

Menopause in the workplace: the compelling research and what it tells us

Menopause Friendly Australia CEO, Grace Molloy, recently talked to a panel of expert researchers about the types and findings of research conducted so far, how it is being applied to inform workplace engagement, policy and practice, and where the research needs to focus next to build out a more inclusive body of knowledge.

The panel comprised [Professor Jo Brewis](#), [Dr Belinda Steffan](#), [Professor Carol Atkinson](#) and [Deborah Garlick](#).

Gender issues have been a topic of workplace research since at least the 1960s, with a focus on menopause emerging in the 1990s and ramping up significantly since 2010.

An increasing body of peer-reviewed social science research, both qualitative and quantitative, is providing compelling foundational evidence to inform and build engagement with workplaces in how to improve their people's experience of menopause and, in turn, benefit by attracting and retaining experienced staff.

So, what is this research telling us and where do we next need to focus our efforts?

Menopause at work, the story so far

The panel shared interesting findings from studies in the United Kingdom.

Correlation between menopausal symptoms and reduced workforce participation: Longitudinal studies published by University College of London suggest a correlation between women who have one troublesome menopausal symptom at age of 50, and their likelihood of leaving or reducing work by 55.

Workplace practice lags policy: Work with both the police force and National Health Service (NHS) in the UK found that even where there are enlightened approaches to menopause policy, this is often not matched by progress with ingrained workplace culture and practice, such as a lack of flexibility, long shifts without access to toilets, water or a change of clothes, and even issues with uniforms that make it challenging to manage menopausal symptoms. An ongoing sense of stigmatisation makes open, normalised conversation difficult.

Impact on sense of self: The impact of the menopause transition can see women shift from a positive sense of self to being more negative and self-deprecating. Individuals adopt different mechanisms to cope with physical and psychological symptoms. A stronger social support network helps accommodate physical symptoms, with a greater reliance on more individual resources such as selection, optimisation and compensation (focusing on using and practicing their most needed skills, and compensating for losses in other areas) to manage psychologically. As in any life transition, personal resilience helps individuals make sense of the experience but, conflictly, menopause itself can disrupt personal resilience.

Overcompensating to manage performance: One study showed that while women's symptoms worsened their performance over six months, their self-reported performance increased because they were working weekends, evenings and through annual leave to overcompensate, often at the expense of their health, wellbeing and personal time.

Increasing diversity for more inclusive research

Whilst it is heartening to see the progress made in researching the experience of menopause at work, the conversation so far is over-represented by the voices of white, affluent, middle-class women, who comprise a higher proportion of some workforces and are often more likely to feel confident participating in research activities about menopause.

Research targeting more diverse communities will help broaden these important conversations.

LGBTQI+ communities: It is not only cisgender women (that is those whose female gender identity corresponds with their birth gender) who experience menopause. Anyone born with ovaries, including transgender men and non-binary individuals, will go through this transition.

Need for multi-domain research: More research is needed to explore the workforce experiences of those identifying with disability, different races, ethnicities and religions, and the intersection with neurodiversity, as well as those people navigating the experience within the precarious and unpredictable gig economy.

The midlife experience: Midlife can be messy and complicated. There can be relationship disruption, divorce, and caring responsibilities for older children, elders and partners, with much of this unpaid burden falling to women. There is opportunity to compare the experience of midlife women with that of midlife men in the broader context of midlife workplace retention and gendered ageism.

Localised research: While the panel's research has primarily been conducted in the UK, the findings translate well into culturally similar regions like Australia. US research translates less well due to major differences in workplace support and healthcare access. The panel referenced localised research in Australia, the Netherlands, Kenya and the Philippines, which is helping build a broader perspective and foster more open conversations.

Translating research into practice to drive cultural change

Social science research reflects that there is not one right way to manage menopause in the workplace. Just as each person's experience is unique, so too each organisation is unique in its culture, leadership style, roles and workplace environments.

It starts with an organisation wanting to change simply to do the right thing for their employees and then asking two important questions: ‘What’s getting in the way of you being your best at work?’ and ‘How can we help?’

The key to success is a focus on cultural change informed first by awareness – the ages, stages, symptoms, solutions and options – and then reviewing the levers available to lift and shift culture, including policies, practices, engagement and training, with sustained engagement and open conversation to embed the change.

Every organisation taking this journey and every Menopause Friendly Accreditation **contributes evidence of what works**. Conducting a baseline survey helps measure the difference these activities are making, and this further matures the models and research. In the UK, Menopause Friendly has over 500 members with a reach of more than 3.5 million people. More than 100 employers have achieved accreditation, which is rigorous, meaningful and helps attract talent, increase engagement and improve workplace environments. Menopause Friendly reviews its standards yearly to maintain currency.

There are clear indications that people have been waiting for this conversation to happen, with workplaces reporting record engagement with intranet posts and events focused on menopause – because knowledge is empowering and sometimes even life changing.

Research is foundational to building a culture of openness and inclusion that enables individuals to understand, disclose and address what’s happening to them with confidence, and to equip workplaces to support them, which benefits both the individual and the organisation.

Closing out our panel, Deborah Garlick reflected on how great it would have been to have started this work 20 years ago when we knew we had an aging demographic with increased female participation? It has certainly started now, and we look forward to sharing further insight from this ongoing Australian and international research.

Watch a recording here: <https://menopausefriendly.au/news/research-menopause-workplace/>

Read the research quoted here: <https://menopausefriendly.au/research/>

Existing menopause in the workplace research referenced in the webinar

Significant research from Australian workplace:

WOMEN WORK AND THE MENOPAUSE PROJECT

Gavin Jack & Kathleen Riach: Monash University

<https://womenworkandthemenopause.com/>

Findings: Should women enjoy good health and well-being after menopause, they can potentially contribute an additional 15-20 years of productive, creative labour to organisations.

Women, Work and the Menopause suggests that menopausal status in itself does not impact productivity; however, organisational support and workplace cultures that stigmatise and problematise older women or menopausal stereotypes, may exacerbate menopause-related symptoms. These kinds of experiences may influence women's engagement and enjoyment of work.

Results indicated that the experience of symptoms associated with menopause did impact on work. The more frequently women experienced menopause-related symptoms, the less engaged they felt at work, less satisfied with their job, less committed to the organisation they work for, and with a greater intention to quit their job. These findings suggest that the experience of menopause-related symptoms negatively impacts on women's experience at work, independently of the age-related effects on work experiences.

These results underpin a call for the implementation of workplace procedures and policies that support working women as they transition through menopause.

Flexibility

Most women reported that they have a flexible work environment (i.e. flexibility in working hours, working arrangements and sickness absence procedures). The flexibility figures from the current study are encouraging to see, as an accommodating workplace is important for older women given the significant life changes they face.

Temperature

Only 30% of respondents reported that they had control over the temperature of their immediate working environment. Further analysis revealed that women who reported that they had control over the temperature reported fewer bothersome menopause-related symptoms and reported experiencing menopause-related symptoms less frequently.

Manager Training

Very few participants indicated that their workplace provided support (formal or informal) or line management training on menopause (3% or less). It is clear that most workplaces underestimate the impact menopause and associated symptoms have on older working women's enjoyment and engagement at work. Based on the preliminary findings from this study and others (e.g. Griffiths et al., 2013) the authors propose that some level of menopause-specific line management training and both formal and informal support networks be developed and implemented. This training should be

integrated into the broader organisational framework around occupational health and well-being (in later life).

Other research:

Research by Prof Jo Brewis

•
Menopausal transition and change in employment: Evidence from the National Child Development Study – Maturitas

•
The consequences of early menopause and menopause symptoms for labour market participation – ScienceDirect

•
Research Page for Prof Jo Brewis

Research by Prof Carol Atkinson

•
The Menopause Taboo at Work: Examining Women's Embodied Experiences of Menopause in the UK Police Service – Carol Atkinson, Fiona Carmichael, Jo Duberley, 2021 (sagepub.com)

•
Menopause and the workplace: New directions in HRM research and HR practice – Atkinson – 2021 – Human Resource Management Journal – Wiley Online Library

•
Policy brief on the UK Police Service Report

Research by Dr Belinda Steffan

•
Steffan, B. (2023) <https://theconversation.com/why-its-good-to-talk-about-womens-health-at-work-according-to-research-212591>

•
Steffan, B., & Loretto, W. (2024). Menopause, work and mid-life: Challenging the ideal worker stereotype. *Gender, Work & Organization*.

•
Steffan, B. (2021). Managing menopause at work: The contradictory nature of identity talk. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(1), 195-214.

•
Steffan, B., & Potočník, K. (2023). Thinking outside Pandora's Box: Revealing differential effects of coping with physical and psychological menopause symptoms at work. *Human Relations*, 76(8), 1191-1225.

Domestic Violence and Menopause

•
Menopause & Domestic Abuse: Early Findings from AVA's Stuck in the Middle with You Project

•
Associations of Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Assault, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder With Menopause Symptoms Among Midlife and Older Women

•
Impact of violence against women on quality of life and menopause-related disorders