

Older workers and work: Societal and personal sentiments

Abstract

Australia is becoming increasingly reliant upon an older workforce. Yet, much existing literature positions these workers as ‘last resort’ employees: held in low esteem by their employers. Evidence of employer expenditure on employees supports that claim. This literature suggests a societal sentiment privileging youth over age extends into decision-making about workplace engagement with and support for these workers in Australia.. This situation is now untenable as realising national social and economic goals is becoming increasingly dependent on the capacities of workers aged over 45. However, a more nuanced and contrasting set of findings emerge from our interviews and focus groups with these kinds of workers. Against expectations, our informants reported little in the way of age-related bias in the conditions of employment, and opportunities for advancement and further development. Although our sample has particular characteristics and featured paraprofessional and professional workers, the contrast between what is reported in the literature, often premised on surveys, and our data premised on interviews is quite distinct. The personal sentiment expressed by our informants contradicts the societal sentiment strongly and consistently expressed elsewhere. Certainly, there is little evidence of a general age-related bias against these older workers. This is not to deny such a bias exists, but suggests it likely plays out in more nuanced and selective ways than as a general societal sentiment. Consequently, although younger and well-qualified workers may well secure higher levels of workplace support than low skilled older workers, this preference is likely played more in some occupations than others and more for some kinds of workers than others. Hence, quite different approaches to policy and practice are likely required than one premised on general age bias. Maintaining and sustaining the capacities of older Australian workers likely requires a range of workplace strategies and educational provisions aligned with particular needs.

Older workers and work

Over the next 40 years or so, Australia will have an increasing proportion of people aged 65 or more and, it is predicted, a decreasing number of young people and workforce entrants. Assuming sustained low fertility and increasing life expectancy by 2050, some 26% of the population are predicted to be in the older age bracket, compared to 15 % aged 0 to 14 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008). These changing age profiles have considerable social and economic implications. One key concern for government and industry is a potential labour shortage and, hence, a potential decline in productivity and competitiveness. According to the ABS (2008, 4), the proportion of the working age population in Australia will decrease from around 67% in 2010 to some 59% in 2050 if present rates of retirement continue.

The retention of mature age workers is seen as one way of maintaining a sufficiently productive labour force (Treasury, 2004, 15). However, although this goal may seem an appropriate policy response, the literature consistently reports negative attitudes by from Australian employers about employing and re-training mature age workers. Hence, despite their apparent potential contributions to the workforce, older workers appear not to be sufficiently valued by key workplace decisions makers to fully contribute to and be supported in securing their workplaces’ goals. Yet, the attitudes reported in the literature may not be helpful in identifying appropriate policy and practice responses. As part of a broader study into sustaining the competence of older workers, this paper reports on the perceptions of a cohort of employees aged 45 or more (the age at which the ABS classifies them as ‘mature age’ workers) about the extent to which they experienced age bias in their workplaces.

Older workers: a view from the literature

The literature about older workers suggests a rather consistent and persistent sentiment: that they are considered 'last resort' employees. There are, however, a few exceptions that suggest more nuanced accounts of the valuing of older workers, premised upon the work they perform and not just their perceived characteristics. A review of research published between 1989 and 2000 (Bittman, Flick & Rice, 2001, 39) captures the first sentiment. They conclude:

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.

In all, these authors concluded (p. 40) that 'negative employer attitudes are based in stereotypes and age discrimination and operate to limit the labour market experience and opportunities of older workers'. This conclusion is reinforced by Gringart, Helmes and Speelman's (2005, 96) finding from a survey of 128 'hiring decision-makers' in businesses of up to 50 employees that those managers were generally unlikely to hire older workers because:

Older workers were viewed as being less adaptable to new technology, less interested in technological change and less trainable, as well as being less ambitious, less energetic, less healthy, less creative and not as physically strong. They were thought to have impaired memory, to be less mentally alert, and less flexible. Finally, older workers were considered inferior to younger workers in their likelihood to be promoted.

Indeed, an Australian study of attitudes towards older workers in the mid 1990s found that 'regardless of the perceived more positive qualities of older workers ..., employers appear to prefer to recruit employees in the younger age groups for most employee categories' with 'minimal interest in recruiting anyone over 45 years for any job ... and no preference for anyone 56 years or older' (Steinberg, Donald, Najman, & Skerman, 1996, 157). So, despite the growing recognition of a looming labour shortage and an increased reliance on older workers, such attitudes appear to be stubbornly resistant to change. For instance, more recently, a guide by the Business Council of Australia (BCA, 2003, 12) identified numerous 'readily accepted negative stereotypes of mature-age workers'.

Encel (2003, 3) claims that negative attitudes towards older workers such as these may well contribute to the widespread 'culture' of early retirement in Australia where workforce participation by those over 55 year is considerably lower than in many other OECD countries (ABS, 2007), although it has recently increased slightly (RBA, 2007). Certainly, enduring sentiments such as these, likely position older workers as undesirable or last resort (i.e. when nobody else is available) employees. The Business Council of Australia (BCA) (2003, 6) worried that these stereotypes underpin discrimination and limit working and business opportunities, and suggested that employers should support older workers' participation not only to maintain the skills and experience base, but also 'to better align the work force with an ageing customer base'. Further to this, the BCA also claims (2003, 18) voluntary retirement is used as a workforce management tool often based on age alone, and without consideration to workers' skill and experience profiles. Encel (2003, 4) warns that age discrimination is 'commonly covert and evasive and easily masked'. In their submissions to an Australian House of Representatives inquiry into older workers' unemployment, Bittman et al (2001, 46) reported that older workers were consistently told they were 'over qualified for lower positions and under qualified for higher positions'.

The BCA (2003, 11) also suggests that it is recruitment agencies that practise 'ageism' when selecting job applicant, rather than the companies they represented, a claim denied by the agencies (Hovenden, 2004). Further, several such agencies promote mature age employment, and one of them, Hudson, commissioned a report on the implications of an ageing population for the Australian workforce which described ageism as 'a particularly insidious form of discrimination' (Jorgensen, 2004, 13). Consistent with is, Drew and Drew (2005) who found the perceived

opportunity cost of losing potential long term younger employees was preferred over recruiting those with limited time left in the workforce. Yet, in doing so, they identify factors other than just age bias alone: those from the economic dimension. The authors found that, overall, the 38 organisations surveyed had a 'fairly positive' view of mature age workers, but their practice often differed from their stated values.

This tension identified just above, indicates factors other than age per se. For example, Ranzijn (2005, 1) claims that 'in general, age discrimination is not a function of a negative attitude towards older workers being instead premised on an implicit cost/benefit analysis'. The OECD (2006, 10) also noted that employers' attitudes towards older workers is premised on 'wages and non-wage labour costs that rise more steeply with age than productivity' and also the 'shorter expected pay-back periods on investments in the training of older workers as well as their lower average educational attainment'. The issues raised in the BCA (2003) and Jorgensen (2004) papers indicate patterns of decision-making that are shaped by implicit assumptions regardless of whether they are well founded or not. So, more than age bias alone, factors associated with employability, performance and trainability also implicitly shape decisions about the continued employment of older workers.

Indeed, as Duncan (2003, 104) concludes, employer attitudes towards older workers is a complex issue, and suggested that research may be 'searching for proof of ageism rather than testing for its extent or influence'. For instance, a New Zealand study of 94 low-skilled workers aged 50 or more, employed in three meat processing plants and a knitting mill, reported they experienced no age-related pressure from managers or supervisors (McGregor & Gray, 2003, 1). Similarly, Howell, Buttigieg and Webber (2006, 6) concluded that top management support for diversity and effective utilisation of older workers as part of the retail workforce resulted in positive attitudes from managers. To further complicate the issue, there is evidence that negative perceptions are held by workers themselves, 'reflecting the deep-seated nature of societal beliefs' (McGregor, 2007, 12). An important factor, therefore, is not only what employers believe about older workers, but the extent to which they act upon those beliefs. The dichotomy of employer views is summed up in two competing models (Yeatts, Folts & Knapp, 2000): the depreciation model, which proposes that the value of workers declines as they move towards retirement age, and the conservation model, which considers all employees regardless of age as 'long-lasting organisational assets, worthy of investment' (Claes & Heymans, 2008, 96). Employer perceptions about older workers are important because, as Taylor and Walker (1998, 644) note, they 'may directly influence not only their prospects for gaining employment, but also their prospects for development and advancement within an organisation'. They may also influence employees' retirement decisions.

Four conclusions can be drawn from the research reviewed above: i) employers tend to perceive mature age workers as less capable than younger ones in terms of such factors as physical ability, capacity for learning and adaptability to change, but superior to younger workers in such factors as commitment, reliability and corporate knowledge; ii) negative perceptions may lead some employers not supporting the ongoing development of mature age workers and to encourage their departure from the organisation; (iii) some mature age workers themselves may accept negative stereotypes about age; and iv) some mature age workers experience positive employer support.

It is within these scenarios that a study comprising interviews and a survey was undertaken to identify key work life issues for Australian older workers, their work and work related learning histories, intentions for their remaining working life, extent to which mature workers had experienced or observed age-related discrimination in their workplaces. In this paper, the data from the interviews are discussed.

Understanding older employees' work and learning

As foreshadowed, the data reported here is from interviews with workers aged over 45 from a range of occupations and kinds of workplaces in Australia. The findings presented here are from 48 individual interviews and two focus groups of 5 and 6 workers respectively, all categorised as 'workers', i.e. they were employees of an organisation, but not responsible for policy. The age ranges were: 45-49: 26.3%, 50-54: 26.3%, 55-59: 31.6%, 6-64: 13.2% and 65-69: 2.6%. Interviewees represented a range of occupational backgrounds, with the biggest groupings in state government administration, education and nursing. The services sector (e.g. hospitality and retail) is also represented, and there are several instances of sole employees and self employed respondents.

In addition to providing data about their work life histories and how they had learnt to perform their current occupation and continued to learn for workplace requirements, respondents were asked a total of 19 open questions, of which 8 were about developing their competence at work. All responses were coded using NVivo software. This paper reports only on their responses to two particular questions from that eight - about perceptions of age discrimination in the workplace: 1) Is there any evidence that mature age workers are less valued than any other workers in your workplace? 2) Do you think mature-aged workers are treated differently than younger workers in your current workplace in terms of: (i) opportunities to learn; (ii) opportunities for advancement; and (iii) security of employment.

Perceptions of value of older workers to the workplace

Of the 50 respondents to the question of attitudes towards mature-age workers, 38 (76%) claimed to be unaware of any evidence that older workers were less valued in their workplaces, than younger employees. Among the other 12 respondents, 7 (14%) cited anecdotal or suspected discrimination and 5(10%) believed there was actual discrimination. So, immediately the claims of general age bias are questioned here. Many of the 76% who reported no discrimination simply dismissed the idea with a flat 'No'. Several said there *was* discrimination towards older workers, but in a positive way, and one thought the place depended on them: '[I]t seems when there is a crisis of any sort, it always falls back on the older worker, if you can get my drift, and it seems to get us out of a hole all the time'.

Contrary to what might be expected from the literature, some informants commented on differences in perceptions about younger and older workers. One respondent from a school reported younger teachers were 'in absolute awe' of older teachers, because the latter knew so much, and another informant who is a teacher stated that older teachers acted as mentors to younger teachers. In a small consultancy firm, the two older workers were referred to appreciatively as the 'grown-ups'. A retail worker in a supermarket chain also noted the particular attributes older workers bring: 'I think the older ones are far more reliable and so you know management sort of looks to those people to be available ... you know, they're not likely to ring in sick of a morning because they've had a big night out or something like that.' There was also the recognition that older workers are needed in the workforce: 'the older worker is now a commodity that society wants to have and hang on to'.

This sentiment was supported by another interviewee, who worked in an organisation, she claimed, had a reputation for retaining employees, some of whom had been there 20-30 years, and 'providing they're still performing and adding value, or contributing to the organisation, they're not threatened at all'. Similarly, an informant from a professional practice suggested his valuing at work was partly because of his greater availability, as he did not have other commitments as many younger professionals did. A person in a semi-skilled role claimed older workers were more valuable to the organisation because they had a different work ethic: 'The younger ones seem to live for one day only when I've got to live for next week.' moreover, as was pointed out by one informant, because of the current economic circumstances it is unlikely that older workers will seek early retirement and, as reported elsewhere by the ABS, are more likely to continue their employment well past what has traditionally been accepted retirement age.

Yet, further to this, and quite contrary to predictions from the literature, two respondents claimed not only were older workers highly valued, but expressed concern about whether younger workers were being treated as well. In one of these workplaces there was a predominance of older workers and the respondent said that younger workers' interests and to be actively protected or they tended to get 'steamrolled'. In particular, one informant referred to younger, and newer, workers as being more likely to be on contracts. As such, they may be more susceptible to the demands of their employers. Similarly, the other respondent said that older workers were treated better, with the younger ones given all the less attractive tasks, 'whether they like it or not'.

In between these views is a more balanced one from a mature-age worker: 'you must be more valued in terms of your historical knowledge, but then again you're not as valued in terms of your technological knowledge'. Limitations in competence with technology were mentioned by a number of respondents as distinguishing them from younger workers.

Overall, the responses of the 38 respondents could be summed up in the words of one of them: 'Mature age workers are highly valued and will continue to be highly valued'. So, against the expectations created by been the literature, there was a far more positive portrayal of and accounts of experiences from these interviews than what might have been expected. What emerges here is a far more nuanced and differential situation than general age bias. Yet, while this data here refers to the experiences of the majority of the informants, seven respondents suggested the apparent lack of discrimination against mature-age workers in their organisations was perhaps not quite as clear cut as it seemed.

Perceptions of implicit discrimination

In the interviews, 7 mature-age employees suggested that, in general, there was no obvious discrimination in their workplaces on the basis of age, and stated that there were policies in place to inhibit any such discrimination. These particular workers believed there were subtle indications of employer bias against mature age employees or that their employment could be under threat as they got older. For instance, one informant reminded us that there are matters of simple personal preference – 'Oh, just like wherever you work, I think. Some people think a bit better of you than other people'.

There was also the issue of older workers who find themselves on contracts if they change employment, and the nature of contractual work bringing with it greater opportunities for being controlled by employers. One informant claimed in his occupational field there was some evidence of companies downsizing and although nothing was stated explicitly, there appeared to be a pattern between those were made redundant and their age. As was reported by the BCA, this may well be a common practice. Another informant suggested that this indeed was accepted practice and employers decide to make older workers redundant, rather than try and find roles for them ("parking them somewhere"). However, beyond age alone, other reasons were proposed why employers might want or feel obliged to seek to relinquish older workers' employment.

'I don't believe anybody is flicked because of their age, ... but somebody who has been around a long time may have a particular view and not be able to change that view because they've been here for a long time and therefore maybe they don't fit in the system'.

The interview data here suggest several themes: an underlying fear among mature age workers about their vulnerability, the possible use of redundancy to mask age discrimination, and employers wanting to rid themselves of mature-age workers who appear to be inflexible. Many of these accounts indicate in different ways that some mature-age workers are not valued to the extent they is helpful for sustaining them in Australian workplaces. Yet, at the same time, the complex of factors that emerge suggest that it is not age bias per se, but associated factors about matters of personal preference, fixed term employment that might not favour older workers, changing needs of workplaces and perceptions of older workers not being current, and so on. However, there are also

some workers who believe that age discrimination has been clearly demonstrated in their organisations.

Perceptions of explicit discrimination

Five respondents identified particular instances where they identified age as the main factor in workplace decisions about employment. Some respondents reported mature-age workers being made redundant because they did not fit the organisation's image. Another suggested that they were made redundant when younger employees were not, a decision that had a powerful impact on the informant:

... they didn't put a young one off, they put me off instead and that was happening to a lot of people over the past five years. I mean I've watched it happen, I just didn't think it would be me, but it was mainly contract workers and older ones. Like there probably would have been ten older staff made redundant in the past two years, including me.

It was also suggested that some forms of work were not amenable for older workers. One example was front of kitchen work in a restaurant: 'It's really an industry for younger, you know, people who just want to run on adrenalin and work really, really quickly and are able to work really, really quickly and as you get older you can't sustain that sort of pace ...and the marketing industry.' Another was from marketing: 'advertising is seen as new and cutting edge and young and groovy; it's not about old The older guys are running the agencies but they're soon moved on too because you've always got a younger, brighter star coming up behind you.' In another instance, an informant declared that it was not the sector or the person, just age bias in the ways opportunities are distributed: 'it's hard to sort of put a finger on it but younger ones are always given the opportunities but the older ones never are.'

These informants identified a privileging of youth over maturity as occurring in their workplaces. Informants suggested older workers being made redundant, in the first instance because they did not fit the changing organisation's image, and in the second because the organisation apparently preferred to retrench older workers rather than younger ones in order to trim its budget. Two examples also relate age to the nature of the industry – 'it's not about old'; and the last one suggests management attitudes to age determine the opportunities available.

In sum, it is evident from these data that there is some overlap in the comments about mature age workers being valued and differences in the opportunities available and security of employment to them. Continued employability is also premised on opportunities for learning. It follows, that the next section reports on particular responses to the question about differences in opportunities for learning and advancement, and the security of older workers' employment.

Differences in learning opportunities

The data sought to identify patterns in the distribution of opportunities, including access to learning opportunities. The perception that all staff, regardless of age, had equal access was strong across all occupational groups, especially those in larger organisations such as the public service, a university, and in teaching: 'it doesn't matter whether you're a beginning teacher or a mature age teacher – you're expected to make sure that you are up to date and abreast with all these changes'. In the public service, one respondent suggested that older workers may get more opportunities because they've been there long enough to 'know the system' and know what they want to learn. On the other hand, a public servant on a fixed term contract said training was not available to him – it was more to do with employment status than age.

Several workers responded to this interview question with examples of mentoring they provided in their workplaces, including a vocational teaching institution where the respondent said it could be a younger or an older worker who helps the other to learn something with which they are having a

problem. This informant concluded that attitude and personality were important, a response that was rehearsed by a school teacher who spoke of some colleagues just waiting for their redundancy package, and her own experience of helping younger teachers but at the same time 'I actually get energy from them because they renew in me the reason I began teaching all those years ago.' Also in a mentoring role was a person working in a social organisation with a small staff of permanents and casuals, to whom the younger ones came for advice: 'I'm not smarter than anybody else; it's just experience I think.'

Some respondents proposed that while opportunities for learning were available, it was workers' own attitudes about their capacities that determined if these opportunities were taken up. For example, one acknowledged that the offer was always there, but 'Why should I go and do a Manager's course when I'll never use it', and another said she had not embraced the use of computers in the workplace because 'I'm 65, so it's hardly an issue, you know, I'll be gone'. Although they seemed to regard it as inevitable, some older nurses raised coping with new technology as something that was being resisted ('a scary thing'). Another informant from a large organisation stated older workers did not always take up the opportunities available around learning about new information technology. 'It is best', said another, 'to let workers continue working as long as they want to but to go on doing what they were doing because it is 'hard to teach an older dog new tricks'. One respondent suggested that while younger people got more opportunities to learn in their organisation, he did not see this as discriminatory because the older worker already knew so much more, and that it was natural that younger people were more likely to be learning. A person working in a small organisation with fewer than 10 employees said the organisation did not provide opportunities – a worker would need to initiate any learning

However some mature age workers saw their employer as the gatekeeper of learning opportunities. One said younger workers with any initiative were sent off to training ahead of older workers, 'probably because they think we're going to get out of here soon'. A senior bank worker said he had never been nominated to do a course, although younger ones seemed to be 'forever' going on one, and he thought that was because once workers reach a certain level in the organisation 'they assume they have somebody good enough.' Another respondent thought that younger workers underwent more training because they were more compliant, less likely than older workers to ask why they needed to do the training.

In all, the responses about whether there were perceived differences between the learning opportunities for older and younger workers can be categorised into four different types: i) those where all staff had equal access, ii) those where there was a mentoring role, iii) those related to the individual attitudes of workers, including towards technology, and iv) those based on employer attitudes. There is also an indication that the status of the employment and the size of the organisation are influential factors, along side issues of age per se.

Differences in opportunities for advancement

The question about differences in opportunities for advancement was clearly more relevant to those working in larger organisations, than those in smaller organisations or who were self-employed. Even where such opportunities existed, a number of informants commented that they had reached a point in their working lives where they were no longer seeking advancement. Teachers, for example, spoke of having already decided to stay in the classroom rather than apply for a management position, even where the latter option had been suggested to them. Another respondent said: 'I guess the perception is that if an older worker was going to leap into that next level ... they would have done so 15 years earlier.' There were also other factors at play in different industries: capped pay rates preventing younger workers moving into higher level positions, and older ones staying on in senior positions and therefore holding younger workers back, whereas in a bank 'they're all being appointed at 40 years of age to be groomed for 5 or 10 years to become the next

CEO.’ There were also opposing views: that older people get promoted because they are more likely to stay with the organisation, and that younger ones are favoured over older for promotion, because ‘they get more out of them’ or, in another instance because of the former’s ability with technology. Another suggested that there was a perception in society that younger people make better informed decisions, whereas a mature age worker thought there were more opportunities for her ‘because of the credibility of the work I do.’

In professional occupations, two respondents related advancement to possession of qualifications, one woman attributed it to being gender-based in her workplace (85% male management), another informant claimed promotion was based on a particular manager’s bias, and another suspected that there was ‘a fair bit of cronyism’. One mature age worker interviewed put quite a different interpretation on the issue: ‘For a younger person you might call it advancement, but for somebody in my age group it’s a matter of are there opportunities for changes in your employment that would actually suit you.’

In summary, a number of distinct positions were advanced in response to this question. The strongest was the case that by ‘mature age’, many workers had decided whether they wanted promotion or not and some were happy to stay in a role they were comfortable with. Younger people were generally seen as being regarded as being more likely to be promoted because they would be with the organisation longer or because they were more capable with technology, but there were examples of exceptions to this among older workers. In a few cases, employer intervention, or lack of it, was also seen as contributing to advancement opportunities, which may not necessarily have been age related.

Security of employment

Finally, as with advancement, the question of security of tenure also attracted a variety of responses. A number of respondents, particularly in the public service and teaching, indicated they had permanency, but that younger workers tended to be employed on contract, and some respondents were concerned about the vulnerability of those younger and contracted employees. On a related matter, one respondent noted people over 60 or even 65 on three year contracts at a university who might be at risk if their contract ends, while at another university, an older worker noted the lack of younger academics to replace ageing ones, and suggested ‘demographics seem to have a lot to do with the regard in which you’re held’.

Two informants linked employers’ attitudes in terms of costs and benefits – the higher the pay and benefits; the more likely it was the older worker would go first. Another informant referred to a government department where they wanted to bring in a new team and ‘white-anted’ some really good workers. An opposing view from two other respondents was that it cost too much to pay out an older permanent worker, so the employer tended to move such workers aside (‘park them’) if they wanted to get rid of them, and wait for the employee to leave:

‘I would hesitate to show any kind of frailty,’ said a teacher. ‘I need to be fitter than the next person, I need to be bright-eyed and bushy tailed, seen to be absolutely coping 1000%, and I wouldn’t ever trust the system if I showed a weakness.’

Another teacher proposed that wanting to change the conditions of employment to suit a changing lifestyle, e.g. to move to part-time employment, might be a bigger threat to employment than age., e.g. In a small business, a mature age worker saw her experience as an advantage if people were put off. In a hospitality business, a mature age worker thought it was up to the individual whether a job was safe or not, but observed that permanent employees were in a much stronger position than casual staff. As for a self-employed person, one respondent said it was up to her own efforts, and a person working in medicine said that getting work was never a problem. Another respondent said

her employer did not differentiate, but that she personally probably needed security of employment more than a younger person. An informant in a hospitality organisation that employed both permanent and casual workers claimed that younger employees were not as committed to working as older workers.

Overall, the status of employment – permanent or contract – seems to be an important factor identified by respondents in relation to security of employment. There are signs of feelings of vulnerability of those workers who conclude that their abilities may be unfairly compared with those of younger workers.

Retaining mature age workers: Discussion

Conclusions are drawn from comparing the findings with four propositions drawn from what is advanced in the literature review.

i) Employers tend to perceive mature age workers as less capable than younger ones in terms of such factors as physical ability, capacity for learning and adaptability to change, but superior to younger workers in such factors as commitment, reliability and corporate knowledge.

The strong and consistent response from the mature-age workers interviewed was that they were not regarded as less capable than younger workers. They generally reported that they were valued for their experience and commitment, and some stated that younger workers looked up to them and regarded them as mentors. A few of the mature-age workers were disparaging of the work ethic of younger colleagues. However, there was small proportion of workers who claimed they were in an industry where youthfulness was seen as a positive characteristic or who believed that they had lost their jobs or were in danger of losing their jobs because they were perceived as not fitting the current corporate image.

ii) Negative perceptions may lead some employers to not support the ongoing development of mature age workers and to encourage their departure from the organisation.

A number of factors seem to be at work in determining the extent to which older workers have access to ongoing development opportunities. In professional occupations, such as teaching and nursing, there are mandatory requirements for all staff, regardless of age, and also changes in the nature of the work (e.g. curriculum changes, technological advances) that mean all employees need to keep themselves updated in order to continue doing their job properly. Also, there are requirements in some professions, such as teaching, for employees to undertake a minimum amount of continuing professional education, so employers are obliged to support them in those endeavours.

However, there were also some perceptions in other occupations that younger people were the first to be offered training opportunities, and a belief that this demonstrated the enactment of age bias. In some instances, the older workers were not bothered by this, because they believed: a) they did not need more training or b) at this stage of their working lives the outcome did not justify the effort, or c) it was more appropriate for younger workers to receive more training because they needed it and could apply it for a longer time. In some cases, employment status (e.g. fixed term) may be more important than age is the distribution of training opportunities.

iii) Some mature age workers themselves may accept negative stereotypes about age.

All respondents seemed to have strong self-perception of their capabilities as workers, although there were occasional mentions of 'slowing down'. Given that few of the respondents were employed in heavy manual labour, change in physical ability was only occasionally mentioned, and not always in relation to themselves. The area mentioned a number of times as a discriminating factor between young and old was the use of technology, and in a few cases, particularly among older nurses, there appeared to be some anxiety and even resistance to changing to a computer-based approach to some tasks, but this was not a strong pattern.

iv) Some mature age workers experience positive employer support.

As indicated earlier, a key finding was that over three quarters of the respondents felt strongly supported by their employers and did not believe there was discrimination in their workplaces on the basis of age. Nevertheless, even among respondents who believed there was no discrimination, there were occasional indications of uncertainty about employer attitudes to age, of the feeling they needed to be seen to be performing well and coping with change. However, there were opposing views on whether older or younger workers would be dismissed first in the event of any layoffs.

It might have been expected from the literature that these interviews would have revealed a strong pattern of age-bias in the experience of these workers. However, this was largely not the case. Many informants reported not experiencing any age bias and then explained why that was the case. Hence, being in an occupation where practitioners were in short supply (e.g. nursing) meant that you would always be treated reasonably, regardless of your age. Then, there were occupations that were more or less suited to a workers who was older (e.g. counselling, professional work) and some that were aligned to younger workers (e.g. chefs working in restaurants, advertising). There were a range of economic factors that likely play out, more in recessionary times than in times of plenty. There were concrete examples of where younger workers are more disadvantaged than older workers in securing tenured work. Mixed in here were also a range of personal factors associated with age, interest, skill levels, occupational status etc that likely shaped how older workers are perceived and responded to. Consequently, rather than age-bias alone, there are a range of factors that shaped these workers' capacity to engage in as productive working lives as they desired. These personal factors emerged through the data and extended from being interested to develop further their work, to want to engage in new forms of work etc. So, it is not societal sentiments alone (e.g. age bias) but a range of factors that shape the workplace experience of mature workers. Here, something of the complexity and variability of these factors have been identified and these can be contrasted to the rather stark accounts that arise from surveys.

Older workers and work

Australia is becoming increasingly reliant upon an older workforce to provide for its social and economic needs. Yet, much existing literature positions these workers as 'last resort' employees: held in low esteem by their employers. Evidence of employer expenditure on employees supports that claim. This literature suggests a societal sentiment privileging youth over age extends into decision-making about workplace engagement with and support for these workers in Australia. This situation is now untenable as realising national social and economic goals is becoming increasingly dependent on the capacities of workers aged over 45.

However, a more nuanced and contrasting set of findings emerge from our interviews and focus groups with these kinds of workers. Much of the predictions from the literature simply were not upheld. Against expectations, our informants reported little in the way of age-related bias in the conditions of employment, and opportunities for advancement and further development. Although our sample has particular characteristics and featured paraprofessional and professional workers, the contrast between what is reported in the literature, often premised on surveys, and our data premised on interviews is quite distinct. Certainly, there is little evidence of a general age-related bias against the older workers we interviewed. This is not to deny such a bias exists, but suggests it likely plays out in more nuanced and selective ways than as a general societal sentiment. Consequently, although younger and well-qualified workers may well secure higher levels of workplace support than low skilled older workers, this preference is likely played more in some occupations than others and more for some kinds of workers than others. Hence, quite different approaches to policy and practice are likely required than one premised on general age bias. Maintaining and sustaining the capacities of older Australian workers likely requires a range of workplace strategies and educational provisions aligned with particular needs.

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