages are expected in certain occupations, sectors and regions. As such, older individuals, as well as other groups of Canadians, are needed to support businesses, economic growth and continuing improvement in Canada's standard of living.

Changes brought about by the pandemic, including the mass adoption of remote workforces or hybrid models that mean less commuting time and, in some cases, less stress, are also encouraging people to continue to work past age 65.

Add to that, some baby boomers simply aren't in a financial position to stop working, and so find themselves working longer than previous generations. In fact, almost one in five (18 per cent) Canadians, aged 50 and up, are planning to push out their retirement date, according to a report from RBC.<sup>1</sup>

This combination of factors has resulted in not only a higher proportion of older workers, but also an unprecedented four generations of workers participating simultaneously in the labour market. That means the workforce has a greater age span within it, encompassing workers with varied needs based on their ages.

### What do these demographic trends mean for employers?

Naturally, keeping workers healthy and productive at all stages of their life and careers is important to employers. When it comes to supporting aging workers, employers should take measures to ensure they continue to benefit from these valuable



**STÉPHANIE MYNER-NHAM**  
CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER,  
EXPRESS SCRIPTS CANADA



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rbc.com/newsroom/news/2021/20210827-myths-realities-retirement-poll.html>

employees' knowledge and experience, while minimizing health-related absenteeism which is typically higher in that demographic.

First, it helps if organizations recognize the benefits that older employees bring to their organization. Applying health and wellness policies holistically ensures older workers and their younger counterparts stay healthy and safe on the job and benefits everyone, regardless of age.

When developing workplace policies, it is helpful to begin by taking stock of your employees' age range. Knowing this generational makeup can help managers anticipate workers' needs and develop supportive policies. This includes understanding not only employees' varying needs, but also their preferred styles of communication, and ways of interacting at work, as these and other factors often vary among generations.

### Health and safety concerns

As workers age, their likelihood of developing physical and mental illnesses or injuries naturally heightens. This is especially true for older workers in more physically demanding positions such as trades and healthcare. In 2016, for example, illness or disability was the reason most reported by Canadians aged 55 and over for leaving a job in the previous year.<sup>2</sup>

Age-appropriate health and safety initiatives can be implemented through various policy tools, such as awareness campaigns, healthcare services or training, and return-to-work programs. It can also take the form of things like ergonomic guidelines and providing employees with funding towards ensuring properly set-up workstations.

Should illness and disability strike, employee benefit plans that offer virtual healthcare for convenience including online pharmacy services and mental health support are key to helping not only older workers but workers of all ages, recover faster and return to work sooner.

### Wellness programs are preventative medicine

Promoting wellness and whole-person health is a first line of defense that helps ensure employees are less likely to fall ill, and stay productive. In fact, investing in workplace wellness is shown to significantly lower an organization's medical costs.<sup>3</sup>

Typical programs include incentives to stop smoking, limit drinking and make healthier food choices. Consider adding exercise or yoga options, annual physical examinations and other programs that address specific needs of older workers, both online and in-person. Offering a nutrition platform and mindfulness series can also be of great value.

Organizing physical and mental wellness campaigns throughout the year can help encourage employee participation. This includes encouraging social interactions at

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/labour-force-participation.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/5345879>

work, and scheduling regular wellness check-ins. Promoting proper sleep, hydration and stress management through workplace resources can also go a long way to having a healthier staff.

### Training and education encourage engagement

Offering personal and professional development support helps workers of all ages stay current and engaged. This can range from brushing up on best practices to learning new skills. A proactive approach to training can also present an opportunity to engage staff with special expertise to help train others. Whether it's tech-savvy younger workers sharing new-age insights with their older counterparts, or older workers conveying wisdom earned through experience.

### Eliminate worksite dangers

Clearing potential trip hazards such as clutter, trash and power cords – especially in walkways – is a core safety practice. Similarly, ensuring adequate lighting in work areas, as well as on hazard-prone areas such as steps and ramps, and that floor breaks are painted contrasting colours, can further help prevent falls. Adding mats and handrails to entry areas that may be prone to slippery conditions, such as snow or ice, is also wise.

### Be flexible

Giving employees opportunities to help balance and manage their personal and workplace responsibilities helps improve retention and job satisfaction.

For employers, demonstrating flexibility can range from offering varying daily work hours to giving staff choices among reduced or part-time hours, seasonal, job sharing and phased retirement opportunities. It can also mean offering schedules that include compressed work weeks, or providing workers with time off so they can care for elderly parents or grandkids.

In the grander scheme, providing workers with chances at lateral career movement, opportunities to take on new or modified responsibilities or tasks, or work remotely or a hybrid remote/office combination can all help ensure ongoing long-term employee retention and productivity.

Lastly, as part of succession planning, consider flexible retirement plans that not only enable senior workers to transition out of the workforce, but also bring on new workers to replace them.

### Engage a pharmacy partner

As people age, many often require medication to help manage chronic health conditions. Adhering to a prescribed medicine regime is considered a necessity not only to achieve optimal health outcomes, but is particularly important for those living with chronic conditions, and especially so among those who have comorbidities that require multiple prescriptions.



Conversely, nonadherence not only negatively affects health outcomes, it can also have a negative bearing on business operations and health benefit costs and plan sustainability. Unfortunately, each year plan sponsors lose millions of dollars in benefits costs, earnings, avoidable medical costs, absenteeism and lost productivity due to medication non-adherence. Express Scripts Canada Pharmacy offers several services to help employees follow their doctor's orders including:

- flexible delivery options;
- automatic refills and renewal reminders (especially through text messaging);
- 90 days' supply for chronic conditions;
- easy prescription management via access to pharmacists and online tools; and
- delivery right to their door.

### Be inclusive and celebrate diversity

Lastly, embracing diversity, equity and inclusion helps ensure that workers of all ages and backgrounds feel valued. Celebrating the strengths of younger and older workers alike, and encouraging them to share their skills and knowledge will not only help foster positive and productive relationships – it can also be a valuable way to retain top talent and train new hires.

Ultimately, as millions of older Canadians approach typical retirement age, employers will eventually face more talent planning challenges. We encourage employers to work with their group insurance/benefits team and their pharmacy partner to plan for and proactively manage the transition of an aging workforce in ways that will benefit both employers and employees for the long term.

