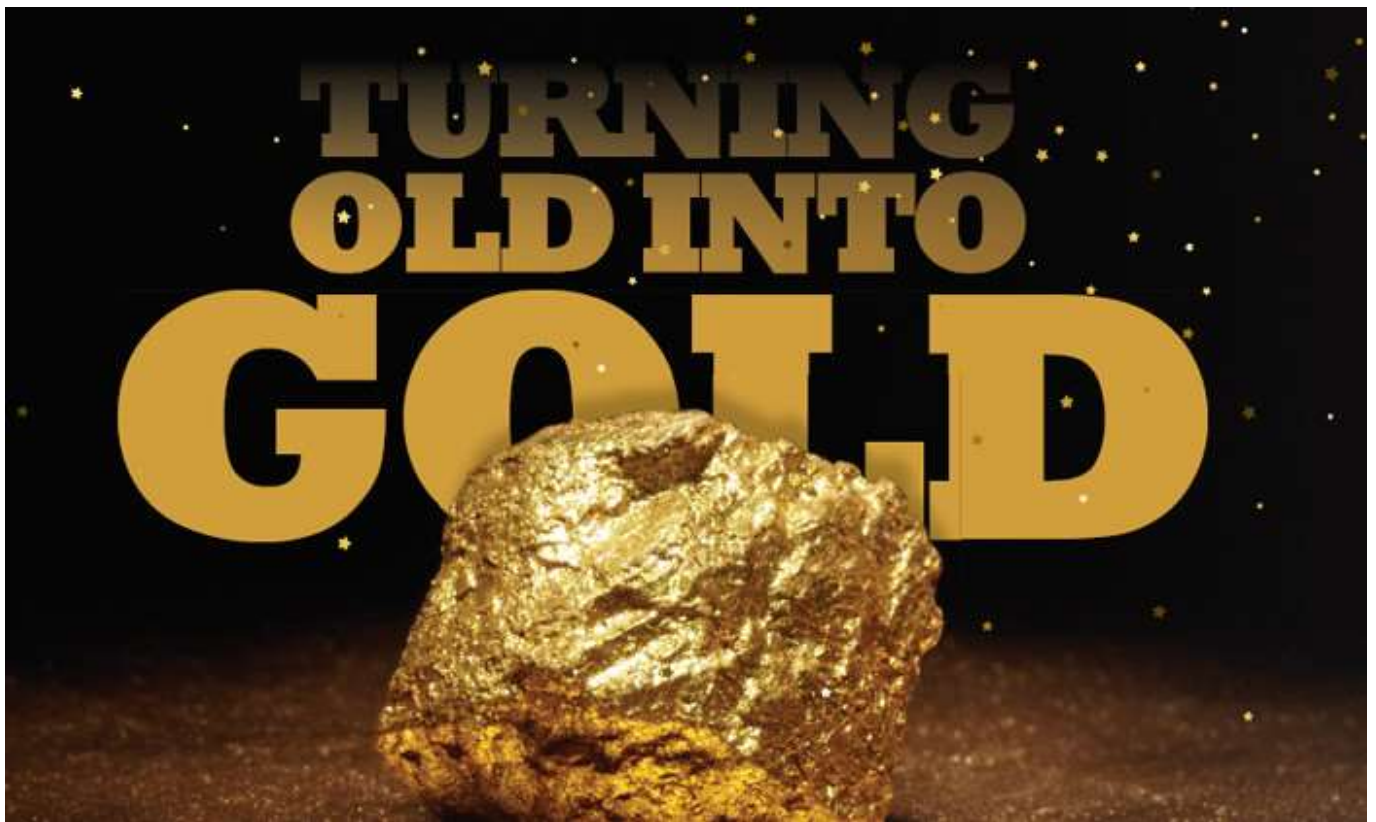


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## Strategies to engage the mature workforce

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**Aditi Sharma Kalra reaches out to companies that are pioneering the engagement of the mature workforce – be it through redesigned job descriptions, flexible employment contracts or retraining opportunities.**

About two years ago at the National Day Rally speech, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave a sneak peek about a plan to raise the re-employment age of local workers from 65 to 67. He aptly summed up the sentiments of older workers, referencing himself as an example: "Many people who are in their 60s want to work longer. They say, 'If I sit at home and do nothing, I will go ga-ga'. Furthermore, my wife will tell me to go and do something about it."

That announcement led to the Retirement and Re-employment (Amendment) Bill 2016 passed by parliament to improve reemployment opportunities for older workers by effecting three changes that will take effect from 1 July 2017. The first is the new re-employment age of 67 that applies to locals who turn 65 on or after 1 July 2017; the second is a clause for an employer who is unable to offer a suitable position in their own organisation to transfer the re-employment obligations to another employer under certain conditions; and the third is the removal of the option of employers cutting employees' wages at age 60.

Since 2011, over 98% of resident employees who wished to continue working were offered employment beyond 62. In 2016, 98% of those who accepted re-employment in the same job, be it on a new or existing contract did not experience a cut in their basic wages. Of the 2% who did experience wage cuts upon reemployment, the median wage cut was 10%.

With this backdrop, *Human Resources* reached out to companies that are pioneering the engagement of the mature workforce – be it through redesigned job descriptions, flexible employment contracts or retraining opportunities.

## GETTING ON IN YEARS (AND EXPERIENCE): On Cheong Jewellery

One of these companies is On Cheong Jewellery, cited among the longest established jewellers in Singapore, and the winner of the "Exemplary Employer Award 2012" and "Outstanding Workplace for Mature Employees" presented by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP). Established in 1936, this company adopts a "4Rs approach" to engaging its mature workforce – reemployment, retrain, reward and respect.

Pre-retirement planning and re-employment consultation are provided to employees when they reach the age of 61. All eligible employees are offered a re-employment term contract of at least one year and the contract is renewable up to the age of 67 and may even extend further as long as they are medically fit for the job and have a satisfactory performance.

"We have five senior workers who are still working at On Cheong Jewellery at ages 68, 69, 70, 74 and 79 respectively even though they are well above the re-employment age at 67," says **Ho Nai Chuen, managing director of On Cheong Jewellery**.

Retraining is another priority at On Cheong, whereby all mature workers are supplied with equal opportunities to develop new skills and competencies to ensure they remain effective and efficient in the workplace. The emphasis is so strong that mature workers are provided ongoing training with the goal of keeping their skills and knowledge up-to-date and in line with that of younger workers.

In the realm of rewards, On Cheong celebrates every little success of each employee to let them know they matter. Employees' successes are announced to let everyone know how much the company appreciates their hard work. Ho explains: "We reward employees with a shopping voucher when they do a great job or display extra mile service."

Ho equally cites the importance of a fair and open appraisal system that provides an opportunity for the management and staff to discuss performance results. "This helps mature workers identify their strengths and weaknesses and encourages improvement on job processes," he says. Such a system helps to reward and promote employees based on merit, and Ho takes the example of mature employees who have benefited from this fair appraisal system and received deserving promotions to managerial positions.

This leads nicely to the final R of engaging mature workers – respect the differences among employees, appreciate their distinctive skills, experiences and perspectives.

"We respect mature workers' views and value their skill, experience and contributions," Ho says, adding it is the company's practice to assign mature and experienced staff to mentor newer colleagues to impart product knowledge and good service culture to its customers.

What business benefits do the 4Rs achieve? Greater loyalty, strong product knowledge, richer storytelling across generations, and a zero staff turnover rate, to name a few On Cheong has witnessed. Half of On Cheong's workforce has been with the company for more than 15 years, for example, and there has been zero employee attrition in the past few years.

"Our mature employees possess a lot of product knowledge and are very patient in serving customers. Some of our senior staff have served customers for three generations under the same family tree," Ho remarks.

He adds that mature employees appreciate and understand the corporate culture and values, thus are able to share its rich history with younger colleagues while mentoring them in the workplace.

Concluding, he proclaims: "Workers who do feel respected or valued have higher levels of engagement. An engaged employee is a productive employee."

## **AHEAD OF TIME: McDonald's plates up mature worker initiatives**

Serving more than six million people in Singapore every month, McDonald's Singapore has 9,000 employees that form the "McFamily", of which 30% are mature workers. In managing this workforce, the fast-food chain strongly believes in providing an optimal working environment to engage and retain a committed workforce regardless of age, religion and gender.

Redesigning work processes and retraining the mature workforce are high on the agenda of **Lynn Hong, director of human resources at McDonald's Singapore**. "In our restaurants, we have implemented a number of tactics to help make the workplace friendly for mature workers," she says. This includes using visuals and

graphics in the kitchen's portable food station training guides – simply by referring to a series of friendly instructional guides, the mature employees can easily carry out the necessary steps in the kitchen, according to the desired standards.

Supplementing that is a focus on training through a number of measures. An age appropriate buddy system is in place so new employees have someone to go to for day-to-day questions, which helps them assimilate in their role. Adequate breaks are also allowed during shifts so all workers can work well and productively.

Hong explains: "Our flexibility in accommodating work schedules also allows mature workers to pace themselves at work and meet their own needs. And, of course, we focus on ensuring workplace safety for all our workers in our restaurants." This theme spills over from employees to managers as well, who are trained on how to take care of mature colleagues and manage them as part of the team.

Another aspect to this conversation is designing compensation for the silver workforce, to which **Nicole Seah, co-founder of Singapore-based Rewardz**, offers advice from her experiences with clients.

"Older employees (above 50) will probably require a higher premium for medical insurance and need to know that there is a retirement plan in place for them. They are also concerned about work security in the midst of economic uncertainty as they grow older."

She adds that benefits for this set of employees may be structured to provide flexible working schemes with lesser work days. McDonald's Singapore does follow this advice, offering flexibility in accommodating work schedules to allow mature workers to pace themselves at work and meet their own needs.

"Our mature workers impart a wealth of life experience, strong values and positive energy to their colleagues of all ages each day – this brings immeasurable value to the culture of our workforce," Hong says.

Summing up the learning, here's a recap of ideas to implement in engaging your mature workforce in a way that benefits your business:

- 1. Retrain:** Give mature workers a target to keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date and in line with that of younger workers.
- 2. Fair appraisal system:** Provides an opportunity for mature workers to identify their strengths and weaknesses and encourages improvement on job processes.
- 3. Mentorship roles:** Assign mature and experienced staff to mentor newer colleagues to impart product knowledge and good service culture to customers.
- 4. Redesign processes:** Implement tactics to help make the workplace friendly for mature workers, such as using visuals and graphics in training guides.

**5. Flexibility:** Accommodate various work schedules to allow mature workers to pace themselves at work and meet their own needs.

**6. Train managers:** Teach managers how to take care of mature colleagues and manage them as part of the team.

**7. Reward appropriately:** Older employees will probably require a higher premium for medical insurance and need to know that there is a retirement plan in place.

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