

Skilled labour shortages

SINCE THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT came to power in 1996, its approach to training has been pitiful. It took a political decision to cut unemployed figures by introducing traineeships.

Under traineeships the award rate of pay was cut by about 30-40 per cent and employers received subsidies to employ trainees. The original arrangement was to allow one day a week of "off the job training".

However this did not last long and employers were able to have someone "on the job" five days a week for considerably less money than someone doing the same or similar work who was not a trainee. Fortunately it was mainly the service industries (retail and hospitality) involved in the scheme.

While this was taking place in the late 1990s employers were deciding that if you were 45-50-plus years of age, you were no longer wanted. Remember this was the dotcom age – computers and technology would solve all the bosses' problems. How wrong they were.

So, we have this great funding of non-trade traineeships and older more skilled workers losing their jobs. No wonder we have a skills shortage.

There are about 100,000 trade-based apprenticeships and 300,000 trainees in Australia. A TAFE funding freeze over the past seven years has seen apprentices unable to enrol.

Employers today want prospective apprentices to hold Higher School Certificate qualifications (year 12). This creates further problems – now you have 18-year-olds being offered \$6.60 an hour as a first-year apprentice.

Eighteen-year-olds can get more money labouring, driving trucks or forklifts than doing a four-year apprenticeship on antiquated wage rates. Eighteen-year-olds also have other pressures – cars, rent, wives, children etc whilst most 16-year-olds do not have these additional costs.

In the retail industry there are tens of thousands of trainees and similar numbers in hospitality, i.e. pizza and burger joints. These people may have skills but it's not where the shortages are. I have seen trainees being provided 2 hours a week training (work) in pizza joints.

The process has been corrupted by shonky RTOs where government funding has been paid and no one employed and no training taking place – the security industry is a perfect example. The Federal Government is only interested in providing employers with cheap wages and getting the numbers off the dole.

The best method of ensuring the skills needed in various industries is to record the retention rates of completed trainees. This is not the current system and this is part of the problem.

Using migration is not the answer. Most 'skilled' migrants do not have the trade skills necessary and don't understand the Australian Standards of the building industry.

I fear the system will get worse before it gets better as the government and employers will introduce another bodgy cheap wage, short-sighted approach which will not provide a long-term solution.

– Terry Kesby

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Avoid the sounds of silence

Every year around 14,000 people are awarded compensation for hearing loss caused by work. Hearing loss is one of the biggest occupational hazards in the industry.

Under the OHS act, employers must eliminate or minimise your risk of hearing loss. They must follow Codes of Practice on this.

If you think you have been affected by industrial hearing loss, you may be entitled to compensation. The Workers' Health Centre can help you with a free hearing test. Compensation is paid if you have lost 6 per cent or more of your hearing.

The Centre can now conduct free hearing assessments at its Lidcombe office, where they employ an audiologist. The centre can also arrange for you to have a hearing test at a number of locations throughout Sydney, including Parramatta, Fairfield and Hurstville.

If you have more than 6 per cent hearing loss and want to pursue a claim, the Workers' Health Centre can pass on your test results to union solicitors, Taylor & Scott, who will make your claim on your behalf.

If you would like to arrange a hearing test, contact the Workers' Health Centre on 9749 7666 and make an appointment.