

## **Older workers: A snapshot**

A paper by Roslyn Cameron developed as part of the ALA-ANTA Innovation Grant 2004

Many who lose their jobs and are unable to find re-employment suffer shock, grief, humiliation, loss of confidence and long term adverse effects on their health and wellbeing. Mature age people began their careers at a time when jobs (at least for men) were expected to be permanent and full-time. Many have no recent experience in job seeking and are ill-equipped to do so. The demoralisation and age discrimination they suffer means that their employability depreciates at a rapid rate once unemployed' (Perry & Freeland, 2001, p. 9-10)

There are three main areas of focus in the recent literature relating to mature age job seekers: unemployment; employer attitudes and; training and the mature aged.

### ***Mature age unemployment, (long term, hidden & underemployment)***

Long term unemployment is on the rise in Australia and particularly affects the mature aged.

A report on long term unemployment in Queensland found that 33.7% of Australia's unemployed were long-term unemployed in November of 1998. The incidence of long-term unemployment is higher for the older age groups:

31.8% 25-34 year olds  
48.9% 45-54 year olds  
55.4% 55-59 year olds  
(DETIR, 1999, p. 15)

The report found that they were largely from blue-collar and manufacturing areas, which suggests this is due to trends in displacement from the impacts of globalisation, new technology and restructuring of the economy or off shore relocation. The report investigated the attributes of the pool of long term unemployed and found that the less marketable characteristics (for example, low qualifications, mature age, youth, NESB) combined with 'duration dependence' to produce a self-perpetuating situation whereby the longer you are unemployed the less likely you are to escape to employment (DETIR, 1999, p.4). The report found that those most affected by long term unemployment are generally those who are already most disadvantaged in the community.

The Victorian Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment funded a report into the labour market and training experiences of mature aged and older people. The report found that there is a growing recognition that mature aged groups endure particular difficulties in today's labour market and have been comparatively neglected in the formulation of key policy.

The report's literature review of labour market disadvantage addresses the issues of under-employment, which consists of the expansion of part-time and non-standard employment among the mature aged. It also points to a lesser access to promotional opportunities and training. Hidden unemployment appears comparatively more

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widespread amongst the mature aged. A large proportion of this appears to be discouraged job-seekers and length of unemployment is a factor. Mature age unemployed are unemployed for longer periods and are over-represented in the long term unemployed (ATEC, 2002, p. 8).

A survey of mature age (40 yrs +) job seekers (N=255) in the Belconnen area of Canberra found that respondents had reasonably high levels of educational attainment and that it was the recency of the educational qualifications that appeared to be related to unemployment rather than the educational level. Barriers to employment were multiple but age was considered the primary barrier. Lack of formally recognised qualifications was also seen as a barrier.

Most respondents felt that technological advances, the computerisation of the workplace and industry restructuring had left them with skills that were no longer relevant to employment. Two other areas of concern in the job search process were the making of applications and the interview. (BEST, 1998, p. 4-5).

VandenHeuvel (1999) uses the ABS definition of discouraged job seekers as 'persons who wanted a job but were not actively looking for a job due to work-related reasons' (1999, p.16). These work-related reasons were reported as the belief that they could not find a job because: they were considered too young or too old by employers; they lacked the necessary education, training, skills & experience; difficulties with language or ethnic background; no available jobs. VandenHeuvel found that:

...discouraged job seekers make up a considerably larger percentage of the population of older male workers (55 years and over) than of younger males. For women, the differences by age are even larger, with one in 36 women aged 55 to 59 years, and one in 42 women aged 60 to 64 years classified as discouraged job seekers. As well, unlike their male counterparts, women aged 45 to 54 years old are relatively likely to be among the hidden unemployed.' (1999, p, 16-17)

VandenHeuvel also looked at the incidence of part-time and underemployment and concluded that:

'...despite generally low underemployment rates for mature age workers, underemployment is clearly an issue for men aged 45 to 54 years.....'

In all, the greatest relative growth in underemployment over the past decade was observed for those aged 55 years and over. Although absolute levels of underemployment are still fairly low for these workers, the probability of underemployment doubled for men in this age group and increased by a factor of 1.7 for their female counterparts' (1999, p, 20-21).

### **Attitudes to mature age job seekers**

There is a strong consensus in the literature that, employer attitudes to mature age job seekers is a major barrier to them securing employment.

A report by the Access Training and Employment Centre (ATEC) addresses the role of discrimination- ageism in disadvantaging the matured aged. The report refers to several studies in the area, which demonstrates age is perceived to be the major barrier to employment.

Research into employer behaviours, attitude and perceptions is also referred to with both positive and negative perceptions. On a more positive note the report notes several companies who have actively recruited mature age employees. In Australia the Holiday Inn Crown Plaza in NSW, the Advance Bank, Telstra, Westpac, Freehills Hollingdale and Page and the Permante Trustee Company are examples of this active mature age recruitment approach (ATEC, 2002, p. 11)

Research undertaken by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services into long term strategies to address Australia's aging population referred to the negative attitudes of employers to mature age people and mature age people on income support themselves. The research noted a high level of pessimism among mature age people in reference to finding a job (2003, p. 10). Research by Keys and Young (2000) supports this and groups negative attitudes of employers towards mature workers into perceptions about their: abilities; attitudes; adaptability and; associated costs.

In a paper given at a recent international conference on Age, Work and Employment, Kossen made the following conclusions:

Misinformed, but powerful, stereotypes about ageing and mature age (or older) workers, rather than reliable data indicating favourable workplace productivity, have been (and continue to be) the root cause behind the disproportionate retrenchment, and ensuing disproportionate long-term unemployment, underemployment and hidden unemployment among this group' (Kossen, 2003, p. 139)

... mature age workers will continue to be marginalised from the labour market due to widespread and systematic institutionalised age discrimination resulting in immense and prolonged hardship. While Australian governments have adopted measures to counter age discrimination in employment, they have, to date, failed to put ageism and age discrimination....on the social and political agenda and give it the serious level of attention it requires.' (Kossen, 2003, p, 158)

### **Training for mature age job seekers**

The Keys Young report identifies several major barriers to engaging in education and training for mature age workers which include:

difficulties with computers, problems with literacy and numeracy, resistance to learning new skills, low self-esteem and confidence (particularly following redundancy), and difficulty coping and adapting to change (particularly technological change) (Keys Young, 2000, p. 2)

In a small survey of Registered Training Organisations throughout Queensland which was conducted for this paper, the following needs were identified, ranked in order of the assistance most commonly identified for mature age jobseekers by the learning providers.

- 1 Self esteem self confidence
- 2 Personal development  
Peer support / networking
- 3 Job Search related  
Career guidance  
Introductory / Basic computer  
Upgrading skills
- 4 Skill recognition  
Seeking a qualification
- 5 Re-skilling  
Information
- 6 Seeking specific skill training

The following list shows the assistance that mature aged students were perceived to be needing from non-accredited providers of adult learning throughout Queensland (again ranked in order of the assistance most commonly identified by the learning providers):

- 1 Personal development
- 2 Peer support / networking
- 3 Self esteem self confidence
- 4 Job Search related
- 5 Upgrading of skills
- 6 Information
- 7 Career guidance
- 8 Re skilling
- 8 Seeking specific skill training
- 9 Seeking a qualification
- 9 Introductory / Basic computer
- 10 Other-work experience
- 11 Skill recognition

It is interesting to note that the top four for each is the same and that Skill recognition is low on the list for both. The following quotes from the learning providers interviewed in this small study shed more light on the needs and anxieties of older workers as they undertake re-training:

Older learners haven't been in formal training environment [for some time]. They are nervous, hesitant and tentative'

Health is an issue for men. For women it is confidence. They have usually been out of the workforce for anywhere up to 10 years

The sense of frustration that nobody is going to employ them is almost self defeating. They are lacking confidence and are convinced they are not employable'

They are their own worst enemy- 'I'm too old'. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the workplace things are done differently, there is the use of IT and modern day procedures'

The two biggest issues are the lack of confidence because of age and the second is that it has been so long since they have studied -You need to be very supportive and help build their confidence.

Self esteem and self confidence. They believe they don't have anything to offer. They de-value the skills and knowledge that they have, for example they could be the president of a sports club or they could run a school tuckshop.

They feel they have to compete with younger people, and its very hard.

Language, lack of technical skills, non –recognition of qualifications and cultural background. Traditions in home countries are different to Australian industry standards.

Lack of self esteem, not used to blowing their own trumpet and the paperwork associated with jobsearch activities. Very, very few have acceptable resumes. You have to paint them a picture.

When they present resumes they must not list their date of birth because of employer attitudes. Some employers are more threatened instead of taking the attitude of what can I learn from this experienced person. Sometimes there are physical limits especially in the artisan occupations.

There is a strong need for life course planning

They don't believe they will be hired because of their age. Low self confidence. They don't know how to identify transferable skills. They don't know how the jobsearch process works. They have either been in same job for a long time or have been out of the workforce for a long time.'

The main issue for mature age participants is prejudice in the workplace, especially for jobseekers who have no qualifications or specific skills. Very few entry level jobs go to mature aged.

Recently, in an effort to re-shape training so that it better serves the needs of older workers, a number of reports have outlined recommendations for change. For example the Keys Young report suggests that:

To overcome these barriers the following approaches have been used with some success: an empathetic response to difficulties facing mature age workers, showing how existing skills are transferable and still valid,

collaborating with mature age workers so they see themselves as agents of change, adjusting delivery methods, and training in familiar surrounds

Training methods to which mature age adults are best suited involve experiential learning, combine in-class and on-the-job training, are self-paced, are tailored specifically to the needs of mature age workers, are practical and hands-on, implement good assessment procedures, provide extra time for those falling behind, and at the broadest level address computing and literacy and numeracy (Keys Young, 2000, p. 2).

Chappell, et al, (2003) compiled a table on good practice in training for older workers from the findings of seven studies :

	Education and Training issues	Workplace issues
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe, non-threatening, less formal environment</li> <li>• Flexible in timing &amp; delivery modes</li> <li>• Small class sizes</li> <li>• Older workers are involved in designing the training</li> <li>• Learner readiness issues are addressed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear linkage to valued rewards &amp; incentives</li> <li>• Clear support from management</li> <li>• Avoidance of a competitive context</li> </ul>
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly written instructions</li> <li>• Learning materials facilitate recall</li> <li>• Material is organised into small units</li> <li>• Work-related tasks</li> <li>• Prompt feedback on performance</li> <li>• Build new skills on existing knowledge</li> <li>• Practical knowledge is the focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-related tasks are identified</li> </ul>
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predominantly utilise verbal rather than literacy skills</li> <li>• Vary amount of time allocated to tasks to accommodate individual needs</li> <li>• Vary amount of time allocated to tasks to accommodate individual needs</li> <li>• Allocate significant blocks of time</li> <li>• Use active, discovery-based learning methods</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to practice skills as they are developed</li> <li>• Limit learning group to older workers</li> <li>• Utilise participant experience</li> <li>• Use self-paced methods</li> <li>• Include group and collegial learning strategies</li> <li>• Gradual transfer of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-the-job coaching is provided</li> <li>• Learning time is allowed &amp; facilitated</li> <li>• Export support is provided</li> <li>• Opportunities to practice &amp; apply knowledge are established</li> </ul>

(Source Chappell, et al , 2003, p. 54.)

The Workplace Education Research Consortium from the University of New England undertook a large study into good practice in training mature age people for who are disadvantaged in the labour market in 2003. This research, undertaken for the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST), concluded that:

The investigation has confirmed that securing success for mature unemployed adult learners who are disadvantaged in the labour market requires five key features. These are: an initial education experience in a safe, non-threatening environment; negotiation with learners in content, format and timing of educational experiences; the use of social cohesion and a focus on learner interests to motivate learners; a learner focused (andragogy-based) approach to learning; and organisational innovation and flexibility.

Given the implementation of these five areas of good practice, the study has demonstrated that initial involvement in non-accredited Community Adult Education programmes can provide the pathway towards active learning for people who are manifestly socially disadvantaged. This pathway presents a bridge that, in turn, leads into active involvement in the community and on to the labour force.' (Gelade, et al, 2003, p. X-XI).

As Australia's population ages, and the resulting strain on the public purse becomes acute, it is going to become increasingly important to maintain a dynamic and skilled workforce. Training that delivers both highly skilled employees and is appreciative of the particular needs of particular demographics, such as the mature-aged, is going to play an increasingly important role.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

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