

Global disruption and staff shortages: time to look at overlooked resources?

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Carlene Boucher, Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

During the recent federal election in Australia, the electoral commission was faced with a unique issue, one they had not faced before, a lack of staff. This was [particularly true in regional centres](#). As a result, electors in some remote areas were [probably denied the right to vote](#). This example of how the global disruption has affected the capacity of organisations to recruit staff when they need it is just one of many instances and we have probably all seen and heard of businesses closing or limiting their services simply because they don't have staff. While not being able to visit your favourite café or get your hair cut are inconveniences and first world problems, more critical shortages in [health and community care](#), transport and education cannot be ignored.

Whilst the causes of the staff shortage problem are complex, they include the ongoing [impact of covid infection](#) and the emerging flu season. In Australia, [immigration for work purposes](#) has been severely curtailed in recent years and this has been exacerbated by [severe limitations on the number of overseas tertiary students](#) entering Australia who make up a large percentage of the retail, hospitality and carer workforce, especially in capital cities. A phenomenon referred to as the [great resignation](#) as also had some impact, though the extent of people leaving the workforce is unclear. In Australia, workforce immobility due to the [housing crisis](#) is also a factor.

[Current initiatives to address workforce shortages](#) such as providing subsidised training, increasing the immigration of skilled people, getting overseas students back and substituting technology for people (such as artificial intelligence) will all take time.

We need people now, and with [the unemployment rate at 3.9%](#) it is time to look at those people who are traditionally overlooked by business. Older people who have extensive experience and skills are an untapped resource. Many are on pensions, or are self-funded retirees and [would be prepared to re-enter the workforce](#) given the right conditions. People with disability have always been [underrepresented in the workforce](#) and survive on job seeker or the disability support pension. Many just don't consider employment an option and this is a factor contributing to the current [low participation](#) rate. This potential workforce is probably available globally as it is a universal [phenomenon that people with disability and older people are underemployed](#).

What businesses can do

Organisations need to engage with older people and the disability community. [Pwc](#) found that while 64% of organisations have a diversity strategy, only 8% include age diversity in this strategy. Older workers need advertising to them in different ways and not just relying on seek and LinkedIn. [Ahrj](#) suggests three strategies for recruiting older workers:

- Simply excluding date of birth from applications,
- Writing advertisements that attract the full range of age groups including referring to experience and reliability as desirable attributes,
- Offering flexible work arrangements.

[Some websites](#) are aimed specifically at matching older workers with age-friendly employers and [word of mouth](#) is another effective recruitment tool.

Recruiting people with disability also requires a slightly different approach. [Max solutions](#) suggest that employers need to:

- Revisit their job descriptions and the ways jobs are constructed: the focus needs to be

More about the essential requirements of the job and the outcomes that are expected rather than how they are achieved. People with disability need to be given the chance to demonstrate how they can achieve the outcomes.

- Make your information accessible: the advertisement and organisation information need to be accessible.
- Allow for selection process adjustments; recruiters need to ask potential employees if they may need adjustments for selection processes such as the interview. This can include how they find the venue, to support during the interview such as an interpreter. Including people with disability on an interview panel sends a clear message.
- Only ask questions about the person's disability if legitimate and non-discriminatory.
- Offer to adjust the workplace as required. Most people with disability will not need major adjustments to the workplace, if any at all. Employers should also assess their workspace for accessibility issues or potential hazards and create equal access to their buildings, meeting rooms, interviews, website, systems and learning and development resources.

Strategies that would facilitate the employment of both older workers and people with disability that businesses could adopt include:

- Rethinking job stereotypes: assumptions that are made about what is expected of employees may need to be challenged. In the same way that [stereotypes about work being suitable for men or women](#) are being challenged, stereotypes about the age appropriateness or physical or mental capacity of workers also need to come under scrutiny.
- Being more open to different ways of doing work: there is often no one best way to do a job. Older people have a lot of experience and people with disabilities are [great problem solvers](#) and can find solutions to issues related to age or disability
- Taking advantage of hybrid work model and flexible hours: [health](#) has the biggest effect

on older workers' decisions about continuing to work, so some older workers will therefore place greater value on flexibility at work, adjustments, or part-time working hours to accommodate health needs or caring. These strategies are also useful when accommodating the needs of [people with disability](#) who may also benefit from being able to work from home.

- Rethinking the gig economy: while millennials may be comfortable with relatively limited job security, older people and people with disability may want more [security in their employment status](#).

In summary, there is need to re-examine how, why, who and where and when work happens. Our taken for granted assumptions about who and how a job can be done need to change if we are going to utilise two excellent sources of workers during this shortage.



Carlene Boucher

Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business.

Carlene has worked at Australian Universities for almost 40 years. She is interested in how people experience difference in the workplace and how they engage in emotional labor to manage their relationships at work.