

COPING WITH AN AGING WORKFORCE

There are a couple of things we know for certain about Canadian demographics. We know we're an aging population. And we know that immigration is rapidly changing the "face" of Canada, as we become more and more culturally diverse.

These two facts are combining to create new challenges for employers, and the smart ones will realize they need to adapt to these certainties now, particularly where health and safety issues are concerned.

We keep hearing that we're an aging population, but the extent to which that is true and the implications, are startling. In 1971, the median age in Canada was 26.2 years. In July of 2003, it was 37.9 years, an increase of almost 45%! The age groups showing the largest increases from 2002 to 2003 were the 90+ years, the 80 – 84 years, and the 55 – 59 years. The age groups showing the greatest decreases were 35 – 39 years, 5 – 9 years and 0 – 4 years.¹ This indicates that the population is getting older and will continue to get older as fewer children are being born each year.

If migration is not considered, then the size of the labour force in Canada will peak in 2009. The number of people retiring after that will ensure that the number of available workers will steadily decline, while those that remain in the workplace will be older. Older workers have more experience, and data indicates that experienced workers tend to have fewer accidents. Those accidents that do occur tend to be related to mobility and agility problems, up until their mid to late 50's when vision problems and hearing problems begin to have an impact on their safety on the job. Older workers tend to have fewer accidents, but proportionally more fatalities.

If the economy continues to expand, and if we are to be able to pay for the increasing healthcare costs of the aging population, Canada must have more workers. They will come from two sources.

First, there will be increased participation from older workers who would normally be required to retire. On June 7, 2005, the Ontario government introduced legislation repealing mandatory retirement at age 65. Some employers have already announced the end of mandatory retirement for certain job classes, such as professors and librarians.

Allowing older workers to continue to participate in the workforce will inevitably lead to increases in certain types of workplace accidents, and increases in workplace fatalities.

There will also be a need for more immigration, as a second source of available workers.

In 2002 Canada's crude birth rate (the number of live births for every 1,000 people in the population) fell to an all-time low. The rate of 10.5 live births for every 1,000 population was the lowest rate since that statistic has been kept, beginning in 1921.²

In 2003 the number of births exceeded the number of deaths by 103,069. However, the number of immigrants was 199,159, although this was partially offset by 55,584 emigrants. This means that the population increase in Canada was due more to immigration than to natural increase. This trend will only increase over the next decade.



The dependence upon immigration to augment the labour force, especially in the areas of entry-level jobs (those positions held by the youngest members of the workforce) will pose special problems for employers in the early decades of this century. Health and safety training, as well as basic job skill training, will be more difficult with workers who may still be learning English.

Since 1997, about 60% of immigrants to Canada report Asia as the site of their last permanent residence. Europe accounts for around 17%, while Africa has increased from 6.7% in 1997 to 10.2% in 2003. Canada, and especially the traditional immigration destinations in and near Toronto, will become even more culturally diverse. In a recent front page story, the *Globe and Mail* reported that the number of visible minorities in Canada will double by 2017, and form more than half the population of Toronto and Vancouver.³ The same will be true of workplaces in these areas. Employers will face increasing challenges in communicating with new employees in a wide variety of languages, and from a wide variety of cultures.

Employers will clearly face two challenges in the coming years if they want to stay productive. They will have to learn to accommodate older workers – and this means more older workers as well as older older workers – and they will have to learn to attract and communicate with more immigrant workers. Those who fail to do this will find that they will not be able to fill the positions that become vacant as the retirement wave moves through their workplaces.

1. Market Research Handbook, Catalogue no. 63-224-XPB, Statistics Canada
2. Canadian Social Trends, Autumn 2004 No. 74, Page 22.
3. The *Globe and Mail*, March 23, 2005, Page 1.

