

SILVER & GOLD

By Jean Lian

Age is more than a number marking time. In some cultures, old age is seen as the embodiment of wisdom and regarded as something of great worth. That view seems not to have taken quite as firm a hold in modern, industrialized economies, where productivity serves as the object of reverence. Today, adjustments and accommodations for aging workers may face resistance or be summarily relegated as stumbling blocks to productivity and on-the-job safety.

Greying nation

Questions revolving around age and work are nothing new, so to speak. Will reaction time be slowed, eyesight dimmed and strength diminished to the point that the safety of workers — all workers — could be compromised? In jobs with a clear physical element, how do employers strike a balance between possible influences on safety and productivity, and avoid the minefield of discrimination complaints?

For years, questions that nudged such discussions uncomfortably close to human rights issues were ostensibly silenced by mandatory retirement. Of late, these legal provisions have fallen by the wayside in numerous jurisdictions.

Ontario, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland are the most recent provinces opting to no longer automatically say “No” when workers reach 65. Mandatory retirement was no more as of December, 2006, and March and May of 2007, respectively. Saskatchewan is next in line, come this November; British Columbia follows from January 1, 2008.

Statistics Canada’s 2006 census shows the average age of the working population (15 to 64 years) is getting older and barely enough younger people are entering the work force to offset those heading for the retirement door. Such work force realities — coupled with the end of mandatory retirement in several provinces — is likely to make the need to fit aging workers properly and safely into operations even more pressing in future.



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