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**Mature-age white-collar workers' training and employability**

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## **Mature age ‘white collar’ workers’ training and employability**

### **Abstract**

Global concerns about the growing impact of ageing populations on workplace productivity and on welfare budgets has led to a range of government-supported measures intended to retain and upskill older workers. Yet, a consistent theme in the research literature is that older workers are reluctant and harder to train than younger workers, and that, regardless, employers are ambivalent about supporting such training. However, a survey of over 250 mature-age workers in mainly professional and administrative (i.e. ‘white collar’) roles identified strong interest and belief in their capacity to engage in learning required to maintain their employability, and that their employers are often supportive of their ongoing education and training. The data also indicate that these workers found personal worth in their work, felt respected and acknowledged by co-workers, and wanted to contribute more fully to their workplaces. These findings not only contradict what is consistently reported elsewhere, but suggest that age *per se* may not be the factor that shapes perceptions of older workers’ employability, but the kinds of employment and level of education held by older workers. Therefore, extending the working lives of these valued ‘white collar’ workers might need to be realised through continuing to provide them with opportunities for rich work and further development to sustain their capacities and interest in contributing to their work and workplaces.

### **Older workers and opportunities for training**

Workforces across the world are aging, and increasingly governments are taking steps to encourage older workers to extend their working lives beyond the usual retirement age and for their employers to retain them as employees and act to sustain their employability. In some countries, including Australia, these government initiatives reflect a desire to maintain such employees’ productivity in the face of a growing demand for skilled workers, a projected decline in the number of younger people entering workforces, and also a concern about the likely impact on public finances of increasingly long periods of retirement. In this context, continuing education and skill development opportunities are seen as having potential to maximise these workers’ capabilities and sustain their employability, and thereby maintain and develop further a national workforce able to realise national social and economic goals (Skills Australia 2010). When it comes to older workers, however, perennial questions arise as to their capacity for the ongoing learning required to sustain their employability and commitment to education and training as they near retirement. These concerns may shape the willingness of employers to support training of employees in their later years of working life.

To understand further how older workers view training opportunities and engage in them, an online survey was undertaken of workers employed mainly in professional, managerial or administrative roles (i.e. ‘white collar’ workers) aged 45 to 64: the range classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as ‘mature age’ workers. There were 268 responses to the survey, which elicited data about mature age employees’ perceptions of their capacities as workers, contributions to work and workplaces, and how their employability is sustained by

workplace provisions and vocational education programs. The intention of the study is to provide insights for government policy makers, employers and educational providers about the place and role of vocational education, broadly defined, in sustaining mature age workers' employability.

### **Training and employability for mature age workers**

In the changing work environment that comprises contemporary workplaces, older workers electing to stay employed are likely to need access to learning opportunities or training programs to maintain their existing work competence or develop new skills for different jobs. However, the extent of their participation in ongoing learning is partially dependent on their employers' attitude to training older workers, the availability of, and access to, learning opportunities for vocational purposes, and at the same time on these employees' willingness, capacity and availability to engage in those opportunities, in other words, by the extent of the co-participation of affordances and engagement that plays out for these learners (Billett 2001a)

British research has identified a decrease in training participation as workers reach their 50s, with those in unskilled occupations least likely to receive skill development opportunities and support from their employers (e.g. Stoney and Roberts 2003; Newton, Hurstfield, Miller and Bates 2005, cited in Phillipson and Smith 2005: 45). Similarly, in Australia, Lundberg and Marshallsay (2007: 23) found 'ambivalence or uncertainty about the attitudes of their employers to supporting training for older workers continuing in work beyond retirement.' Noonan (2007: 20) suggests that managers are unlikely to invest in training older workers except where there seems to be a clear and immediate return or to meet mandatory requirements. For both employers and employees, McNair and Maltby, with Nettleship (2007: 28) observe: 'At its simplest, investment in training is evidently justifiable if it leads to an individual remaining economically productive for longer.' Yet, consistently, the literature reports that the exercise of such bases is likely to be the exception, and that the norm is the enactment of societal sentiments about the qualities of older workers, which is to limit training opportunities and expenditure. So, when it comes to the older workers who increasingly comprise a growing component of national workforces, there is considerable ambivalence in the literature about their capacity and willingness to 'improve and continually update', as captured by Bittman, Flick and Rice (2001: 39) in a review of research about such workers published between 1989 and 2000:

Australian studies report that older workers are valued for their skills, experience, loyalty, corporate knowledge, commitment, strong work ethic, reliability, and low absenteeism. At the same time, employers regard older workers as less adaptable to change, less productive, hard to train, inflexible, less motivated, a risky investment and with potential poor health.

Nevertheless, the picture is more nuanced than it first appears, because the evidence also suggests that the more education adults have, the more likely they are to undertake further education (Ball 1999, in Chappell Hawke, Rhodes, and Solomon, 2003: 56; Kennedy and Da Costa, 2006: 38; Anlezark, 2004: 1), and this trend extends to mature age workers. For example, Thomson, Dawe, Anlezark and Bowman (2005: 9) found that 'the higher the level of prior education, the more likely the older person is to participate in further training'. Moreover, the nature of the work and workplace is also influential in shaping the perception of older employees, according to Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008: 431):

... older workers who had a greater propensity to engage in development activities perceived that their job provided them with more opportunities and, in turn, were

more committed to their organization and intended to remain with their organization than those who were not inclined to pursue development activities and whose job did not provide them with opportunities for development.

This commitment seems important in the quest to extend the working lives of those who might otherwise retire. For instance, Phillipson and Smith (2005) found that training later in working life is most likely to occur in managerial and professional occupations, and that larger organisations are more likely to offer such support across their employees' working lives than smaller ones. The significance of the organisational context is also evident in two of the factors Smith, Oczkoski and Selby Smith (2008: 3) identified as important in fostering skills development for workers generally: i) the presence of a learning orientation in the organisation – people stay in organisations if they feel they are learning and progressing in their careers; and ii) the training as part of an overall learning culture – important in retaining skilled people and making better use of their skills. These findings suggest that factors other than age *per se* (i.e. being an older worker) are significant in both personal and workplace decision-making about older workers' employment and employability.

This brief review of literature suggests there are three elements to be considered in any examination of the participation of a cohort of mature age white collar workers in vocational learning for employability purposes: i) the attitudes and abilities of the employees – and the indications are that a white collar group could mainly comprise workers likely to willingly engage in further education provisions; ii) the attitudes and support of employers for training older workers – and the literature hints that white collar workers may be more favourably regarded than other workers; and iii) the nature of the workplace itself in relation to the sorts of employment offered and the levels of education expected, and the extent to which ongoing learning is valued within and across the organisation.

Those three elements might ideally have been explored through comparing the perceptions of employers and employees, but that was not possible within the constraints of the research project discussed here, which surveyed only those positioned as employees. Nevertheless, and importantly, it is workers who elect to engage (or withdraw) from work and educational arrangements in particular ways, including responding or otherwise to invitations to engage in their workplaces and circumventing obstacles that may restrict them making their contributions. The section below outlines how the perceptions of a cohort of white collar workers were captured and analysed in this study.

## **Method and procedures**

It was decided to use an anonymous online survey to gather data from mature age workers, about their perceptions of their capacities as workers, their contributions to their workplaces, and how their employability is sustained by ongoing learning. Among the advantages of this method are that it is easy to administer, can potentially reach a large number of respondents in a short time, it is inexpensive, and respondents can answer at their convenience (Sekaran 2000: 250). On the other hand, the method limits respondents to those who have access to computers and are computer literate, and who are willing to complete it (Sekaran, 2000: 250). For this particular study, the method also provided an assurance of research integrity through its operation by an experienced third party, as well as access to the intended sample population (those in professional, managerial and administrative roles) through the intranet systems of several government agencies and professional bodies that agreed to assist with the project.

The survey instrument was developed on the basis of semi-structured interviews conducted earlier with mature age workers and managers. It comprises 20 closed items spread across four sections: i) You and your job, ii) Retirement intentions, iii) Attitudes towards older workers, and iv) Training. Responses required are mostly in the form of multiple choice, using a five-point Likert scale (i.e. strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree), with branching as necessary to elucidate closed or binary responses (i.e. yes/no answers). A pilot version of the questionnaire was trialled with a small number of undergraduate and graduate university students, and administrative and academic staff. After revision, the questionnaire was distributed electronically and simultaneously through the third party to the government and professional organisations. The invitation and the introduction to the survey stipulated it was intended only for people 45 years and over in paid employment, full-or part-time, or casual, and an incentive was provided in the form of a draw for movie passes, in a way that maintained confidentiality of responses. The survey design required each question to be answered before progressing, and an electronic procedure prevented multiple responses from the same computer. Trials indicated the questionnaire could be completed in 10 to 15 minutes.

The survey site remained open for a four-week period, and at the end of that time, 302 questionnaires had been electronically received, of which 268 were completed in full. This exceeds the number generally regarded as a minimum for analysis purposes (Sekaran 2000), and a descriptive analysis of the responses from those 268 workers is presented and discussed below. In particular, data and findings about education and training access and opportunities for occupational purposes and the nature and extent of the respondents' engagement with them were gathered. For the purposes of analysis, the two responses at either end of the scales, e.g. 'strongly agree' and 'agree', and 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree', were aggregated, to identify the most significant patterns. The central choice on the scales, 'Not sure', can indicate either uncertainty or 'does not apply'.

To support the analysis, the responses were imported into SPSS (version 18), with initial descriptive analyses undertaken using the frequencies and cross tabulation options, the latter including  $\chi^2$  statistics, allowing identification and an assessment of the significance of variations in frequency responses from different sub-groups (i.e. by gender, time working, or level of education). These analyses were particularly helpful in identifying and validating trends in the data that are quite counter to what is reported elsewhere and frequently about how older workers are perceived by employers and the limits on workplace support afforded to older workers. In short, the findings below to some extent contradict such findings and reinforce the view that perceptions about and treatment of older workers are not necessarily wholly premised on age, but on the kinds of work they undertake and the level of educational achievement they possess.

### *The sample*

Of the 268 responses, 176 (66%) are from women and 92 (34%) from men. Table 1 presents the respondents' age groups using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) categories, and this shows that 25% of the respondents are in the youngest mature-age grouping, and that more than 75% are below 60 years of age. While there was a similar pattern of responses by gender, proportionally more female respondents are younger (58.6% under 55 compared to 42.4% of males).

Insert Table 1 about here

When the data provided by respondents are grouped according to ABS (2006; 2009) occupational classifications, almost half are professionals (mainly in health, education, and human resources), 20% are managers, and clerical and administrative workers comprise 20%, and they tend to be working in large (250+ employees) and medium organisations (50-249 employees). More than 30% of the respondents reported having postgraduate qualifications, while just over 10% have no post-school qualifications, compared with the current Australian estimates of 8% and 37% respectively (Long 2010). The proportion of respondents with an undergraduate qualification (22%) is close to the national level, and about 18% of respondents have a VET Diploma or Advanced Diploma, compared with some 10% nationally. So, the respondents represent a cohort that is more highly educated than the national norm.

The responses to the questions in the section about retirement plans indicate the sample largely comprises individuals keen to remain employed and employable over the foreseeable future, unless personal circumstances (e.g. family, health, changed financial status) intervene. The kinds of changes the vast majority would like to make to their working arrangements and responsibilities up until they retire are related to achieving greater satisfaction and fulfilment at work. However, training-related factors also feature prominently, with approximately 75% of respondents wanting to use their skills more widely, and have opportunities for further skills development, and almost 60% wanting a mentoring role with younger workers. In sum, the responses do not reflect those of workers who are unwilling to accept challenges, new opportunities and training opportunities. Instead, they reflect individuals who are needing to and willing to continue to work and also to learn to sustain their employability, which they largely view in expansive rather than restrictive ways (e.g. contributing to the workplace and assisting others sustain their employability).

## **Perceptions of white collar workers surveyed**

### *Attitudes towards older workers' development opportunities*

To gauge how attitudes towards them in their workplace might influence access to and take-up of training, the survey includes a number of items to elicit these mature age workers' perceptions of their contribution to the workplace and how they were perceived by other workers (see Figure 1). While there was extremely strong agreement (almost 90%, with also a very low level of uncertainty) that significant changes had occurred across their industry or workplace in the previous five years, responses to other items were less definitive with, in some cases, quite a high level of uncertainty regarding the response. Positively, however, only 14.6% of respondents felt pressured to retire for age reasons (69.8% disagreement).

Insert Figure 1 about here

There was relatively strong agreement to items regarding equal situation or treatment of older people in the workforce - with almost two-thirds of respondents reported having the same opportunities to train and learn as their younger colleagues and being as adaptable as younger workers. However, only about half reported equality in promotion opportunities between younger and older workers; similar opportunities for men and women; and generally equitable treatment between younger and older workers. The high rate of 'not sure' responses to some items was particularly interesting - for example around a quarter were uncertain whether having older workers helped an organisations image; that they would have the same

promotion opportunities; or that they were in fact recognised as “key assets” in their organisations. Perhaps the most contentious items were those relating to taking orders, with relatively low levels of agreement (31% agreed they disliked taking orders from younger staff and 22% that younger staff disliked taking orders from older staff) but also very high levels of uncertainty – in both cases around a quarter of all responses. However, it might be misleading to assume that this lack of certainty about how to respond to this item reflects a negative sentiment, if these matters had not been identified as an issue within their workplaces.

While responses were relatively consistent across different groups, a few clear differences were noted when cross tabulations of the data were enacted. The oldest workers, for example, showed a significantly less positive perspective on security ( $\chi^2 = 20.527$ ,  $df=6$   $p=.002$ ), on promotional opportunities ( $\chi^2 = 18.255$   $df=6$ ,  $p=.006$ ) and on being treated well ( $\chi^2 = 23.313$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Hence, while 61.2% of those 45-49 years agreed that older workers had the same promotional opportunities only 29.4% of those 60 and above felt this way. While different age groups did not appear to have an issue with “taking orders” from younger colleagues there were significant differences in responses across different levels of qualifications ( $\chi^2 = 21.132$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.000$ ) with, for example, 70.0% of those with no post school qualifications expressing no concern compared to only 35.9% of those with university qualifications – with this latter group also expressing far high uncertainty on this (26.1%). Position was also an area of difference ( $\chi^2 = 23.298$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ ) with those in management roles appearing to feel more valued, with 82.7% feeling they were a key asset compared to only 38.9% of administration staff and 53.3% of professionals. Managers also indicated they saw greater opportunities for promotion ( $\chi^2 = 16.808$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.010$ ) with 75.0% of those in managerial positions feeling an equal chance of promotion compared to, for example, 46.3% of those in administrative positions.

The responses regarding attitudes in the workplace indicate that these workers believe themselves to be making a significant contribution to their workplaces whilst tolerating and being able to tolerate some degree of inequity in workplace practices, with this inequity being reported most strongly by the older cohort of workers.

### *Personal work experiences*

There was a similar strong level of agreement (89%) that there had been major changes in the workplace over the past five years, with comments on their work experiences summarised in Figure 2. Given this level concurrence, it is noteworthy that almost as many (84%) reported being *capable* of undertaking further learning for work purposes, but more than one third claimed they did not need any more training for their current job – with less than one per cent uncommitted about their capability. The fact that these workers had been able to adapt to changing requirements and develop further their capacities through their work in responding to these changes, as evidenced in their long working lives, and that they have moved to different work roles and positions indicate that they had been able to learn to sustain their employability.

Insert Figure 2 about here

With regard to other personal preferences, almost equal numbers (around 40%) indicated they were either not interested or were interested, respectively, in *retraining* in their current



workplace or in reducing their working hours. A large proportion of respondents reported being valued in their workplace by peers (76%) and their employers or supervisors (69%) – yet with almost 20% claiming they lacked their employer’s or manager’s full support. While generally the data showed consistency across groups, some differences were noted. Females, for example, indicated significantly greater agreement that they were “not too old to learn” ( $\chi^2 = 8.059$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.018$ ) with 87.5% agreeing, compared to 76.1% of males. Current roles also were relevant with those in managerial roles significantly more confident that their experience was valued by the boss ( $\chi^2 = 29.994$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.000$ ) with 86.5% of managers agreeing, compared to only 51.9% of those in administration. So, although there is some evidence here of aged-related bias these biases are again moderated for those in managerial positions, for instance.

### *Personal attributes*

Responses to the set of items on personal attributes indicate these respondents rated their own contribution highly (see Figure 3). Indeed, more than 85% of respondents reported their skills, experience, age and capabilities as assets for their workplaces. Most claimed to be as adaptable to change as younger workers, and almost as many claimed to be more knowledgeable and more skilled, and to a slightly lesser extent had a better work attitude than younger workers. Some 80% reported having had opportunities to pass their knowledge and experience onto others. These responses are perhaps not surprising and might be dismissed as reflecting their own biases and interests. However, the data above about their capacities to adapt to changing work tasks give substance to such claims. That is, if they were not able to learn, and in perhaps in self-directed ways to meet the changes, then the on-going development required by changing workplace demands would not be evident, as it is in the continuation of their work employment. Put simply, if they were not able to learn, and as part of their work activities, they would no longer be employable.

Insert Figure 3 about here

In sum, the majority of the older workers who responded to the survey reported that they are not too old to learn and, in general, are demonstrably able to cope with significant changes in their workplace and to their work through their ability to learn to adapt to these new circumstances. For many, access to training and security of tenure are held to be equitably distributed across their workplaces, although about half reported believing that advancement is not as available to older, as for younger workers, and there is ambivalence about gender differences. The confidence these workers generally reported about their own capabilities and contribution to their workplaces is reflected partly in how they perceived they were valued: more respected by peers than management it seems.

### *Willingness to retrain*

Further evidence of their self-belief as learners and of their willingness to retrain is presented in Figure 4. This figure depicts the positive response regarding preparedness to learn new skills, with all but one respondent indicating they were open to and capable of learning new tasks and knowledge. The only exception was a very highly technical expert, in a permanent position in a large company. Although three-quarters reported not being anxious about learning new tasks, there were some concerns, with 13% indicating some anxiety and 10%

were unsure. Given the often claimed technological incompetence of older workers, it is noteworthy that 88% regarded themselves as competent with technology, another reflection of the nature of the current employment and education levels for the majority of respondents.

Insert Figure 4 about here

There is also strong support for work-related learning to be explicitly encouraged and supported by workplaces, although only a little over 30% reported needing additional training for their current work. Almost a quarter reported an interest to train for a different job with the same workplace, with this most likely to be those in Administration (35.2%) rather than Managers (9.6%) and also those that are younger (i.e. 40.3% of those 45-49 would prefer to re-train with their employer compared to 17.3% of those 50-54 or 55-59), thus with greater opportunity to build skills in a new area. Yet, seeking a bigger change: just over 30% said they would like to train for a different job *elsewhere*, including for their own business. However, for questions about personal preferences, a considerable proportion (19%-26%) reported being unsure about their future. Again, these data do not indicate respondents who are avoiding challenges, merely looking to retirement, or being unwilling to engage in training opportunities that they believe to be helpful in assisting them learn knowledge that is new to them.

In terms of preferences for experiences through which to learn, close to two-thirds of respondents nominated conferences and professional association activities respectively as sources of ongoing development for work purposes, apart from accredited training, in maintaining currency with the sorts of workforce development typical in such occupations. Almost as many respondents nominated short courses and colleagues at work, and just under half reported used the internet to supplement their vocational learning. Next (ranging from 34% to 18%), are compulsory training, professional development leave, industry attachments, and family and friends. Noteworthy here, 60% of respondents had undertaken *accredited* training since the age of 45, the large majority for professional development purposes, but also just over half claiming their reason for undertaking these courses was also to assist continuity of employment until retirement.

So, across this cohort is strong evidence of interest and engagement in, and success with educational programs. More than half of those with accredited training had completed vocational education and training (VET) qualifications, with 37% undertaking certificate-level courses and 17% qualifications at VET diploma or advanced diploma level. Almost 30% had undertaken or were undertaking university-level studies, and two-thirds at postgraduate level. Certainly, the responses in this section reflect those in the previous one: a very strong pattern of openness to new learning, and high confidence with information and communications technology. Moreover, around 80% of these older workers reported being supported by their workplace for job-related learning, which contradicts other literature and reviews that suggest workplaces do not support older workers' development. However, the majority claimed not to need more training in their current role. Furthermore, a finding of possible concern to employers is that almost one-third of respondents would like to train for another job elsewhere. As might be expected with this cohort, conferences and networking are important sources of learning, as are to a lesser extent are short courses and the internet. However, noteworthy here is that more than half of those who had undertaken accredited training since turning 45 had acquired VET qualifications, perhaps indicating the need for more practical and immediate relevant training.

In all, the findings here support other findings (e.g. Thomson, et al 2005) that those with higher levels of qualifications continue to participate in education and training across their

working lives, and possibly at a higher rate than workers with lower levels of educational achievement. Yet, through a consideration of these data a more nuanced account also emerges about the bases for these workers' engagement in work and learning that can be explained through a consideration of the interactions between workplace affordances and the bases by which individuals engage in what is afforded them.

## Discussion

The findings reported above are generated from respondents with generally higher educational qualifications than exist within the wider Australian population, and who are mainly employed in professional, managerial and administrative occupations. While statistically the respondents are not representative of Australian white collar worker, they are the kinds of workers that workplaces likely want to retain, and governments likely hope will remain in employment, and preferably for longer than the conventional age of retirement or pension entitlement age. That is, they are highly qualified and experienced workers who seem keen to contribute to the workplace, including assisting others learn in order to sustain their employability.

When considering affordances (i.e. the invitational qualities extended to participate and learn) and engagement (i.e. how individuals take up those invitations) in regard to older workers' employability, there are contextual factors, internal and external to their workplaces that shape also decisions about the timing of retirement, regardless of opportunities available to them or their willingness or otherwise to take advantage of these opportunities. This is, of course, an issue for employers who have ambivalence about training older workers.

Nevertheless, the workers surveyed here anticipated that they needed to remain employable for the long haul, with only exceptional events likely to precipitate premature retirement. According to the survey data, when they do stay, these workers want to contribute to their workplaces and be valued by other workers and management for their contributions. More than 90% of respondents nominated 'job satisfaction' as key to their interest in being employable, and some 75% wanted to develop further and use their skills more widely. These sentiments seen quite at odds with the perceptions of employers about these workers which is presented in much of the research literature.

These latter sets of figures are consistent with those proposed by Skills Australia (2010) which claim that the skills of these workers are often under-utilised in their workplaces. However, it is claimed by the Australian School of Business (2010) that how best to utilise older workers' skills and to integrate them into a diverse workforce effectively are still matters to be resolved. One thing is clear, however: many of those being referred to as 'older workers' are discomforted by such a nomenclature (Billett, Dymock, Johnson and Martin 2011). Yet, as working life extends, and fertility rates drop, the breadth of ages within most workplaces will likely expand. Certainly, the survey respondents had few reservations about their capacity to confront workplace change and engage with new learning, given that a high proportion rated themselves just as capable as younger workers on those scores. This finding emphasises differences in perceptions about older workers. For instance, Bittman et al's (2001) review identified older workers being perceived by employers as 'less adaptable to change, less productive, hard to train, inflexible, less motivated', attitudes consistently noted in older worker research (e.g. BCA 2003). This educated cohort, employed in mainly professional and administrative roles, generally confounded that perception, and with some justification, given their track record in meeting the changing requirements of their workplaces. In this cohort, there seems to be no lack of confidence or limitations in literacy or numeracy that Newton et al (2005) and Chappell et al (2003) suggest may limit efficacy for training. Moreover, the vast majority reported they received support from their workplace.

Yet, despite the high level of acknowledgement of change in their industries and workplaces, only 30% claimed they needed additional training for their current job. As this lack of interest in training appears unrelated to their belief in their learning ability, it presumably is due to a belief they are sufficiently competent for their work roles (Noonan 2007). Nor does the lack of interest in training seem to stem from two negative influences identified by Wooden et al (2001), low self-efficacy as learners or disinclination to 'learn' because of impending retirement.

Indeed, this cohort's responses are quite the opposite because they are not contemplating retirement and are keen to maintain their employability. Consequently, it is not surprising the study reveals a high degree of personal agency in further education efforts, with 60% of them having undertaken accredited learning since the age of 45, mainly for professional development (i.e. maintaining employability). There may also be an 'affordance' element in the high uptake of accredited training if the conclusion from Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008) is accepted: 'older workers who had a greater propensity to engage in development activities perceived that their job provided them with more development opportunities and, in turn, were more committed to their organization and intended to remain with their organization.' This characteristic appears to be reflected in these respondents' claims, and it might well be true of other kinds of workers who value the role of professional development.

In terms of affordances, workplaces are also generally seen by the respondents as supportive of their work-related learning, and more than two-thirds believed there is equal access to training for young and old. This finding suggests that in the employing organisations, the conservation model, which considers all employees regardless of age to be 'long-lasting organisational assets, worthy of investment' (Claes and Heymans 2008), is dominant or at least being exercised for these kinds of older workers. It is more likely such a model would be followed in the sorts of workplaces represented in this survey. Almost half of these workplaces are large organisations (i.e. 250+ employees), and 20% are medium-sized businesses (i.e. 50-249 employees), which are more likely to be capable of developing and enacting more generous employment policies than small businesses where training may be more limited or ad hoc.

The high proportion of full-time employees in the survey sample may also account for the more positive view of learning affordances they experience, given it is part-time and casual staff who were found by Thomson et al (2005) to be among the older worker groups less likely to receive training. However, another of Thomson et al's (2005) findings seems to be partly at odds with an outcome of the present study. They found in their research that older men were less likely to receive training than older women, whereas in the survey there is considerable ambivalence among the respondents about gender differences, and 25% (i.e. relatively high in comparison to other 'disagree/strongly disagree' responses in the survey), did not report women having equity with men in training opportunities. This percentage seems quite a high proportion given the size and nature of most of the respondents' employing organisations, which might be expected to have affirmative or equitable policies in this regard. However, Thompson's respondents may be drawn from a different kind of cohort than the one captured in this survey.

Overall, the interplay of affordances and engagement Billett (2001b) identifies as essential for effective workplace learning, appears to also be a major factor in the take-up of training by older workers and, hence, a key to their ongoing employability. It may well be that this more educated and professionally employed cohort of workers is both afforded a greater array of opportunities and more relatively willing to participate should they identify the need. This conclusion is elaborated by comparing the findings about lack of training for older

workers with the outcomes of this study. In discussing the *lack* of training undertaken by older workers, McNair and Maltby, with Nettleship, (2007: 18) observe that there is debate in the literature about whether employee or employer attitudes are most responsible for the level of engagement in learning and development activities. However, for this cohort of mature aged workers, training is generally perceived as being available, and employers supportive, and individuals are motivated to take advantage of the opportunities, for both organisational and personal purposes.

## **Conclusion**

From these findings and those discussed earlier in this section, a number of policy and practice considerations emerge in relation to training and retaining older workers, particularly for those who already have post-school education and training qualifications. In general, job satisfaction is a principal motivator and concern for mature age white collar workers. From these data it seems that such workers are unlikely to resist training or necessarily be hard to train. They are not frightened of technology; want the same access to education and training opportunities as younger workers, and want to make best use within the workplace of the expertise they have developed. However, they may need to be convinced of the benefits before committing themselves to particular forms of vocational education and training. In addition, there will be a small percentage of mature age workers who are anxious about and perhaps reluctant to be learning new tasks and activities who will need additional support for that purpose.

In all, the study found that older workers' employability is premised on a duality between institutional (i.e. workplace and educational) and personal factors, and these play out in particular ways for paraprofessional and professional employees, which may well be different than for other kinds of employees (i.e. those with lower levels of education and lower status occupations). Opportunities to engage in and contribute to the workplace and being acknowledged as valued employees, are likely to sustain the worker and assist in redressing societal sentiments that work to inhibit the employability of these workers. Yet, given the evidence provided above that those in professional and administrative roles and the generally well-educated workers are already seeking a learning orientation in their work and workplace, and opportunities to both develop and use their skills more fully, such affordances may become necessities for retaining and sustaining the employability of these kinds of workers.

These findings are significant because education levels in the workforce are rising, so employee expectations are also likely to rise - as evidenced by our cohort. Employers and educational institutions, therefore, need to consider the continuing education and training needs of the growing element of a professional and administrative workforce whom they are likely to want to retain and to remain employable. Furthermore, although the particular sample here was secured through circumstantial factors, it indicates that it is not just age per se that influences the kinds of capacities and abilities possessed by workers aged over 45 and, also how they are supported in workplace. Instead, other factors, including the level of education individuals possess and also the kinds of work in which they are employed, mediate perceptions of worth and willingness to support their learning by those whom employ them. For policy makers, for employers, for educational providers, and for workers themselves, the message that comes through overwhelmingly is that stereotypes and generalisations about mature age workers are unhelpful to the people themselves and invalid as a basis for policy and practice. Instead, more nuanced considerations and measures appropriate to the needs and aspirations of particular cohorts are required.

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Table 1 Age groups and gender of survey respondents

Age group	No	%	% Male	% Female
45-49	67	25.0	20.7	27.3
50-54	75	28.0	21.7	31.3
55-59	75	28.0	33.7	25.0
60—64	42	15.6	18.5	14.2
65-69	5	1.9	1.1	2.3
70 and over	4	1.5	4.3	0

\* Note for subsequent group comparisons the group 60+ was used due to small numbers in 65-69 and 70+.

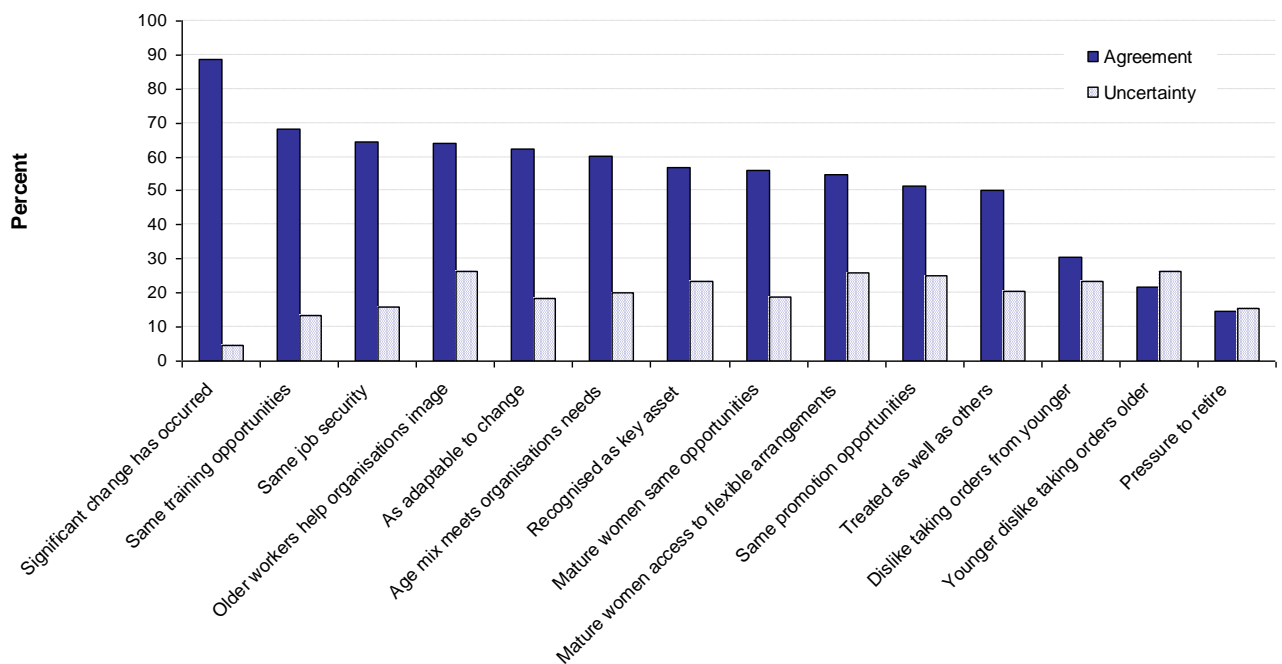
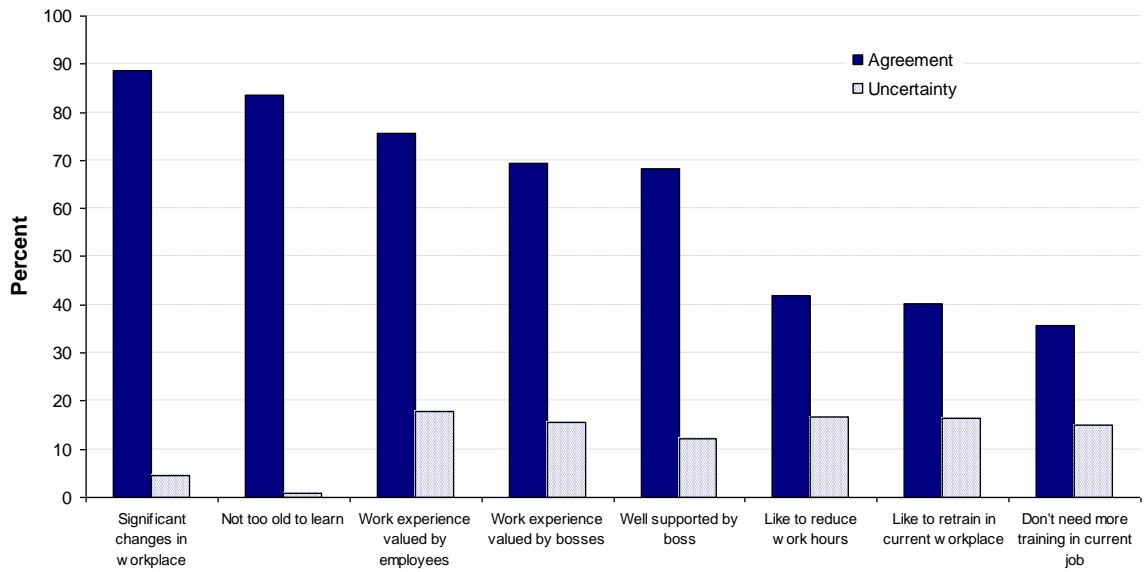
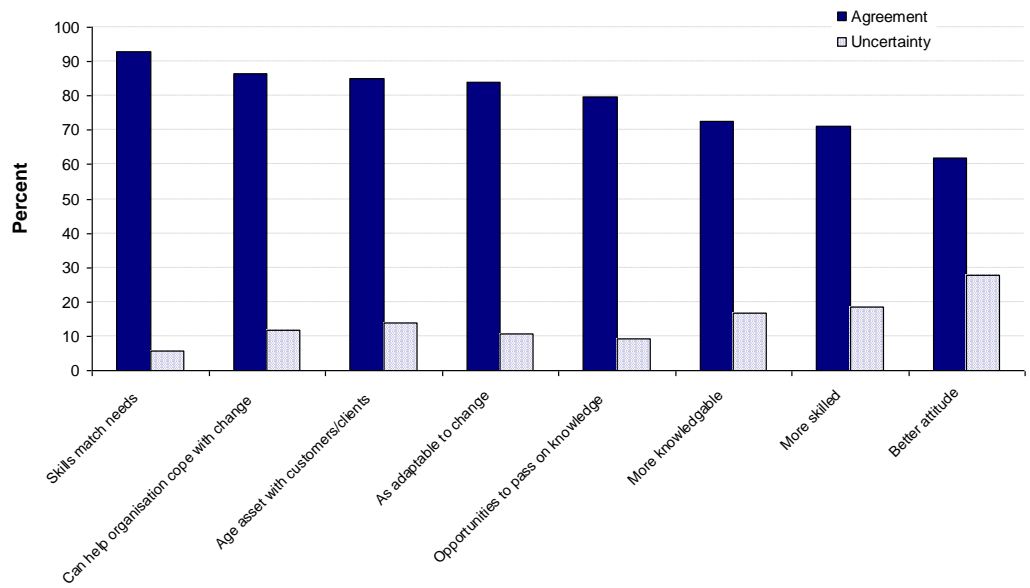


Figure 1 Workplace attitudes to mature workers - showing the % agreement and uncertainty.

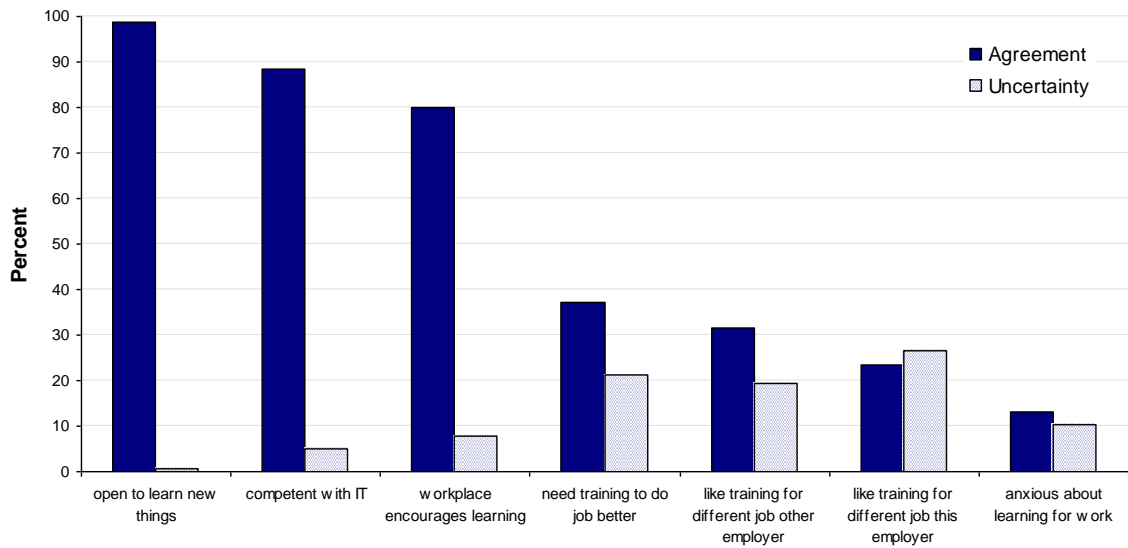




**Figure 2 Personal workplace experiences and needs, showing % agreement and uncertainty of responses.**



**Figure 3 Personal attributes showing % agreement and uncertainty of responses**



**Figure 4 Capacities and opportunities for skills development showing % agreement and uncertainty of responses.**