

## **Catching up with information age**

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By VIKKI BLAND

Did you hear the one about the 50-year-old executive who was having trouble understanding how to use his email programme?

Embarrassed to ask his much younger, email-savvy receptionist for help, he continued making errors and wasting time until he surreptitiously took an introductory email course.

How about the super-efficient, 49-year-old office manager who was revered by her colleagues but suffered low self esteem because she didn't know how to use the shortcut keys on a word processing programme?

For the truly IT-savvy, these true stories may seem a little trivial. However, with the average age of the New Zealand workforce steadily rising (in 1996 it was 37, in 2001 it is projected to be 42), thousands of mature business managers, support staff and administrators are likely to be functioning in an IT world with little or no formal IT training to draw on.

If this seems doubtful, consider this: the 2001 census revealed 87 per cent of New Zealanders employed as legislators, administrators and business managers were over the age of 30.

This included 5403 over the age of 65 and 9843 aged between 60 and 64. A 40-year-old in 2004 was born in 1964 and educated throughout the 1970s; a 30-year-old was born in 1974 and educated throughout the 80s.

In both decades, administrative and technology skills taught at secondary and tertiary level excluded computers and information technology tools as we know them today.

Add to that the number of small businesses in New Zealand without IT training budgets or expertise and it is easy to see how a large proportion of our workforce could be struggling with IT.

IT training is obviously available in 2004. But the courses are often unsuited to mature workers, says retraining specialist Pam Martin.

Martin, who describes herself as "well past 30", has launched Extra Mile Training, targeting business support workers over 30 who need retraining.

The company runs short evening and weekend IT and administrative courses and class sizes are restricted to 12.

Martin says many mature workers find IT training courses too long, expensive or inaccessible because they are offered in working hours. Or they are too embarrassed to admit what they don't know.

"They're expected to use up to the minute technologies they've never been formally trained on. The result is they take nine steps on the computer to do something that could have been done in one, and then hope no one notices. If they're prompted to archive their email messages they panic because they don't know if they'll find them again. It really affects their work confidence."

Martin says without an understanding of modern IT tools employment opportunities for mature workers can be restricted.

"A recruitment agency told me they downgrade even very fast typists for using the mouse instead of the right shortcut keys on a keyboard. Mature job seekers need to know things like that."

While community education and free IT courses are offered by tertiary institutions and high schools, Martin says mature employees still miss out.

"The age range in community courses can be from nine to 90, which cuts out customised teaching. And free courses are very successful at opening up job opportunities for people at home or on benefits, but are not advanced enough to meet the needs of experienced administrators looking to gain IT confidence and specific software knowledge."

Martin says giving mature workers new IT skills will keep New Zealand's ageing workforce employable, strengthen the small business industry and help employers retain mature staff who are often highly valued for their life skills and customer knowledge.

And by 2051, the 42-year-old New Zealand worker may have learned everything he knows about IT from his grandma's knee.

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