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Re-employing older workers: Ageism reconsidered

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In the future, the ageing of “baby boomers” is likely to result in a shortage of skilled labour in Australia, like other western countries. This shortage is due to baby boomers’ early retirement and decreasing national birth rates. In addition, the workforce is ageing, due to improved health, lifestyle, and longevity. There are several consequences of this increased longevity. A consequence of this is that many older workers will find it difficult to adequately fund their longer years of retirement through superannuation and other personal savings, especially where unsound investments have been made. Some older workers may wish to stay in the workforce for longer periods, others might wish to re-enter paid employment after retirement, and still others may involuntarily exit. This paper focuses on the issues of workers extending their working lives, and explores the issues of older would-be workers who wish to continue to work by re-entering the workforce, and whether this is a possibility for them. However, older workers, particularly those seeking to re-enter the workforce, currently find it more difficult to be hired. A common assumption is that low levels of recruitment of older workers are explained by ageism alone. However, this presumes that all older workers experience re-entry into the workforce in a uniform way, and that they share similar expectations and desires regarding work.

There currently exists a gap in the literature about older workers’ desire to return to work, and the conditions under which skilled older individuals would be attracted back to work. This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study, which investigated the views of older people who had already left the workforce. The data indicated the influence of: the levels of qualification and skills, the availability of suitable part-time work, the impact that barriers emergent from the taxation system have upon access to workplace benefits, and the youth oriented attitudes in the workplace.

The paper concludes that older ex-workers find it difficult to rejoin the paid workforce because employers see them as not being the most competitive in a hiring decision, based on “objective” measures. This may be the consequence of the most competitive older workers having already left the workforce, possibly because they have had more financially rewarding or lucrative careers. These more qualified and experienced older ex-workers may have no need or desire to return to the workforce, and thus are not part of any job competition. In addition, older ex-workers will often compete for jobs against not only younger workers, but also other older workers who remain in the workforce. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it may not be simply ageism at work and as this paper will demonstrate, once the meanings older people attach to employment are examined, a more complex picture emerges of the would-be older worker.

CONTEXT FOR STUDY

The population of Australia is ageing, and, by world standards, the population can already be described as “old” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Like other western countries, the average age of people in the Australian workforce is also increasing, with people also generally living longer. The Australian Bureau of
Statistics (ABS) forecasts that the proportion of Australia’s population over the age of 65 years will double by 2051 and the 15 to 64 year-old cohort, that is, those being relied upon to fund the general taxation reserve from which future welfare payments are to be made, is projected to decline by 7 percent over the same period (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000).

The Australian "Baby Boomer" generation (mostly accepted as those born in Australia between 1945 and 1960) has now progressed through to the brink of retirement and, in 10 or so years, will create a “bulge” of 65 year olds. This will begin a period of ten years of “the highest rate of growth in the over 65 age group” (ACIL Consulting, 2000: 9). In 2003, the oldest of these Baby Boomers are turning 58 years of age, with the youngest turning 43. Hartmann (1998) suggested that the continued trend of the early retirement of the Baby Boomer generation would result in a shortage of skilled workers, notably in the areas of professionals in health, management and business services, and engineering. This continuing trend towards early retirement, combined with the low birth rates of the Boomers, is likely to exacerbate this labour shortage, as well as the type of employment opportunities that will be available, which will vary substantially for this generation. The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) (1991) indicated that new jobs created since 1991 will be more skilled than seventy-five percent of jobs available in Australia in 1986. In other words, similar to other western countries, some of which are already experiencing this phenomenon, Australia’s “Baby Boomer bulge” is likely to cause a shortage of skilled labour as well as straining the welfare system to the point where early retirement might well become more difficult.

The problems likely to be created if there is no change to the current situation are wide reaching and include the possibility of people working longer in life than they want to, for more hours than they want to, and in jobs that they do not like. There is also the possibility that skilled older workers will want to remain in the workforce, beyond the accepted age of 65. This latter scenario is that argued by many researchers who have commented that the Baby Boomer generation will not want to stop work altogether, but change the amount and type of involvement, and continue to use their intellect (see for example, Kadlec, 2002).

To meet the looming labour shortage, options include organisations either retaining or re-employing skilled older workers. The advantages of extended working lives are clear: (a) additional productivity in the workforce; (b) reducing the financial burden on (younger) tax payers to cover health and allied care; (c) increased tax takings to assist government budgets; and (d) access to increased private financial resources as a result of increased personal income and wealth (Sheen, 2001). However, older workers find it more difficult to be hired, and particularly once they have left the workforce (see for example, Encel, 2003; Sheen , 2001). This paper looks at some possible reasons why this might be the case.

The experiences surrounding older workers’ re-employment needs examining, and this paper looks at those. One of the consequences of increased longevity is that individuals are likely to find it difficult to adequately fund their longer years of (traditionally non-working) life, relying on superannuation (which was designed at a time when people retired at the age of 65 and usually lived only another 5-10 years after retirement) and other personal savings. That is, at the same time as older
workers may financially need to continue working later in their lives, the ability of older workers to find re-employment is low. The most common explanation given for older workers having difficulty in re-employment is ageism. This explanation may need reconsidering, and is the focus of this paper. Older workers are less likely to be hired, whether they remain in the workforce, or are outside the workforce, but the reasons for this require investigation. One possibility might be that older workers who are seeking employment or re-employment are not seen as the most competitive applicants in a hiring decision. This paper investigates the latter of these groups of workers – the ex-worker seeking re-employment.

One area not commonly researched in the literature is whether older workers need to, or want to, continue to work, and the implications of such decisions by them. Perhaps it could be that the more qualified and experienced older ex-workers have no need or desire to return to work. Perhaps it is the less able older workers who are the job seekers participating in research, and being reported on as not being hired. If this were the case, such older workers may not be the best applicants for the job, irrespective of age, and are simply not competitive with their younger counterparts at the time of hiring. This paper seeks to explore the issues of re-employment experiences of older workers and their desire to continue to work, by way of re-entering the workforce, beyond the traditional age of retirement (65 years of age in Australia). In particular, this paper discusses the possibility that the better qualified and more highly skilled older workers may leave the workforce, and those older (and less skilled?) workers remaining are left to compete against younger workers for the available jobs. There may be several reasons why the more skilled older workers leave the workforce. However, for those wishing to re-enter the workforce, the difficulties remain, and the reasons for this are explored.

AGEISM


Age discrimination is usually considered as the “less favourable treatment of an individual compared to others solely on the basis of their chronological age” (CCH, 1994, cited in Bennington and Tharenou, 1996: 63), or more simply as "discrimination against people on the basis of chronological age" (Bytheway, 1995: 14). Glover and Branine (2001) add that ageism is “unconscionable prejudice and discrimination based on actual or perceived chronological age. It occurs whenever a person’s age is erroneously deemed to be unsuitable for some reason or purpose” (2001: 4). Hamilton (2001) however added a further, practical dimension concerning decisions being based on “irrational prejudice or stereotyping rather than on a proper consideration of objective factors such as that person’s skills, abilities and experiences” (2001: 199). In employment, such decisions would impact advertising
vacancies, recruitment and selection, promotion and demotion, education, training and development, redundancy, redeployment, retraining, dismissal and retirement. For example, to avoid claims of age discrimination, some USA employers were found by McGoldrick and Arrowsmith (1993) to be advertising for younger workers, but using inference rather than directly stating age in their advertisements, while some employers were using recruitment agencies to distance themselves from recruitment (and potential claims of ageism), and avoided any involvement in selection until after the shortlisting stage. Such circumstances have implications for older ex-workers seeking re-employment.

Currently, the hiring of people in Australia and most western democracies is covered by some sort of legislation, such as the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Federal) and the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Federal) in Australia, while in the UK there is the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, Race Relations Act 1976, Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. In the USA, there are the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Age Discrimination in Employment Act 1967, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and The Age Discrimination in Employment Act, 1998. Various governments in Australia have created specially designed organisations to assist in monitoring the relevant State and Federal Acts, such as the Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment (WA), the Office of Public Sector Merit and Equity (Queensland) and the Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment (NSW). Australia’s legislation means that such personal factors as marital status, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, ethnic or racial origin, union activity or family responsibilities are irrelevant to, and must not be allowed to influence, employment decisions. Age is one of these illegal factors in most states in Australia but as yet is not included in federal level legislation (Vines, 2001). However, the government monitoring offices in each state and territory in Australia are finding that the legislation is not necessarily working in practice (Encel, 2003), probably because there are covert ways of discriminating against people.

As detailed above, various researchers found covert ageism still occurred, and that older workers found it difficult to return to the workforce once they had left, tended to be out of the workforce for longer, and were less likely to be offered job-related training. Some of these authors also found that older workers were less likely to be promoted, and more likely to be "downsized out" of an organisation or selected for redundancy (which may be a cover for ageism). "This form of discrimination has adversely affected many people and their careers" (Bennington and Calvert, 1998: 136). In Australia, an ABS survey of unemployed found that 44 percent of respondents aged 45 and over identified age as the most important single obstacle to getting a job, and this proportion increased significantly to 64 percent among respondents aged 55 and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994). In terms of the comparative effects of possible age discrimination in Australia, Hartmann (1998) provided data on the reduction in the employment rates for older workers, aged 45 - 64 years, over the period 1976-1996. The apparently hardest hit of the categories was men aged between 55-59, whose unemployment rates rose from 1.9% in 1976, to 6% in 1986, and to 10.3% in 1996. In addition, the length of time of unemployment of this male age group also rose from approximately 90 weeks to 110 weeks between 1986 and 1996 (Hartmann, 1998). Further to this trend, Encel (1998) noted that this rise was up from 36 weeks in 1978. Vines (2001) found that the disadvantages
suffered by older workers in Australia include “low participation rates in employment, high rates of casualisation, comparatively low levels of training, extended length of time in the unemployment ranks, and continuing displacement from work” (2001: 15).

Minichiello, Browne, and Kendig (2000) investigated the rationale behind ageist behaviour, and suggested that it was the managerial biases that older workers are too costly, too inflexible and too difficult to train which were the most significant barriers and deterrents. While Peng and Klein (1999) argued that legislation offered some protection to older workers, “stereotyping, unfair policies, and discriminatory practices” apparently still continued (1999: 72). Further, they argued, one of the greatest barriers to eliminating age discrimination was lack of information – older workers did not know their rights and employers still believed the negative stereotypes.

In terms of older workers being available for employment, there is literature (for example, Field, 2001; Kadlec, 2002; Stein, Rocco and Goldenetz, 2000) supporting the view that older workers will want to continue to contribute (not necessarily in the same pre-retirement jobs, or in a full-time capacity) and to remain involved, but this literature tends to be predicting current or future trends in the USA. Also, the level of qualification and skill is not analysed sufficiently throughout the literature to be able to predict whether certain skill levels are more likely to create employment opportunities. In terms of employment opportunities and the likely employment success for older workers, the question remains whether the lack of recruitment of older workers is caused by ageism alone, or whether there is something else occurring to make the hiring of older workers less likely. Exploring the possibility that the “more highly skilled” older workers leave the workforce, and that the older workers who remain may be less able and therefore not competitive for jobs in the labour market, appears warranted. That is, in Australia, it may not be simply ageism that causes older workers to be less successful in their endeavors to secure employment. It could also be that those who are applying for jobs are not competitive. Further research in Australia is needed into the employment possibilities for older ex-workers.

THE CURRENT STUDY

According to Patrickson (2001) and Patrickson and Clarke (2001), the financial security of employed older workers will impact their decision to retire or to stay in the workforce. Thus, those who have voluntarily left the workforce may have had the more financially rewarding or lucrative careers, implying that they may be the more highly skilled older workers. Being in a more financially secure position to provide for their non-working future allows greater flexibility in choosing to work or not, how much work, and whether or not they need to be paid. It may also follow that such older workers have higher-level networks than those remaining in the workforce, upon which to call should they seek post-retirement employment, be it casual, part-time or consulting, or starting their own business. On the other hand, these more qualified and experienced older workers may have no need or desire to return to the workforce, but some may stay for social or professional commitment reasons. This situation may relate to the type of skills possessed by the older workers, as some would possess highly valued skills, and some may not. With their skills, they are
likely to be able to continue to work in a variety of other types of work, for example part-time consultancies.

The better-qualified and skilled workers may seek flexible work arrangements, particularly with less than full-time hours, and may include short-term, possibly full-time, but not year-long assignments. However, part-time work for the high level executive or professional is likely still seen as being outside the norm of workplace arrangements, so these types of desired working arrangements are probably not yet accessible by the majority of better-qualified older workers. As a result, such better-qualified and skilled workers are more likely to leave the workforce. Another possibility could be that the social culture surrounding retirement in our western way of life appears to have been to retire early and possibly to show your success by being able to finish work earlier in your life than others, and then relax, stop work and play golf; or to make way for the up-and-coming “young guns”. This may have persuaded older workers who can afford to voluntarily retire, to do so early. Perhaps it is the less skilled remaining older workers who are the subjects of study in the published research, and it is a possibility that the more skilled older workers, who have left, are not investigated because they are not accessible within the workforce, or not found within the organisations being investigated. Also, there is a likelihood of skewed data supporting ageist assumptions because a particular, new, segment of the older ex-worker group has been under-researched. Research has not explored the experiences of those older workers who are outside the workforce, and their experiences of seeking re-employment, and competing against both younger and other still-employed older workers. This paper will discuss the results of interviews with older people currently outside the workforce, and their views concerning re-employment possibilities for them.

For the older ex-worker, competition for jobs is likely to be against still-employed (less skilled?) older workers, and younger workers. If an employer is given a choice between an older ex-worker and one still in the workforce, the employer is possibly more likely to choose the current employee. This decision could be based on the employer’s assumption that the ex-worker had involuntarily left the workforce, otherwise s/he would be retired, and therefore is not as skilled as others still in the workforce. In addition, the assumption may be that the older workers remaining in the workforce are also not highly skilled, or else they would have voluntarily left the workforce already. In other words, neither group of older worker appears as attractive as a new hire to the employer as does the younger worker. The logical consequence would be that younger workers would be selected for available jobs proportionately more frequently than older workers, either inside or outside the workforce.

Ageism may not be the simple or only explanation for such hiring decisions, but that the better older workers have left the workforce and are therefore not competing, while those who remain are less skilled that their younger counterparts. The evidence that fewer older workers are successful in their job seeking may be the result of these situations, creating the impression that older workers are not hired because of their age. In practice, however this may be due to the relatively stronger competition, not simply ageism. In other words, it is not that employers are not selecting older ex-workers because of their age, but that, compared with others (younger workers), such older ex-workers are not as competitive.
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A preliminary study investigated the views of older ex-workers about the employment conditions under which they would be attracted to return to work. The views were sought of older workers no longer in the workforce, and how they viewed the likelihood of their being able to return to work, and how, from their perspective, organisations might help or hinder that re-entry to the workforce. Therefore, this study examined, from the experiences of older ex-workers themselves, what employment practices might organisations use to retain, retire or rehire their staff, and what employment practices might they be using to ignore older ex-workers as re-entrants to the workforce.

A qualitative research approach, using semi-structured questions administered in a face-to-face interview, was used to investigate the participants’ experiences of being older workers and their employment histories. The researcher, using voice recognition software, transcribed the audiotapes obtained from those interviews. Once the data were collected and transcribed, the researcher analysed it by identifying the major themes across the transcribed text. This process involved firstly, identifying and listing the main or dominant themes, and secondly, finding supporting comments.

The participant sample was five older workers who were not currently in the workforce, and was selected from people who were either retired, had voluntarily left the workforce, or had been unable to rejoin the workforce once they had been involuntarily expelled. Steinberg, Walley, Tyman and Donald (1998) found that sixty-two percent of Australian employers considered the age of 55 to be the benchmark for an “older” worker, and so this age was selected for this Australian study. The participants each had mixed employment histories, except for one who had more than twenty years in the one company. Participants were selected from a combination of employment histories, sex and age (but all over 55 years), as well as industry type. The reason that there is no maximum of the age range is that Drucker (2001) predicted that within three decades, Australia and other developed countries would have raised the minimum age of access to full retirement benefits to 75 years.

The participants ranged in age from 60-68, and there were three males and two females. Two of the male participants were qualified professionals, one had a trade qualification and the two females were not qualified in either secondary or tertiary formal education. Four of the five had had working “careers” (in their own words), the men for a longer time, and reaching higher levels within organisations and higher salaries than the women. One woman had not had a “career”, but a series of jobs split over time in and out of the workforce, and broken-up with time devoted to caring for her sick father until he died. See Figure 1 below for details of the participants.
Figure 1  Schedule of Interviewees’ details

(The names of these participants are not their real names. The names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.)

“Bill”
Male, aged 68, has had lots of jobs, is self-employed, has no qualifications, has been a senior manager, does voluntary work, his main income is the age pension, and he lives with his wife in their home.

“Geoff”
Male, aged 61, qualified, a self-funded retiree, has worked for companies for many years, and then bought his own business, who lives with his wife in their own home.

“Howard”
Male, aged 65, married, lives with his wife in their own home, has been a very senior executive and CEO, is qualified, retired at 56 years, is on several “boards of directors” (gets paid for that), and is a self-funded retiree.

“Marg”
Female, aged 67, lives with her husband in their own home, left school at 14, is not qualified, has worked in clerical jobs all her life, depends upon the age pension for income, her employing company moved when she was 55, but she had a sick child she cared for at home so couldn’t move with the company. She moved to Gold Coast and did not get another subsequent job.

“Norma”
Female, aged 60, is not qualified, has been a clerk and teachers’ aide, has not had a “career”, has nursed her sick father, has never married, had no children, does voluntary work, lives alone in her own home, and depends for income on a Disabled Pension.

Preliminary themes from the study are explained under the following headings: (i) qualifications and voluntary separation from the workforce; (ii) access to workforce for less qualified older workers; (iii) continuation of older working lives; (iv) importance of part-time work; (v) constraints of the taxation system; (vi) age as self-justification for non-hiring; and (vii) younger people’s reactions to older workers have a negative impact on hiring decisions. Each of these seven themes is supported by comments from the participants, as outlined below. The literature in the area of the ageing workforce also supports most of these findings, as detailed under the separate headings below.

(i) Qualifications and voluntary separation from the workforce

One issue that emerged from the interviews was that of the apparent different “quality”, or competitiveness in a hiring situation, of the various participants. That is,
it appears that the two better qualified participants (Howard and Geoff), who had had the more lucrative careers (as measured by their job titles and organisations), were both voluntarily out of the workforce and self-funded in their retirement. The other three participants (Marg, Norma and Bill) were less qualified, less well financed, possibly due to less lucrative careers, broken careers or choices to not work for a period of time. These latter three participants were all dependent on government pensions, and two of them wished to return to work but had been unable to get a suitable job, which matched their background experience and their perceptions of their appropriate level of remuneration.

Another reason that the more skilled workers may have left the workforce is that the offer of flexible working arrangements for senior employees was not available to them.

Howard (male, aged 65, married, self-funded retiree), mentioned, “absolutely no, not at all. You just couldn’t do it – you’re either running the place or you’re not running the place. It takes a given individual a certain amount of time - you can’t do half the job, you really can’t”.

In order to reduce the pressures of full-time work, these more senior level participants had to leave the workforce, as there appeared little alternative.

(ii) Access to workforce for less qualified older workers

Another finding was that the less qualified older workers, who had left for a variety of reasons including involuntary separation, were unable to return to the workforce to a desirable or full-time job. In each case, they had wanted to return to the workforce and believed that they had the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities to do so, and held expectations that returning to full-time work was a reasonable and achievable goal for them at that time. For example,

Bill (male, aged 68, married, pensioner) said, “And I actively looked in the paper for positions for the first few years after coming up here. No one ever asked for a 55 or 60 year old manager to work”.

Norma (aged 60, single, not working, on a pension) provided the following, “I went back and applied for all these jobs and you know, you go in and you could see it on their faces, in ’oh gosh, she’s an old biddy, and we don’t want her’”.

Geoff (male, aged 61, self-funded retiree) mentioned, “I looked at buying a business in order to buy a job”.

None of those who wanted to do so was able to re-enter the workforce to a desirable full-time job.

Interestingly, the more highly skilled participants who were self-funded retirees and financially secure were not now keen to seek paid work, or to re-enter the full-time workforce. At the time of leaving the workforce, however, one of the self-funded retirees, while still working full-time, had believed that “the writing was on
the wall” and that he would be pushed out if he didn’t retire, and had originally sought to return to work immediately after retirement. He had expected to find full-time professional work at an executive level, but was unable to. All other participants, except the other self-funded retiree, had been involuntarily removed from the workforce and each had also sought to return to full-time work immediately, but remained unsuccessful in their quests.

Those older workers, who did not need to work (and did not wish to return to the workforce), tended to be those with higher qualifications, more lucrative careers and a wider variety, and level, of skills to offer employers. If these “better” older workers have left the workforce early, then perhaps those remaining in the workforce are those who are less competitive when compared with other age groups. If this is so, then ageism needs to be considered as a more complex framework that incorporates socio-economic and other dimensions.

While the sample size precludes making general statements about a relationship between older workers’ qualifications and skills with their employability, such further investigation would be worthwhile. Perhaps some older workers who are relatively less skilled may stay in or seek to return to the workforce, while those who can, leave. In other words, it may be a possibility that the “more highly skilled” older workers leave the workforce, and the older workers who remain may be less able and therefore not competitive for jobs in the labour market.

(iii) Continuation of older working lives

Each of the less qualified participants had wanted to continue to work at the time they had left the workforce, whether they had left voluntarily or not. Also, each would have returned to full-time work had they had that opportunity. However, since leaving the full-time workforce, most had obtained a combination of casual or part-time work, accepting a type or level of work that they believed to be less than their capabilities and experience should be able to command. Another reason provided by those participants who were not financially independent is that they each would have liked to have worked until an older age, or were still interested in work, in order to “top up” or save more for their full-time retirement. For example,

Geoff (male, aged 61, self-funded retiree) said, “but by the time you get to 60 or 70 or 80 the money can go pretty quick so I was still keen to get something to top up the money”.

However, one participant who was not financially independent, and lived essentially on a pension, said,

“I can honestly say I have never been bored. ... I can't imagine going back to work. Nothing would entice me back into the workforce!” (Marg, female, aged 67, married, pensioner).

(iv) Importance of part-time work
Most participants specified that they would now like two or three days’ work a week, or have assignment-type employment, such as three months’ full-time work, but not continuing for a whole year.

As Norma (aged 60, single, not working, on a pension) said, “I don’t mind if I could find a job for two days a week. I would be happy because I think that’s all I could manage”.

This finding supports the current practice concerning older workers, and the statistics that show that older workers work fewer hours per week, and are marginalised in the workforce (see for example, Sheen, 1999). Any offer of employment, in order to be attractive to older workers who were already outside the workforce, would need to be less than continuing full-time, with varying flexible working hour components, according to the comments made by the participants.

It may be that several years prior to being interviewed for this research, some participants had become discouraged from seeking full-time work and had accepted what they had managed to find. Perhaps they had become used to a less expensive lifestyle and a decreased income, and then when asked about full-time work, had decided that they were not as interested, as they could now live adequately on a lower level of income. Comments associated with the less than full-time work included “less pressure and stress”, “more time to do the other interests in my life”, “only accepting jobs that utilise my skills”, and “only taking jobs that I want”.

(v) Constraints of the taxation system

The amount of salary or wages was mentioned by three participants, but especially in relation to taxation and their pensions. The participants remarked that earning more money would negatively impact their income from the government-provided pension, and thus their overall remuneration. All the participants mentioned the problems and disincentives that the Australian taxation system currently offers to those who wish to work and who are eligible for government welfare. The Australian taxation system was not considered conducive to extra work, either as a fully self-funded retiree, or as an age (or other) pensioner, according to comments made by all the participants. The issue of the financial circumstances of the older worker affecting their decision to retire has been well documented by Patrickson (2001) and Patrickson and Clarke (2001), who argued that a person’s financial situation is one of the three main issues that influences a decision to retire or not.

For example, Bill (male, aged 68, married, pensioner) said, “For any person like myself, the incentive has to be better than what you're getting. So if the government pension was less attractive it would be more attractive to work”.

Howard (male, aged 65, married, self-funded retiree) added, “The real problem is the taxation system is not conducive to work and that's not conducive to earning high rewards. There’s a point at which this taxation system would stop me working”.
“The pension is too good to feel that, like if you worked for three days you wouldn't get as much pension anyway, which is fair enough, but it would stop a lot of people doing it, wouldn't it?”
(Marg, female, aged 67, married, pensioner).

One participant said that he wanted to be a paid a lot, but two did not offer any comment about the amount to be earned, but rather focused on the need for job satisfaction in any job s/he might undertake. In addition, Bill (male, aged 68, married, pensioner) said, “I would rather earn money than have it given to me”.

(vi) Age as self-justification for non-hiring

Comments regarding participants’ experiences with trying to enter or re-enter the workforce included a range of hiring issues, but particularly age-related issues.

“They want somebody young, who looks pretty. Always the interviewers are always much, much younger than you, and you could always tell, in their faces.” (Norma, aged 60, single, not working, on a pension).

Geoff (male, aged 61, self-funded retiree) commented, “I see something in the paper and have seen the odd job advertised and have thought about having a go, but most times there has been a negative response and you assume its because of your age”. Later he added, “The actual person-to-person interview didn't go too well; I think there was a lack of empathy between the interviewers and me, one of which,[…] not to be dismissive or sexist, was a young lady, and you know, I don't think we had much empathy”.

Bill (male, aged 68, married, pensioner) commented about the general lack of jobs available, “But up to 70-75 [years of age] people are still active but not a chance in hell of getting a job since 55”. Marg (female, aged 67, married, pensioner) remarked, “You get sick of looking [for employment]”. As can be seen from the above comments, older workers appeared to use their age as self-justification for non-hiring, with little further self-analysis of their relative competitiveness. All participants “blamed” their age as the reason for non-hiring.

Bill (male, aged 68, married, pensioner) said, “We've got to the stage now because of circumstances where there's just no employment for someone at 68. There's just none. No meaningful work,” and later added, “you assume it’s because of your age”.

Norma (aged 60, single, not working, on a pension) commented, “So you get to the interview on the basis of the paper, but when you walk in they didn't like you, 'cause you're too old”.

However, using your age as the reason given for non-employment success may be that this is simply a well-known and socially accepted reason to give to others (and to yourself) as to why you might not have been selected. Using this explanation means that no self-analysis need be undertaken, as the cause for non-hiring is beyond
the control of the individual, and therefore analysis of one’s comparative competence or experience is not necessary. This latter issue is important and has not been mentioned previously, but is worthy of further research.

(vii) Younger people’s reactions to older workers have a negative impact on hiring decisions

The differences in age between employers and supervisors who might be hiring new staff, and the age of the applicants, was mentioned as a reason for possible non-hiring. That is, participants remarked that younger hiring staff were less likely to choose older workers than were older hirers. In other words, in situations involving older workers as applicants, where the age differential between the applicant and the interviewer was relatively small, they commented that they had a better success rate in being hired. Also, the greater the age differential, participants commented, the lower the likelihood of being hired. Comments were made regarding the mixture of older and younger workers in the workplace. Where the workplace is full of younger workers, it may be that older workers are less likely to be selected, as younger workers might not “be comfortable” with older workers, or “do things in different ways” to older workers.

Two participants were keen for the research to mention that they felt that the younger generation reacted differently to the older generation, and that this may be the reason for non-hiring of older workers.

“\textit{I think a lot of young people find it hard to tolerate old people and I think that probably stops a lot of companies from employing old people}” (Marg, female, aged 67, married, pensioner).

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Evidence concerning the relatively lower levels of employment of older workers is abundant throughout the literature, and reflects that older workers are not as well represented in the labour force (proportionately) as are younger workers. Most older workers who have left the workforce want to continue to work beyond the traditional retirement age, and those who have been involuntarily forced out of the labour force want to return. However, after several years, as shown by the findings in this preliminary study, those who had been unsuccessful at re-employment had accepted that they were unlikely to be able to return to full-time work. They had apparently grown resigned to living on a lower income and now, sometimes years later, some were less willing to return to full-time work.

The comments made by the participants supported the literature in terms of the perceived negative value of older workers (either inside or outside the workforce) by employers, resulting in low rates of hiring older workers. The findings supported other research in that age was a common reason provided by participants for leaving the workforce; and that, should they desire to be re-employed, older ex-workers would seek flexible working hours that were less than full-time employment. The older ex-workers themselves commented that they had found trying to get re-employed was a difficult task, and that they believed that their age was a significant part of the reason for their lack of success. In other words, employers apparently did
not value older ex-workers as new hires. Another possible explanation for older ex-workers’ lack of hiring success could be that the more lucrative careers of some older workers may assist their decision to leave the workforce. Consequently, those older workers remaining or seeking a job might be those who are less well qualified and experienced, or who have had less lucrative careers.

If work is not flexible, to make it reasonably attractive to financially secure, qualified and experienced older ex-workers, they are unlikely to return to the workforce. As a consequence, if they leave, this may mean that the remaining, less qualified and less experienced older workers, who may need to work, are the applicants for the available jobs. In other words, if the more capable older workers do not want certain forms of work, then it may not be ageism, but lack of suitably competitive older workers, which causes the low hiring rate of older workers searching for jobs. Such a situation would justify employers not choosing the older, less competitive applicants. Thus, it might be plausible that employers would not be simply being ageist, but making the best hiring decision between the available applicants, founded on the broadly accepted basis of making a hiring decision - merit. These possibilities need further investigation, and a larger study across occupational groups and industries would be worthwhile.

Further research would also be beneficial to clarify the claims of older workers that age is the reason for their non-employment. Empirical research might support this view, confirming the actual continuance of ageism in the workplace. Alternatively, such research may find that age is not the main or only reason that older workers are not as frequently hired. One possibility could be that older job seekers are less competitive than other age groups in a hiring situation. A further area of investigation that might prove valuable is suggested by the findings of the study outlined in this paper - into the tensions that may exist between older and younger workers in the context of the hiring situation. Participants made comments about the negative impact of younger workers on older workers in the interview situation, and such possible intergenerational tensions may prove worthy of further exploration. It is planned to pursue such research, using a more social constructionist framework.

Other issues that would benefit from exploration are the employment conditions that employers and organisations might be willing to offer the better skilled older workers as an enticement back (or) into the workforce. Such research should include those older workers who have already left the workforce as well as those older workers that organisations consider worthwhile retaining later into their working life. Also, the possibility that older workers do not want to retire, even though financially they are able, but may want to continue to have some level of involvement, needs further exploration. Finally, an international comparison with other countries that are similarly facing a looming labour shortage due to an ageing workforce, and how their employment situations are being managed, would also strengthen the knowledge of older workers in the Australian workplace.
References


