

Social construction of older workers & the evolving policy discourse of working longer

CSIRO-Monash Superannuation Research Cluster – Older Workers

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Labour supply and older workers

- Baby-boomers' retirement → weakening of labour supply
- Already evident in some industries
- Employer concerns persisted through the GFC
- Labour shortage of >2 million by 2030 requires:
 - Investment in skills
 - Increased skilled migration
 - Prolongation of working lives

Past narratives of retirement

- Previously, retirement was good for you
- Early withdrawal from labour market was encouraged
- Older workers were viewed as blockages who should make way for younger labour market entrants
- Retirement was viewed as a time to enjoy later life
- Labour supply shortages have caused a rethink

Contradictory opinions had emerged

Taylor and Walker, 1994

How old is too old to work?

Employers identified upper age limits –

- 1 out of 4 too old at age 50
- 43% too old at age 55
- 3 out of 5 too old at age 60

What jobs can they do?

For workers aged over 50 –

- 27% of employers could think of no job they would have difficulty adapting to
- 35% could think of a few
- 31% could think of a few or many

New narratives of retirement

- Now working longer is good for you
- Older workers are viewed as active agents in the labour market
- Older workers should pass on the benefits of their experience and knowledge to others
- Retirement is a time to continue contributing productively through paid employment or volunteering
- Until what age? 65? 70? 75? Beyond?
- Has retirement become a form of unemployment?

‘working is a protective factor against physical ill-health and poor mental health’

(Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, p. 6)

Prolonging working lives

- Policy responses in Australia
 - Raising the pension age
 - Education and training for older workers
 - Age based discrimination legislation
 - Age Discrimination Commissioner
 - Dissemination of guidelines to assist employers

Employer attitudes and discrimination

- Discrimination on the basis of age is key a barrier to labour force participation of older workers, some contend the least acknowledged and understood.
- One facet of scholarly interest has been employers' ageist stereotypes.
 - 17 studies internationally have assessed these since initial work in the 1970s.
 - Have reported varying levels of employer negativity and indifference towards older workers.
- Results have been inconsistent in demonstrating differences in employer attitudes across demographic and organisational characteristics and how these attitudes are associated with organisational practices.

Age stereotyping of older workers

Adapted from AARP in Hedge et al., 2006; Kreab and Gavin Anderson, 2014

Valued for:

- Reliability
- Loyalty
- Dependability
- Experience
- Corporate knowledge
- Wisdom
- Temperament
- Strong work-ethic
- Commitment to organisation
- Job satisfaction
- Stability

Lacking:

- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Technologically savvy
- Enthusiasm
- Innovation
- Pace-setting
- Ambition
- Risk-taking
- Desire to learn
- Openness to change
- Collaboration
- Understanding of social media

e.g. Restart wage subsidy

Australian government program for workers aged over 50 years

- Conscious of age limits but lacking an evidence base
- Posits a business case that:

“Mature age employees are reliable, take pride in their work and are keen to make a positive contribution”
(Department of Employment, 2014)

Reliability as an employee attribute is:

- Positive for repetitive and predictable tasks in a routine
- Negative for flexible, innovative and creative employees

Competing narratives of older working have evolved

Competing narratives of older workers

Productive

Kreab and Gavin Anderson, 2014

- In 2014 older Australians faced less age based discrimination than in 2012
- Australian employers are actively looking for ways to retain the knowledge and experience of older workers
- Perceptions of discrimination in recruitment and promotion have dropped (from 28% in 2012 to 18% in 2014)
- Employers are more willing to offer training to older workers (from 39% in 2012 to 67% in 2014)

Vulnerable

AHRC, 2013

- Most Australians think age discrimination is common (47%) or very common (24%)
- Directed towards older & escalates with age
- For those aged 55-64 years:
 - 35% experienced age discrimination
 - 51% felt treated with disrespect
 - 59% felt ignored
- For those aged over 65 years:
 - 43% experienced age discrimination
 - 64% felt treated with disrespect
 - 66% felt ignored
- Experiences of age discrimination lead to feeling shame, anger, and a diminished sense of self-worth

Activation of older workers

- Activation in terms of the 'right' to work
- But, there may be no work, no meaningful work, or no 'quality work', due to:
 - Age based discrimination
 - A lack of skills currency
 - Physical and/or mental health issues
- Unemployed older workers may 'retire' as a face-saving status
- Others must maintain economic activity for financial reasons, even if they have limited prospects in the labour market
- They may become trapped in involuntary part-time or casual work for long periods rather than being in control of 'flexibility'
- May face the prospect of social exclusion and poverty

Employer attitudes: favouring older workers on the wrong qualities

- Studies have found evidence that older workers are rated more highly on qualities that are considered less important by employers.
- Has potentially important implications for efforts to overcome age barriers in the labour market, particularly those aimed at awareness raising among employers.
- Current efforts to promote so-called ‘qualities’ of older workers such as arguing for their ‘reliability’ and ‘loyalty’ may have little persuasive influence on employer behaviour.
- The favouring of qualities perceived to be predominantly present among younger workers along with the preferential evaluations of prime age workers is suggestive of a pessimistic outlook for the employment of older workers.

The new policy rhetoric that has emerged around working until the age of 67, and potentially to 70 or beyond, may ring hollow to many job-seekers currently aged in their 50s and 60s whose working lives, due to a combination of social and health risk factors, are likely to be curtailed long before.

Thank you

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