Mature workers are the fastest growing cohort of the APS workforce. Soon, 23 per cent of mature workers will be eligible to retire, making it a strategic priority now for the APS to identify, and remove, barriers to a long, productive life of work in the APS.

The Australian Government priorities for the APS are to:

- build a stronger Australia through greater workforce participation and increased productivity
- make for a fairer Australia by way of enhanced social inclusion
- develop and implement strategies that support APS front line managers as effective leaders.

Why did we undertake this project?

- Workforce challenges for the APS—Australia’s population is ageing. There are fewer workers to support retirees and young dependants. Measures to improve recruitment, as well as retention rates among older workers, are needed.

- Chronic disease is on the rise—Chronic disease is the leading type of disability preventing or impairing work capacity. The workplace is recognised as having a critical role in slowing the rising prevalence of lifestyle-related chronic diseases and enabling those with disability or ill health to remain in employment.

- Engaging a multi-generational workforce—The APS must meet the challenges of a workforce comprised of four generations. Participation and engagement of all workers is essential for a dynamic and vibrant APS.

- Embracing disability and diversity—The APS has a commitment to foster workplaces where the diverse skills, abilities and cultural perspectives of individuals are respected. Disability needs to be seen as nothing more than another point of difference and the value of diversity is recognised. APS leaders and front line managers must become more confident to recruit, manage and support people with disability into their organisations.

- Innovation, productivity and human capital management—Innovative approaches are needed to build a more agile and strategically flexible APS to transform the APS into a forward looking public service.

- A strong evidence base—We can learn from others. Europe has a long history of effective approaches to improving worker health and work ability. The UK and Canada have more recently undertaken significant work and research in this area.

APS 200 project

In an effort to deliver on these priorities, Comcare led an Australian Public Sector Project (APS200). The APS200 Project: Work Ability and Ageing in the APS was supported by the Australian Public Sector Commission’s Workforce Group and the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations Labour Market Policy Branch.
The Work Ability and Ageing in the APS Project Team has developed an integrated, whole-of-government Framework for Action. This framework enables the APS culture, systems, and capabilities to better support the participation of older workers. Supported by leadership commitment and lifelong learning, four key elements were identified to influence retention of mature workers in the APS:

- Workforce planning and development
- Frontline confidence and attitudes to ageing
- Work design
- Health and wellbeing

‘Now, the big issue is what should be changed? Is it the human beings, or, is it the work?

We cannot change the human ageing process—that’d take a couple of thousand years; but; we can change the work life’.

Professor Juhani Ilmarinen

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1 Intergenerational Report 2010.
2 AIHW, Australia’s Health 2008.