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# PHYSICAL RESILIENCE IN AGEING WORKERS

Everyone is getting older, but having so many people getting older at the same time is creating a challenge for government, the economy and, of course, workplaces. Part of the consequence of this demographic shift is that people are expected to work till they are much older, past the traditional retirement ages of 58, 60 and 65.

**A**ccording to the Australian Government's 2015 Intergenerational Report<sup>[i]</sup>: "Australians will live longer and continue to have one of the longest life expectancies in the world. In 2054–55, life expectancy at birth is projected to be 95.1 years for men and 96.6 years for women, compared with 91.5 and 93.6 years today." (page vii)



In relation to workforce participation: "Participation rates among those aged 65 and over are projected to increase strongly, from 12.9% in 2014–15 to 17.3% in 2054–55." (page ix)

Workers are expected to remain physically and mentally productive, and continue in their current roles. One safety executive confronting this issue said: "We can't retrain everyone into accounts payable roles!"

### STRAIN DATA SHOWS WORKERS ARE HURTING<sup>[ii]</sup>

Move 4 Life's data, collected over 11 years, including thousands of responses from Australian workers, shows that 75% of us are experiencing ache, strain and pain at work and 34% of that group said that ageing is a contributing factor.

Workers aged over 45 years have a 38% higher risk of sprain and strain injury than younger workers. And the problem is not getting better: Safe Work Australia confirms that the musculoskeletal disorder rate has remained static at 60% of all serious workers compensation claims since 2000.

### LINK TO MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Working with ache, strain and pain has a direct impact on mental health outcomes.

As workers age they become more aware of their physical state. Looking towards a long career in a physically demanding role, ageing workers are confronted with the need to make change in order to help their body last the distance. Going to work every day in pain is not sustainable in the long term.

Ray Portelli is a 57-year-old boilermaker working in rail maintenance. He said: "When you can work without lower back pain you're happier, you're just a better person all round".<sup>[iii]</sup>

Employers will benefit from helping ageing workers confront their need for change.

The positives and negatives of employing older workers are summed up well by the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) in its research into the ageing workforce:

"While age-related changes in mental and physical function are inevitable, they do not invariably lead to incapacity or reduced performance and productivity at work (Silverstein, 2008). Silverstein noted that 'in some ways older workers are the most skilled and most productive employees, but in others they are the most vulnerable'.<sup>[iv]</sup>

WorkSafe Tasmania's 'Safe and Healthy: A guide to managing an ageing workforce'<sup>[v]</sup> from 2014 puts it this way:

### "What work means to older workers

For individual workers, decisions about staying in or returning to the workforce depend on many considerations, including:

- individual economic needs (for example, inadequate pension income);
- job satisfaction and the sense of productivity and creativity offered by work;
- the need for social contact and stimulation; and
- maintenance of self-esteem and self-confidence."

The organisational benefits of an engaged, high-achieving ageing workforce will only be realised if workers in physically demanding roles are able to work without pain as they get older.

But how can one achieve continuing physical resilience after 40 or more years of physically demanding, or even sedentary, work?

Confronting the need for change is a first step.

But what change?

### MOVING DIFFERENTLY — MORE, FASTER, HEAVIER, BETTER

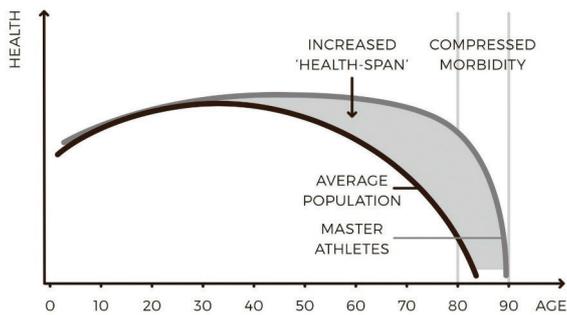
James Hewitt from Hinsta Performance has introduced the concept of Healthspan in thinking about the quality of our life.

While there is no magic pill to reverse the long-term impacts of ageing, we can take action to ensure that we are as healthy and active for as long as possible.

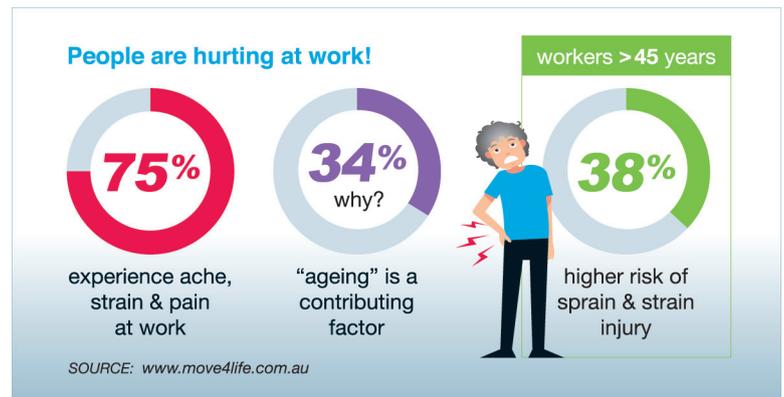
How do you increase healthspan? Masters athletes are veterans of track and field who compete well into their 80s, and when you look at their performance over time compared to the average population, it reveals a lot about increasing healthspan.

Typically masters athletes hit their peak performance in their 30s and — perhaps surprisingly — retain much of that performance for a long time, followed by a rapid drop-off from age 70 onwards. The goal is to hit as high a peak as you can and maintain it for as long as you can. This effectively compresses ill-health into as short a period as possible, increasing overall health during your life.

Healthspan is linked to the quality and intensity of physical activity. You've got to move more, move faster, move heavier and move better. (See graph 1 over page).



Graph 1  
Credit: James Hewitt Head of Science & Innovation, Hints Performance<sup>[vi]</sup>



## Move more

With our increasingly sedentary lives, we must find opportunities for movement. Wearable tech and a trend towards more movement-friendly work environments are definitely helping, but we should take advantage of every opportunity for movement.

## Move faster

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) has recently gained popularity, particularly with cross-fitters. A typical HIIT session involves bouts of high-intensity effort, followed by varied recovery times. As little as a four-minute investment in time has been shown to increase strength and cardiovascular endurance.

## Move heavier

Once we reach the age of 30, our total physical strength is already on the decline. This trend continues through our 40s, and by the time we are 50 we can expect to start losing up to 15% of muscular strength per decade. This is due to muscular atrophy, and strength training helps to counteract this problem.

## Move better

This is potentially the key. Even if we move more, faster and heavier, all of this is pointless if we move badly. If our movement patterns are not sound, there's a good chance that we won't have the physical capacity to move more, faster or heavier, no matter how willing we are. Everything must be underpinned by a focus on better movement. While very few people have a proper read on how well they actually move, it can be learned.

## OLD DOGS, NEW TRICKS

While it is difficult to retrofit peak safety, health and fitness in ageing workers, moving more, faster and heavier will help.

Importantly, it absolutely is possible to help people make change to reduce ache, strain and pain and build physical resilience as they age.

Ray Portelli had been working with ache, strain and pain at a severity level of 7–8 out of 10. He's now around 2. He said that he has made meaningful change that has impacted on his life at, and away, from work. Going to work every day in pain is not something any of us should accept as part of life.

Early intervention and return-to-work strategies are important but are not long-term solutions. We must not accept that ageing with pain is inevitable or resign ageing workers to a vicious circle of pain and treatment.



*In some ways older workers are the most skilled and most productive employees, but in others they are the most vulnerable.*



Workers will make change if they are provided with good options and, as we expect of adults, allowed to make decisions for themselves. Organisations need to provide programs that can teach these options.

Changes to accommodate the needs of an ageing workforce are likely to provide a quick return when one considers the value of the lived experience of those workers. The ageing workforce could be a tough challenge but one with enormous rewards for everyone.

\* Steve Walz (CEO) and Terry Wong (GM) lead Move 4 Life — a company that provides training and consulting services for preventing sprain and strain injuries and futureproofing an ageing workforce.

[i] 2015 Intergenerational Report Australia in 2055 — [http://www.treasury.gov.au/~media/Treasury/Publications%20and%20Media/Publications/2015/2015%20Intergenerational%20Report/Downloads/PDF/2015\\_IJR.ashx](http://www.treasury.gov.au/~media/Treasury/Publications%20and%20Media/Publications/2015/2015%20Intergenerational%20Report/Downloads/PDF/2015_IJR.ashx) (accessed 25 July 2017)

[ii] Move 4 Life — STRAIN INDEX data

[iii] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXYyCqQhhj>

[iv] [https://www.physiotherapy.asn.au/DocumentsFolder/Advocacy\\_Background\\_Papers\\_Aging\\_Workforce.pdf](https://www.physiotherapy.asn.au/DocumentsFolder/Advocacy_Background_Papers_Aging_Workforce.pdf)

[v] Safe and Healthy: A guide to managing an ageing workforce — [https://worksafe.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/283782/BetterWork\\_Ageing\\_WorkforceT.pdf](https://worksafe.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/283782/BetterWork_Ageing_WorkforceT.pdf) (accessed 25 July 2017)

[vi] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/02/healthspan-vs-lifespan/>