

Workforce planning is a long-haul challenge



Phil Teece

Advisor,
industrial relations and
employment
phil.teece@alia.org.au

Seven years have passed since this column first urged the sector to start thinking seriously about its ageing workforce. Three years ago we warned that new approaches were urgently needed to combat potentially 'serious skills shortages' in years to come. Last year I lamented that — while there were honourable exceptions — few organisations had shown any real sense of urgency.

Well, what a difference a year makes. Yawns and glazed looks have rapidly given way to animated — albeit often superficial — discussion. Suddenly, skills shortages, succession planning and the ageing workforce are 'sexy' subjects in national political and business discourse. Now everybody wants to talk about how we should deal with these problems.

The library and information sector too seems finally to be waking up. And well it might, since very few Australian industry sectors confront a greater challenge. Collectively, librarians are close to being the oldest of any major occupational group in Australia. Bureau of Statistics and Department of Employment data show that currently 52.1 per cent of librarians are over 45, compared to 34.2 per cent among the Australian workforce as a whole. Only 19.1 per cent are younger than 35 against 41.9 per cent in the total workforce. It is difficult to imagine clearer evidence of a need for action.

So it is a relief to see that the sector is getting its act together. Leading the way are the Australian Technology Network (ATN) libraries. Following an October 2004 commissioned report from Whitmell & Associates, ATN now has a clear blueprint for action. The report presents a set of clear and sensible recommendations for practical succession and workforce planning and its integration with broader organisational strategies. This constitutes a very solid platform for action to deal with what is a very real challenge.

Among ATN libraries, RMIT, for example, has been quick to build on the report. Action has been taken to develop its own formal Workforce and Succession Plan. Central to the plan is identification of long-term future needs and expectations of managers and staff, available resources, objectives, and how success will be measured over the short and long term. RMIT will conduct an inventory of skills, aptitudes and attitudes needed by the library in the immediate and long-term future. It will identify areas of weakness and set the focus for future recruitment and professional development. Attempts will be made to involve all staff in thinking about and preparing themselves for the future. This will include more contemporary evaluation procedures.

Effective communication of the plan and its benefits is seen as essential to its success. Some of the specific operational changes mooted include more attention to learning agility and leadership potential in recruitment criteria; comprehensive individual staff development action plans; peer reviews including involvement of people in similar positions in sister organisations; reduced hierarchies; serious attention to career path planning for potential leaders; systems to give younger staff earlier experience in staffing and budgetary management; and greater involvement with other libraries in setting national strategies for combating problems associated with an ageing workforce.

These are encouraging developments but a cautionary note is necessary. When a long-smouldering problem suddenly erupts into flames, there is a tendency for rushed action and a put-out-the-fire mentality. The demographic challenges now grabbing public attention are real. Action to meet them is essential. But it needs to be much more than the all-too-common 'quick fix'. Management rather than removal should be the goal.

A recent *Business Review Weekly* analysis of Australia's chronic lack of effective succession planning found a number of reasons for failure. Foremost is a lack of commitment by senior management and directors. BRW says that, when talent development and succession planning are left to the human resources department, chances of success are slim. Too often planning looks only as far as middle management levels because executives and directors have what BRW describes as 'a mindset of kings and queens rather than caretakers of the company'. And, most importantly, if it is not recognised that workforce and succession planning needs serious and continuing time, effort and resources, there is almost no chance of success.

Every organisation's needs are different. But there are factors common to all in planning for necessary adjustments to soften the impact of looming demographic upheavals. Increased labour market participation rates will be absolutely vital. To achieve that, two types of employee must be catered for much more effectively than to date. They are married women with children and older people. Both will want levels of true flexibility that have not been widely available previously. For that to happen, two questions must be answered: 'How can we improve the quality of part-time jobs?' and 'What steps should organisations take to improve work/life balance for the people who want genuine flexibility?' Work watch will look at these questions in its next two columns. ■

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