

Conditions restrict workers

Employers should prepare for a fresh force about to enter the jobs market, writes **Amanda Horswill**

LARGE companies that refuse to loosen up employment conditions risk missing out on a huge pool of competent employees, a work-readiness trainer warns.

Work Savvy Parents director Coleen Rivas says changes to the welfare system have prompted many people who have been unemployed for years to look for work. The changes require single parents to seek at least 15 hours of work a week when their youngest child turns six.

Rivas says some large corporations are not tailoring their employment process to take advantage of the skills those people offer, even though a national skills shortage is leaving many jobs vacant.

"Some employers are fabulous. Others could be more flexible," she says.

"Let's say, for example, that they applied for a job at Coles. If they got that job, they require you to be available to work all shifts. How can a single parent with two small children work on a Sunday? There is no child care available on Sundays. Thursday nights are not viable.

"On top of that, they only offer a 10-hour-week contract (of guaranteed hours, below the 15-hour minimum single parents on government assistance are expected to work).

"I think larger employers could do a little bit more. They need to understand that (single) parents are fabulous employees but that their number one job is their kids."

That mindset could be changing. Coles Group spokesman Scott Whiffin says the company is working toward more flexible work arrangements.

"At Coles, we are highly aware of how difficult it is to find sufficient numbers of team members in the current low unemployment environment, who have the skills

and customer-service ethic to fill our vacancies as all our businesses grow and expand," Whiffin says.

"We are actively working with our store managers and developing rostering mechanisms and guidelines that offer the maximum possible flexibility to all our team members – including return-to-work parents – and to accommodate where possible their desired working hours.

"It is most definitely not our policy or approved practice to compel team members to work hours that are not compatible with their lifestyles."

Sarina Russo Job Access's Lisa Sherwin says that, even if employers do become more flexible in their rostering and contract conditions, some parents on welfare need to overcome huge barriers to join the workforce.

To combat these challenges, the company runs training courses to make the transition easier.

"Many parents are very confused about the new requirements to look for work," Sherwin says. "That needs to be unravell-ed so we explain why these changes have occurred and why the Government has made this decision and we address those sorts of things.

"Their main fears are: How do I do this? How am I going to juggle the needs of my family and my employer. How am I going to do this?"

"Then they worry about what they have to offer to an employer.

"They might have been out of the workforce for 10 years (but) they don't realise that they have transferable skills with commercial value.

"They also don't know what to do (or) where to start to look for jobs. They don't know what employers are interested in hiring people part-time.

"Then there are concerns about child care, where is it and how will they afford it – and they need the tools to develop a support network of family and friends so, if the child has a sniffle and can be left in someone's care, the parent doesn't have to stay home from work."

Sherwin says some parents also need help writing a resume, which could perhaps be the first they have compiled in their adult life. Others do not know how to use the internet to search for jobs.

She says employers need to be more understanding of those workers' needs.

"To make it easier for them, employers firstly need empathy and to understand the fear and anxiety of someone returning to the workforce after a long period of time," Sherwin says.

"There is a whole pool of sole parents out there about to enter the workforce and they have fantastic life skills and maturity and time-management skills but they are only looking for part-time work – say 15-20 hours.

"Employers who don't usually use part-time workers need to think about how they can. Maybe they need to make small changes to their operations. If staff has always started at 8am, perhaps there could be a second shift that starts at 9.30am and finishes at 3pm.

"The returns are good. Once an employee settles in, they bring all the qualities that an older worker has and the result is a more loyal employee," she says.

Balancing Family and Career courses, run by Sarina Russo Job Access and Work Savvy Parents. Twelve sessions over four weeks during school hours are to be run later this month at Mitchelton and, later, at other centres. Inquiries to Lisa Sherwin on 3621 5709 or Greg Lock on 0407 180 070