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Australia's publicans tapping into mature workforce to solve staff shortages

By **RHIANNON DOWN**, REPORTER
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Publicans across the country are encouraging older workers – including retirees – to get behind the bar again to pull the nation's hospitality industry out of a one-in-100-years staffing crisis.

Vacancies across the industry, exacerbated by a shortage of international workers, have reached a crisis point at 100,000 positions, leaving businesses shorthanded for the summer rush.

Katrina Jones, 51, returned to hospitality after a decade away from the industry and started behind the bar at the Cobargo Hotel on NSW's south coast about three weeks ago, when she was looking for work to fit around her family commitments.

"I thought, oh well, pulling a beer is like riding a bike," she said.

"It's been a bit hectic at times, but it's interesting and got me meeting people I wouldn't have met before, so I'm enjoying it.

"I was a bit nervous but the people who are here are friendly and didn't make me feel bad while learning the ropes.

"I think that's really important if you're going to have people come into work, it's all about how it makes them feel."

Cobargo Hotel owner David Allen said that when his online job ads for bar staff went unanswered, he decided to change tack, instead pivoting to hiring older staff to fill vacancies through word of mouth.

"This is a once-in-100-years problem that requires a once in a 100 years solution," he said.

"We are really struggling to find workers; you go on to Seek and there are 100,000 ads and you type in manger and there are 600 jobs and for bar staff there are thousands.

"I had a sort of light bulb moment; in our area the median age is 53, we have an older population and getting older, there's hardly any accommodation so it's hard to import workers from the city, there is nowhere for them to rent."

Mr Allen is fighting to dispel the myth that hospitality is a job for backpackers or people in their 20s, stressing it's an industry that offers flexible hours to suit all ages that anyone with transferable skills can be trained quickly for.

"Older workers have so much to offer, they've got life skills, all you need is an RSA and maybe a barista course and we can upskill them," he said.

"In ads for bar jobs there is always a picture of young people behind the bar; young, beautiful.

"It's the wrong message to send; if you're an older person don't bother. The first thing I see is older people are not welcome.

"You have to fight against the thinking that if you're over 50 you can't work in certain industries."

Ruth Wyard, 63, who has been working at the pub for more than two years, said she had rarely seen demand this high in Cobargo, which now has only one pub and one cafe left standing after fire tore through the town of about 700 residents during the Black Summer catastrophe.

"Unfortunately, none of the town shops have been rebuilt so there is a lack of that sort of thing happening for tourism," she said.

"There isn't really anywhere to eat, there's just us and one small cafe up town that's available for food, and the shopping capacity is greatly diminished."

Australian Hotels Association national chief executive Stephen Ferguson said the industry was recovering from the worst 18 months in its history and was in desperate need of workers.

"The return of international students and working holiday-makers will be slow, but we have an army of skilled mature-age workers here that we need to tap into," he said.

"There is a pool of retired people out there and many older workers who lost jobs during the pandemic, and these people have the 'soft skills' needed to work in a pub. They are reliable, hardworking and mature – and we need their help."