

KEEPING EXPERIENCE ON THE FLOOR - QMW Industries



QMW Industries apprentice Ben Samuels (left) and team leader/mentor Victor Neverov

Brisbane manufacturer QMW Industries wants older workers back on the floor passing on their skills and experience to younger workers.

QMW's Operations and Training Manager, Brad Coombs said while older tradesmen generally leave manufacturing because of the physical demands of the trade, QMW attempts to retain its older workers through job redesign, retraining and mentoring.

"It is traditionally a fairly young workforce," Brad said.

"We are trying to tap into older workers and bring them back - the days have gone where a younger workforce was preferred.

"There is a change in culture now – more experienced workers are the backbone of the workforce."

Brad said working conditions in manufacturing industry have improved over the years so the workplace is more adaptable to older workers.

"Quality assurance, workplace health and safety and environmental requirements are all part of it – so it is a lot safer and supportive for workers.

"We are aware of workers' health issues and change the job tasks to suit their capabilities.

"For example, rather than taking physically demanding tasks like lifting or working outside in the heat, we will redesign the job to focus on more bench work like welding."

Brad said the shift towards computer-based machinery has also brought a loss in traditional trade skills like hand oxy cutting, electric welding and forming and shaping, so QMW uses mentoring to ensure these skills are not lost completely.

"We currently have 14 apprentices being mentored," Brad said. "We use it like a buddy system, working next door, so the apprentice always has someone to relate to.

"It is important they learn as much from their mentor's knowledge and experience before the mentor leaves the workforce.

"And the encouragement mentors give to the younger fellers is important.

"The mentor also feels valued because they are contributing, they are not just an employee, they are helping pave the way for someone else."

While QMW values the original skills mature-age workers can pass on it also places a priority on retention of older workers through retraining and flexible work arrangements.

"We have a workplace skills matrix so we can assess our areas of need," Brad said.

Sixty-year-old Victor Neverov has been working for QMW for 10 years, and is now a team leader, mentoring a workshop of 12 tradespeople including apprentices.

“We wanted to keep Victor out of retirement and retain his skills and knowledge so we sent him on a leadership course.

“We recognise what his needs are, for example he now needs some basic computer skills so he can take on work scheduling, so we will ease him into that.

“It’s one thing to recruit but it is most important to keep them there,” Brad said. “Retention is our main focus – how we can keep the employee happy.”

Depending on an employee’s needs QMW offers all employees courses in advanced welding, leadership, basic computing or workplace, health and safety.

“It’s about understanding not everyone is the same.”