

Promoting lifelong employability for workforce aged over 45: Singaporean workers' perspectives

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Abstract

Understanding how best to assist mature-aged workers (i.e. those over 45) maintain their employability across extended working lives, and what workplaces, educational institutions and government agencies can do to sustain that employability, is now central to many countries' national social and economic goals. In most countries with advanced industrial economies and those aspiring to develop such economies, mature age workers are now likely to need to engage in longer productive working lives and, potentially, engage increasingly in more demanding kinds of employment such as professional, managerial, executive, and technical work. As a case study, this paper discusses interviews with mature-aged Singaporean workers, some of whom are also employers, about how sustaining their employability should be realized. First, it describes something of the current circumstances (i.e. constraints and opportunities) for workers aged over 45 in Singapore through accounts of their experiences in workplaces and educational institutions. Second, it advances views that can inform policies and practices to improve workplace practices and also the provision of lifelong learning (e.g. CET) in both Singaporean workplaces and educational institutions. In all, it argues that both workplace and educational provisions need to support mature age workers in ways that are commensurate with their skills, confidence, and capacities to progress. Yet, beyond what workplaces and educational institutions can provide, the active and pro-active (i.e. agentic) engagement of these mature aged workers is also essential.

Keywords: Mature-aged worker, Singaporean employability, Workplace practice, Lifelong learning.

Employability and mature aged workers: A Singaporean case study

As in many other countries with both advanced industrial and emerging economies, a central concern for the Singapore government policy is maintaining the lifelong employability and productivity of its workforce (Yacob, 2009). A key element of this policy agenda is sustaining the employability of the increasing portion of the national workforce aged over 45 years (i.e. mature-aged workers). Yet, maintaining

these workers' employability is reliant upon two sets of related factors. First, employability requires being given (a) the opportunity to work and demonstrate competence (b) access to opportunities to extend the utilization of workers' capacities and respond to new challenges, and (c) being able to access opportunities for developing their skills and capacities further. Second, mature age workers themselves have to (a) possess the capacities and interests to secure employment (b) remain employable (i.e. competent at work) and (c) respond to new challenges at work (e.g. opportunities, advancements, new tasks, goals). This capacity includes being self-directed in their engagement in and learning through opportunities at work, through courses and other means to develop their employability further. More than any sharing of the burden of this policy agenda, how individuals engage in the process of learning would be central to the quality of its outcomes. Most likely, robust learning outcomes arise through effortful engagement by those who learn. Consequently, beyond the provision of learning opportunities and support in workplaces and educational institutions that might be organized to meet their needs, ultimately is the requirement for these workers to engage meaningfully and intentionally in this learning. Hence, when considering policy responses and new practices for the employability of mature-aged workers, it is essential to consider these workers' qualities and intentions as well as the kinds of opportunities provided for them by educational institutions, workplaces and other sources of support. In this way, employability is a responsibility shared amongst individual workers, community, workplaces, and educational institutions.

It is proposed here that, in the case of Singapore, the goals for sustaining employability of mature age workers are of two kinds: i) extending the duration of effective working life, and ii) a greater engagement by older workers in the kinds of professional, managerial, executive, and technical (PMET) work that is held to be central to Singapore's future economic competitiveness. However, both of these goals are underpinned by workers' ongoing learning for employability through participation in work that engages them with changing work and workplace requirements, along with access to provisions of educational and workplace support and occupational certification.

The study described and discussed here seeks to understand how these goals might be achieved in Singapore. There are four reasons for selecting Singapore as a case study to discuss these issues. First, Singapore's working population is ageing to a far greater extent and at a greater pace than most other advanced industrial countries, and it stands only third behind Japan and South Korea in terms of aged profile. Second, much of the nation's resident population aged over 40 has little more than school levels of education, which is misaligned with and insufficient to engage in the kinds of professional, managerial, and technical work that is central to Singapore's future directions (Economic Strategies Committee 2010). Third,

like in many other countries, the nation's tertiary education system is still almost wholly focused on preparing young people for employment, rather than ongoing occupational development (i.e. CET). Fourth, many Singaporean enterprises report preferring to employ and support younger workers for reasons of cost, currency of knowledge, and beliefs about their superior capacities as employees. So, there are particular nation-specific factors that make this a helpful case study, including the generational divides in levels of education, legacy of age-related pay, occupational engagement of and reliance on non-resident workers, and mature-age workers' prospects of being supported by their employers. Yet, there are other factors that are common to other countries, including the societal sentiment that often favours youth over age, a preference for younger workers, and government moves to extend the length of working life. The case is structured through consideration of the worth of and prospects for mature age workers' sustained employability, where it is concluded that these prospects are potentially worthwhile is supported by workplaces and educational institutions and engaged by mature age workers. These issues are then elaborated through the accounts of interviews with mature age workers about their work, work environments, and prospects for sustained employability.

Mature age workers' employability

It is initially helpful to consider whether attempting to sustain older workers' employability is realistic and a worthwhile project. Across all age groups, individuals possess and exercise different levels of capability and interest, and mature-aged workers are no exception. Certainly, through the process of maturation, older workers will experience some softening of capabilities, such as physical strength and reaction time, to a greater or lesser extent (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2007). However, the importance of such changes for these workers' employability depends upon their occupation. For military personnel, firefighters or front-line restaurant chefs, for instance, these changes may undermine their capacity to be effective in those roles. Yet, this case may be far less so for clerks, librarians or doctors, for instance, because their work is based less on physical strength and quick reaction times. Moreover, mature-aged workers often have a far greater repertoire of working knowledge (Sigelman, 1999) and have developed more effective work procedures and decision-making capacities than their younger counterparts (EU, 2007). This more extensive knowledge base can sometimes compensate for slower reaction times and physical strength, and the strategic qualities of experienced workers knowledge can be particularly potent (Bosman, 1993). For the surveyor or estimator, this extensive repertoire of knowledge may be essential, and constitute capabilities that younger workers simply do not and

cannot possess. Yet, these extensive repertoires of knowledge may be less useful in occupations where the knowledge required for work is constantly changing, as in advertising or information technology or other occupations subject to rapid change; their existing knowledge and capacities can become quickly redundant. Then, there is the focus and level of interest that workers have, regardless of age that shapes how they put their capabilities into use (Perkins, Jay et al. 1993): their disposition or 'mindset'. The level of individuals' interest does much to shape the direction, intentionality and scope of learning (Tobias, 1994). Yet, this is a factor not dependent upon age. Therefore, in considering policy and practice measures to promote the employability of mature-age workers, there is a need to account for mature age workers' capabilities and interests, and how these might be aligned with or developed further to secure the kinds of employment for which they are suited, or are in demand, such as professional and technical capacities.

Yet, as with individuals' interest, the capabilities required for employability are best able to be exercised and deemed employable most effectively when utilized in work activities, and maintained and extended through opportunities for undertaking new tasks, advancement and access to intentional training activities (Billett, 2001). So, beyond individuals' capacities and interest in continuing to learn is the need for opportunities for engaging in work and having access to new and challenging activities that will serve to sustain their ongoing employability. Making this provision available to mature aged workers includes workplaces employing mature-age workers, and utilizing them effectively in these ways. Then, there is also the need for accessible, well supported and pertinent continuing education and training (CET) provisions that have: i) flexible entry requirements, ii) modular structure and accessible provisions, iii) appropriate and engaging instructional strategies and vi) well respected certification that will meet these workers' needs. Hence, beyond considering the personal capabilities and interests that support employability, is the need to sustain that employability through workplace and educational provisions that engage mature-age workers, and provide opportunities for developmental support and progress.

It follows from the above that it is important to understand the degree by which these kinds of experiences are being afforded to mature aged workers in Singapore and the ways in which these workers are taking up what opportunities are provided for them. Given that so much of their learning is premised upon how they engage with opportunities to learn new knowledge and are invited to do so, it is helpful to get perspectives from these learners. Consequently, in the next section, the process and findings from interviewing a cohort of such Singaporean workers are described and discussed.

Sustaining mature age workers: interviews

The interviews, whose findings are reported here, are part of a larger study that used interviews and a survey to capture the perspectives of mature age workers' experiences of sustaining their employability and how that might be enhanced (Billett, 2010). In particular, to identify their recent experiences a sample of Singaporean workers aged over 40 were interviewed to ascertain what constitutes workplace and educational practices that are attractive to these workers in meeting their needs as workers and encouraging them to remain in the workplace and also sustain and develop their employability further. The interviewees were selected to capture perspectives from a range of occupations and age categories. They were asked questions about: i) their work and work life history, ii) their own and societal perceptions about 'older workers', iii) their experiences with opportunities for advancement, further training and securing employment, and how they maintain their workplace competence, iv) the support they received from their workplace, educational institutions, and elsewhere, and v) most appropriate workplace roles for older workers. In addition, they were asked what government should do to assist and support their lifelong employability. The interviews, whose duration was usually approximately 45 minutes, were audio recorded, and transcripts generated from those recordings. Informed consent was secured from all interviewees before the interviews proceeded.

Informants

A total of 42 Singaporean residents aged over 40 were interviewed using a schedule of questions that had been tested prior to the interviews commencing. The interviewees were identified and selected through the research team's contacts and affiliations. Table 1 presents data about the informants' gender, race, and age groupings. Importantly, given the nature of social policy within the country, the main racial groups within Singapore's resident population are proportionately represented, and informants whose racial grouping is reported as being Filipino and Indonesian were also interviewed. The interviewees were mainly males (i.e. 35 out of 42) and represented a range of ages from 40 to 70 years (see Table 1). A total of 40 interviewees were in age groups usually categorized as comprising 'older workers' (i.e. 45 years and above), and the interviewees also included workers beyond the current retirement age (i.e. 62). In this way, the age profiles of the informants are helpful because they represent perspectives of those who are younger than the current retirement age and also some who are beyond that age. Consequently, these informants provide a sampling across gender, age groupings and Singaporean racial groups, which is quite helpful. Less helpful was the limited number of female interviewees.

Table 1: Informants' age and race

Informants	Age groups	Race
42	2 (40-44 years)	Chinese (21)
Male (35)	3 (45-49 years)	Indian (9)
Female (7)	13 (50-54 years)	Malay (2)
	10 (55-59 years)	Other (4)
	10 (60-64 years)	
	2 (65-69 years)	

Note: not all interviewees responded to all items

The interviewees' work was representative of a range of occupations and industry sectors, as presented in Table 2, which indicates the interviewees' occupations on the basis of their age groupings. The interviewees' work roles ranged from the senior executive of a very large organization, through to skilled workers, and service and administrative workers. Also, some of those who manage and employ older workers were interviewed. Within these roles, the participants represented different age groupings within a range of occupations, as indicated in Table 2 below. As presented in this table, the interviewees work in both public and private sector organizations. In these ways, the sample is representative of a range of occupations and industry sectors, and different age groups within those occupations. However, the sample was mainly selected from professional, management, executive and training roles, and, as such, is not representative of the mature age working population of Singapore, many of whom are employed in low-paid service work. Consequently, the sample is not nor does it intend to be representative of the entire Singaporean population; nor was it intended to be. The limited number of females and respondents from low-status and low-paid work are clear limitations of this sample. Nevertheless, the interviewees' transcripts provided useful insights from across a range of workers who are largely engaged in the very kinds of professional, managerial executive and technical occupations through which the government is seeking to build national capacity.

Table 2: Informants' work and industry affiliations

Occupations n= (age groupings)	Sector = (age groupings)
Manager 1(40-44), 2 (50-54), 1(65-69)	Training 3 (40-44), 1(45-49), 3 (50-54), 3 (60-64) 1 (65-69)
Director 1(40-44), 3 (50-54)	Service 1 (50-54)
Trainer 1 (45-49), 1 (60-64) 1(65-69)	Public service 1(40-44)
Auditor 1 (40-44)	Education 1(65-69)
Lecturer 1 (65-69)	Security 1(65-69)
Retail 1 (50-54)	Retail 1 (50-54)
Supervisor 1 (65-69)	Commercial Arts 2 (65-69)
Creative Director 1 (65-69)	Insurance 1 (50-54)
Insurance agent 1 (50-54)	
Consultant 1 (60-64)	

Note: not all interviewees responded to all items

New learning and older workers

As is now well-known, effective learning is not restricted to participation in educational programmes — likely most of our learning across working life comes from engaging in activities in the workplace (Billett, 2010). The informants consistently provided supporting evidence that confirmed this proposition, including how older workers continue to learn throughout their working lives. Indeed, making the point about engaging in learning more strongly, it is noteworthy that most interviewees reported recently engaging in and negotiating new work roles and new work requirements. All of these changes require them to have learnt new knowledge; otherwise they would not have been able to fulfil these roles and requirements. Indeed, of the 42 interviewees, nine reported recently engaging in new kinds of work and 26 reported that their work had changed in ways requiring new skills and capacities. These data suggest that the majority of interviewees had engaged in significant work changes which require the learning of new roles and new knowledge (i.e. new or transformative learning). This finding is perhaps hardly surprising because work and the requirements for effective work practice constantly change. Therefore, to engage in these new forms of work requires new learning. However, importantly, these data contradict the claim that older workers are either reluctant or slow to learn new tasks and knowledge. Instead, the evidence here is that the majority of these interviewees had engaged in significant new learning in recent times, and there were few accounts of this learning being secured through participation in training programmes. Instead, it seems that the majority of this learning had arisen through individuals' engagement in their work tasks. Interestingly, even those workers who claimed there had been no changes in their work tasks referred to new challenges in that work (e.g. how it was being conducted). Certainly, changes to work requirements can be quite significant and ongoing (Billett, 2006), and for many workers this includes becoming competent in technologically mediated processes (i.e. learning to use new technology). Again, the interview data indicate that just about all of the interviewees had been required to learn new knowledge to maintain their employability across recent years. This finding also emphasizes these workers' interest in and capacities to continue to learn new knowledge.

Moreover, the interviewees consistently referred to engaging with and using a range of resources in supporting their ongoing learning (e.g. colleagues, web-based resources, trial and error). This finding indicates adaptable behaviours on the part of these worker learners, not helplessness, as is often claimed for older workers. Indeed, and again in contradiction of what is often claimed about older workers not being willing or able to engage with new technologies, many informants reported using the Internet and other forms of electronically mediated means of accessing information to remain current and competent in their work. So, in these ways, these findings question simple assumptions that workers aged over 45 are not interested in learning or are not adaptable learners, and are inflexible in their approach to

working and securing knowledge and that they are incompetent with and often afraid of technologies such as those required to access information electronically.

The informants were also asked about how they had initially acquired their occupational skills and continued to develop them across their working life. The responses are reported in Table 3 on the basis of categories of circumstances of learning (i.e. on the job, through school, polytechnic, college, through national certified qualifications, university and other means) for both their initial skill development (PET) and also their ongoing skill development (CET) across their working lives.

Table 3: Initial and ongoing development of work skills

	On-the-job	School/ polytech/ college	Vocational courses	Uni	Other
Initial preparation	30	15	5	10	10
On-going development	29	3	11	10	21

Given their age profile, it is perhaps not surprising that the informants reported much of the initial skill development being acquired through their work (e.g. ‘on the job’). This is because, at the time they would have been learning their occupational skills, Singapore’s provision of tertiary education was quite underdeveloped. Likely, a younger age cohort would emphasize learning through educational institutions (e.g. polytech, institute of technical education, university), because that would have been their experience. Yet, these data also indicate many workers’ on-going work-related learning arose on-the-job: through experiences in the workplace, which is consistent with other studies of workers’ learning through work activities (Billett 2001). However, there are also engagements with educational institutions and through nationally endorsed vocational qualifications — that is, the Workforce Skills Qualification system (WSQ). It is also interesting to note and compare the participation of these settings for entry-level preparation with those for continuing education and training.

What the data suggest here is that learning through work remains important for these informants’ ongoing employability throughout working life. The post-compulsory education sector appears to have played a strong role in the provision of continuing education and training, but much less so for ongoing development of these workers. Also, university programmes are not seen as being an educational provision to improve the ongoing employability by a larger number of participants. So, although this is but a small sample of views, the pattern is quite noteworthy.

Interest in work and responsibility for ongoing learning

Given that individuals' learning is largely directed and mediated by their interests, intentions and effort, it is important to understand the degree to which mature-age workers are interested in their work and in taking responsibility for the learning required to sustain their employability. The interviewees were asked about their interest in and responsibility for their learning. In response, nearly all the informants expressed strong interest in learning more about their work. Also, overwhelmingly, they emphasized the importance of their role in that learning process. It was almost never seen by the interviewees as being largely somebody else's responsibility, but almost universally as mainly theirs. Sometimes, the emphasis in their responses was about needing to learn to be competent in their work to sustain employment, for the sake of maintaining employment, having a strong sense of competence in what they do, or about being gainfully employed. Amongst the interviewees were some informants who had retired and were now returning or had returned to working life. These interviewees claimed that they were very interested in work and, therefore, learning for their work held the prospect of engaging in interesting and worthwhile activities. Interest in work was reported strongly by most informants as being a key driver in their quest for lifelong employability. Some examples of how these informants expressed this interest are as follows:

"I think if I stick and work and my health is good, I'll just carry on. If the company allows me to work, I'll just carry on, because this is like a passion to me. It's more creative work, so it keeps you going, rather if you don't work; at least it keeps you going on at the same time you can learn with all of the new, younger generation. So from learn you still learn" (mature-aged worker)

"I am currently 51, I am Chinese, I have no intention of retiring at all. Honestly, even if I can make all the money in the world, I still want to work because I think that would keep me sharp and prevent me from dying early" (mature-aged worker)

Also, the interviewees suggested that mature workers accept that ongoing development is essential and that they had to take responsibility for that learning:

"...because it's lifelong learning so you've got to carry on upgrading yourself, you cannot carry on catching up with industry. So, to me, it's got to be ongoing, an ongoing process non-stop" (mature-aged worker)

"...mature workers need ... a lifelong learning attitude, that means continuous lifelong learning and to have a very open mindset that is

receptive to change” (mature-aged worker)

“... continuous learning is not an option, you have to do it and this has to be honoured on an ongoing basis” (mature-aged worker)

“relying upon ‘ee-lau mai-lau’ (倚老賣老) — you are wise and you are selling your wisdom because you are simply an elderly person — is no longer sufficient. A mindset like this needs to change, because older workers need to keep on learning” (mature-aged worker)

“... if you’re really interested in upgrading your work, in progressing in your place, I think then you shouldn’t take your own training to supplement what the department provides” (mature-aged worker)

“... if you have the right attitude you can be as productive as any of the other younger workers” (mature-aged worker)

Across these illustrative quotes the importance of the mature workers’ dispositions (i.e. attitudes and values) associated with being a lifelong learner and taking responsibility for their lifelong employability is consistently advanced. It was suggested that these qualities are strongly exercised by mature-age workers:

“... older workers are more committed” (mature-aged worker)

That is, more than what others do to assist; what these interviewees report is that it is individuals’ dispositions (i.e. their values, attitudes, interest) that are central to how they both work and learn, and importantly direct their efforts in maintaining their employability. The salience of this sentiment about actively engaging in learning is strongly endorsed within most contemporary accounts of human learning and development. In particular, most contemporary accounts of learning, including those emphasizing the contributions to learning from the social world, emphasize that humans are active meaning makers and constructors of that knowledge. Consequently, the degree to which individuals engage in these processes of learning through and for work, and the intentionality of how they go about it, including the energy they exercise, are central to the kinds and quality of learning processes that are enacted and their outcomes. This is not to say that lifelong learning processes directed towards employability should proceed without support and guidance. However, it will not proceed in a productive way unless individuals have the appropriate disposition (e.g. mindset). What the data consistently report is that these workers claim to be exercising their agency in learning through and for work.

Moreover, in consideration of this personal disposition, it seems that individuals’ sense of self is important in terms of how they view themselves as

workers and learners. Consequently, workers who are consistently advised that they lack competence and the capacity to retrain, and are denied opportunities for advancement and development may well come to question their sense of self and how and to what purposes they direct their energies when working and learning. Demotivation and frustration likely have significant consequences for the effort workers become willing to direct into their learning. However, this enthusiasm is also mediated by individual confidence. The issue of confidence, which many of the respondents referred to, goes beyond what might be seen as a general concern of all learners, particularly when faced with new learning tasks. In the transcripts, confidence often seems to refer to individuals whose earlier educational and life experiences have not necessarily prepared them well for the kinds of demands and requirements of contemporary working life. Therefore, it seems important to take seriously concerns about these mature workers' personal confidence as they are central to how they will come to engage with both work and learning. It follows that understanding how workplaces and education institutions can best provide the opportunities and support that assist these workers' development, and also position them as being worthwhile and valued workers, and as responsible and active learners is perhaps most likely to engage these kinds of workers. From this outcome, it may be possible to suggest how workplaces can best support workers' ongoing employability.

Support from the workplace, educational institutions and elsewhere

From the above, it can be seen these mature-aged workers report being highly motivated to sustain and develop their capacities further and participate fully in the workplace. Yet, as noted, securing and sustaining employability goes beyond individuals' capacities alone. There is also a need for opportunities and support to assist that employability across individuals' working lives. Correspondingly, the interviewees were asked to identify the kinds of support that they receive and need from their workplaces, educational institutions, and other sources. The majority of responses referred to how experiences in their workplaces can assist this ongoing learning. However, statements about and suggestions for how educational institutions can also support their learning were also provided. A frequent request was for workplaces to provide opportunities for engaging in learning and extending what individuals already know through their everyday work tasks and activities. This request is consistent with what was suggested in the earlier reported data on how their ongoing learning was supported. Some informants illustrated this contribution:

“... on-the-job training. Most of the time you gain experience, because in the logistics field I think you don’t go by the text. It is more, operational; ...so you learn in the field with the experienced people that are around you” (mature-aged worker)

“... my role as a part-time auditor helps me because I get the wealth of information here working with the ATOs” (mature-aged worker)

“... on the job, mainly on-the-job training” (mature-aged worker)

The first illustrative example refers to what is learned through everyday authentic work activities, and to engaging in the everyday goal-directed activities required for work that also generates learning, which has been identified as being a potent base to learn the knowledge required for work (Billett, 2001). The second refers to the kinds of activities that are generative of rich learning. Here, for instance, the task of checking others’ work and engaging in different kinds of workplaces provides a process that has particular pedagogic qualities that are helpful in supporting rich learning.

The informants also referred to the kind of workplace environment through which they believed learning through work would progress most effectively. Repeatedly, directly or indirectly, they referred to the importance of having a workplace environment that is open, supportive, and collaborative. One informant referred to their workplace environment and how will it assist his learning:

“Well, they support me by giving me good rapport and then also by telling me what are the necessary things to do” (mature-aged worker)

Another interviewee listed three qualities that would make a workplace an effective learning environment for mature-age workers.

“... i) due to the fear of failure there is a need to build confidence; ii) learning activities that are integrated into tasks with other people, because so much of what happens is based on a work task; and iii) developing a sense of security and self-worth that contributions are worthwhile and valued” (mature-aged worker)

Some interviewees were quite specific in their suggestions about how their workplaces can assist mature-aged workers’ learning. These suggestions extended to identifying particular approaches or strategies. A number of interviewees quite independently of each other referred to a process of learning through a dialogue with other workers. That is, what they proposed was that they would like to learn through opportunities to share information in ways that positions them as

both learners and also assisting others to learn. It is inferred and imputed from the interviews that these mature-age workers did not want to be positioned as 'students', and were quite discomfited by the prospect of being treated as students with somebody teaching them. Instead, and repeatedly, they indicated that they had much to contribute to other workers' learning and wanting to help others to learn, and yet through this process recognized that they had more to learn themselves. In this way, they are proposing a pedagogic approach that meets their needs as experienced and competent workers, who have much to provide for others' learning, and also there was consistently an acknowledgement that they also needed to learn. Yet, across this cohort, the majority had initially learnt their occupational skills on-the-job and continued to learn through practice. Hence, their reported preference was to engage with others in something that might be described as a 'dialogue forum' with other workers, not in a class to be taught by a teacher. Likely, these forums would take place in or near their workplaces, perhaps in working hours or in meal breaks. They would permit these mature-age workers to share their knowledge with others (i.e. younger or older), and learn from others at the same time, whilst avoiding being positioned as 'learners' who had to be taught by others. In this way, their sense of 'self and purpose' was likely to be engaged more intensely and in ways that they could engage without their sense of self and confidence being eroded.

"I was fortunate enough to be in a department where there is an open mindset among managers and auditors to learn from one another" (mature-aged worker)

"I think colleagues help; we help each other" (mature-aged worker)

The interviewees made another suggestion for the learning through work by being permitted to 'shadow' workers from whom he would want to learn through practice. Shadowing refers to observing, listening to, and working closely with other workers, and even performing part of their work, whilst being guided and initially monitored. It was also suggested that utilizing the skills of older workers as a training resource should be adopted much more widely. It was proposed that these mature age workers' contributions could be enacted through the: i) assessment of skills for upgrading and opportunities for rotating work roles, ii) conversion of workers to trainer courses, iii) a certified worker-trainer pool that is available for promotional and training roles, and iv) older workers becoming worker-trainers across a range of enterprises, not just those in which they are employed. In this way, a structured approach to workplace learning support was proposed to be enacted as part of everyday work activities, and in ways that both utilize mature workers' experience, and also positions them either as guides to others' learning, or as engaged in a process that grants them personal initiative and direction in their learning.

Consequently, beyond the importance of courses with their highly valued, but sometimes inaccessible, qualifications offered by post-compulsory education institutions are the pedagogic approaches and strategies, such as those outlined above, that can be enacted easily in workplaces. That is, rather than organizing taught courses, processes such as dialogues and shadowing outlined above might be a helpful mechanism for learning through work and in workplaces and in ways that meets the needs of these older workers in generating reciprocal learning amongst workers in each workplace. In some instances, these kinds of experiences can be enacted as part of individuals' everyday work, as in shadowing. Others suggested that workplace meetings could be utilized more fully as learning opportunities where knowledge is shared. There are also production meetings, lunchtime discussions, among other things, that might also serve this purpose in an engaging way. Then, there is also the option of organized development opportunities in workplaces, such as the clinical supervision models in which individuals come together to share information about current experiences and cases. However, these kinds of dialogue forums, shadowing, and sharing are likely to be most effective when they are enacted in a benign and constructive (i.e. supportive and collaborative) environment, as was suggested above.

Educational provisions

The majority of interviewees indicated that much of their ongoing learning for sustaining their employability had occurred within their workplaces. Nevertheless, they also provided data about learning through educational provisions both from experience and also in prospect that they would have such opportunities. A number of informants made a direct reference to engaging in and benefiting from training opportunities. Quite specifically, some interviewees had recently completed a course that provided both the context and the basis for critiquing existing course provisions. Here, they made specific reference to flexible entry into this course that enabled many of them to engage in a nationally recognized Certificate course. They also referred to the relevance of this programme and how it had been taught.

“After completing the ... course I put into practice what I've learned and I found that the experience is given at the course/college the knowledge that was imparted to me to conduct my on-the-job activities better” (mature-aged worker)

This interviewee refers to a training environment characterized by informed trainers, who added value, as did the other participants. The opportunity to share experiences and use other participants as resources was held to be very valuable. She also referred to being quite anxious beforehand, about the course, having not

participated in a training programme for 20 years. While being highly supportive of the programme, she suggested that prior to participating in this course it would have been helpful to have had more information about what to expect, the requirements, and expectations of students. It was also suggested that the self-checking and self-assessment devices utilized in these courses were particularly helpful for the mature-age students. However, there were quite different views about the ways in which these programmes should be offered. These views were gathered through inviting the interviewees to speculate what they would request of the government if they had the opportunity to do so. In response to this request, some interviewees suggested that these training programs should be subsidized and offered through local training centres to make it more convenient for mature-age workers to attend, and that they should be made more interesting and relevant for older workers. One interviewee similarly proposed that these provisions should: (i) be well funded; (ii) be available at locations near to the neighbourhoods where workers live; (iii) be flexible in timing and availability of courses; (iv) consist of more interactive programmes; and (v) be inclusive of socializing activities between sessions so that they can be more socially rich as well as academically-focused learning experiences. The four last proposed qualities emphasize the requirements of workers who are seeking to have accessible provisions that meet their needs and other commitments, want to be engaged in dialogue, and address needs for social contact. Another view was that it was important for these courses to be offered through higher level educational institutions, for example polytechnics. One informant suggested he would really like to gain access to the polytechnics for his ongoing education programmes, because this would enhance its worth as a programme, the outcome, and also his status within his own family. Generally, it was suggested that these courses should be practice-based and include networking opportunities for individuals to find jobs in which they can practice what they learnt.

For workers with low education and language capacities, it was suggested that government attention should be directed towards: i) providing quite short courses with measured amounts of content to be learnt, ii) arrangements to develop greater awareness of what is available, and iii) access to financial and other support for these kinds of workers. In particular, for these kinds of workers the issue of confidence to participate effectively and succeed is likely to be a key concern. Hence, a key consideration for both workplaces and educational provisions is providing the means by which these mature aged workers can engage successfully with learning opportunities, and be supported by these programmes being offered in convenient locations and through modes that are accessible for them. What was noteworthy in the kinds of suggestion the interviewees made to government was that many of them were quite strategic in intent, and, surprisingly, not always directed at the interviewees' specific personal interests.

Sustaining the employability of mature aged workers

It has been proposed in this case study that the important governmental and national priority of sustaining the employability of mature aged workers in an economy that increasingly needs their skills can be realized by the engagement of these workers in this learning process, the support of workplaces in affording the kind of environment in which they can contribute and also learn through being gainfully engaged in productive activities, and providing them with support for learning that is appropriately focused, respectful of them and their contributions, and also educational provisions that are offered in ways that are responsive to their other roles, readiness to learn and that can extend, rather than confront, their sense of self. Moreover, sitting over this is the need for a societal environment that acknowledges the contributions of workers of all ages and is mature enough to realize that the contributions of all kinds of members of the working population need to be respected, supported, and opportunities provided for the further development of all workers. After all, all workers will age and likely need to be seeking longer productive working lives. If realizing this employability is seen to be wholly the responsibility of workers themselves, they may be denied the important opportunities for engaging in productive activities, developing their knowledge further through participating in work activities that are new to them, and through which they will learn. Educational institutions also need to offer arrangements that can accommodate these workers, including ways and locations through which their programmes are offered. Without being employed and having these opportunities, their quest will become increasingly perilous. Yet without active engagement by these workers, such workplace and educational opportunities will be squandered.

So, there is a need for policy directions to guide workplaces, educational institutions, and mature aged workers themselves. Singapore has begun to develop such a set of arrangements. This includes developing a continuing education and training system, policies to encourage employers to both re-employ and support their on-going development, and agencies specifically tasked with meeting those needs. It may well be useful to monitor their progress and success in changing societal attitudes about 'older' workers.

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Author's profile

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