

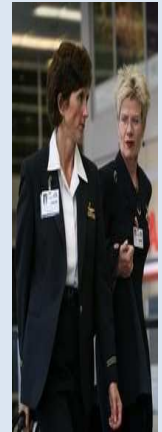
## Older workers and work: Societal and personal sentiments



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## Progression

- Older workers and work
- Older workers: a view from the literature
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- Perceptions of value of older workers to the workplace
- Perceptions of implicit and explicit discrimination
- Differences in opportunities for learning, advancement
- Retaining mature age workers



## Projected median ages, selected countries, 2010 and 2050 (ABS, 2008, 3)

Country	Median age 2010	Median age 2050	Difference
Japan	44.6	54.9	+10.3
South Korea	38.0	54.9	+16.9
Singapore	40.6	53.7	+12.9
Canada	40.0	45.3	+5.3
Australia	38.2	45.2	+7.0
China	34.9	45.0	+10.1
New Zealand	36.8	44.1	+7.3
UK	40.0	43.4	+3.4
Vietnam	26.9	41.6	+14.7
Indonesia	28.2	41.1	+12.9
USA	36.5	41.1	+4.6
India	25.0	38.6	+13.6
PNG	20.3	30.9	+10.6

In 2010 – no country had median age at 45, but by 2050 six of these countries will

In June 2008, in a labour force of 11,176,751, the percentage of Australian workers aged 45-64 was almost 35%, with just over 2 per cent aged 65 or more

## Older workers and work

Australia's working population is aging and % of workers aged over 45 is increasing

Australian's are expecting and expected to work longer

Tim Colebatch - February 25, 2009

MORE than a third of older Australian workers now plan to work until they first retire. Retaining these workers in the workforce and sustaining their workplace competence is seen as necessary to secure national economic and social goals. Statistics reports. Yet, research typically reports negative perceptions about older workers from employers. reports that 15 per cent of Australian workers aged 45 and over say they plan to retire, but just 5 per cent plan to retire until they drop. Most intend to ease down to part-time work. But, overall, less than 30 per cent of middle-aged and older Australians now intend to retire before they turn 65.



## Older workers: a view from the literature

Often seen as a 'last resort' employees

Business Council of Australia (BCA) identified numerous 'readily accepted negative stereotypes of mature-age workers' (2003 p. 12): They are seen as lacking motivation and enthusiasm, close-minded, more susceptible to injury and illness, having out-dated skills, less capable, unwilling to take on new training or challenges, risk averse, and having less potential for development.

Bittman, Flick and Rice (2001, 39) found:

... 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.

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. (Speelman 2005)

Workers so perceived are unlikely to get support for their learning from employers

## Yet, more than age bias alone, other factors appear to be playing out

Duncan (2003, 104) concludes, employer attitudes towards older workers is a complex issue, and that research may be 'searching for proof of ageism rather than testing for its extent or influence'.

a New Zealand study of 94 low-skilled workers aged 50 or more, employed in three meat processing plants and a knitting mill, experienced no age-related pressure from managers or supervisors (McGregor & Gray, 2003, 1).

Same in retail sector (Howell, Buttigieg & Webber, 2006)

evidence that negative perceptions are held by workers themselves, 'reflecting the deep-seated nature of societal beliefs' (McGregor, 2007, 12).



### Older workers' capacities:

possess many qualities that employers seek in employees (e.g. reliability, punctuality, productivity, problem-solvers etc) (McIntosh);

less likely to leave than younger employees;

remain effective in most work roles until retirement;

respond well to retraining, and can quickly improve skills that have not been practiced;

experience decline in muscle strength, sight, speed of perception and response, but further develop competence to judge, sense of responsibility) (EU report); and

evidence of increased accident rate of OWs is mixed.



### Understanding older employees' work and learning

60 interviews with older workers and employers of older workers (50 one-on-one and two focus groups)

Drawn from a range of occupations: professional, para-professional, technical managerial, trades, and service worker kinds of occupations.

The age ranges were: 45-49 (26%), 50-54 (26%), 55-59 (32%), 6-64 (13%) and 65-69 (3%).

Quantitative section followed by questions about:

- (i) their learning;
- (ii) perceptions of standing of older workers;
- (iii) workplace support;
- (iv) educational support and
- (v) access to other kinds of support.

Some findings reported here from these interviews



### Perceptions of value of older workers to workplaces

38 out of 50 interviewees unaware of any age bias

7 reported anecdotal or suspected discrimination

5 reported actual discrimination

OWs reported as being really essential component of the workforce, of whom younger workers were in awe.

Other positive comments included reliability, competence, availability, high work ethic and strategic (i.e. long term views).

Need to protect younger workers, who might get steam rolled, and also are more likely to be on contracts. Older workers treated better and given the best work.

All of this ran counter to expectations



### Perceptions of implicit and explicit discrimination

*"I guess it really would depend on the field. If you're talking about concreters, they're really old at 40. If you're talking about academics, well for me, age is wisdom, so the later in life you're doing that sort of thing, the more information you're going to carry around in your head. It really depends on the field of work."*

Some work becomes too hard (Steve)

Then, some industries might be less tolerant of older workers. Dick talks about his experiences in advertising:

*I haven't known security of employment for years, since I came out of the multinational ad agencies; it's always been freelance. Yeah, mate, I termed it the underbelly of Brisbane advertising about five years ago, like you fall out of the multinationals when you reach a certain age in advertising. Like advertising would have to be the worst industry for age, really.*

*Because advertising is seen as new and cutting edge and young and groovy; it's not about old and, you know -- 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.*

But, less age bias in his current public service position

### Differences in opportunities for learning and advancement

General finding that all respondents had access to learning opportunities.

The larger the organisation, the greater the access

However, opportunities played out in different ways.

Younger workers often have opportunities for going on courses

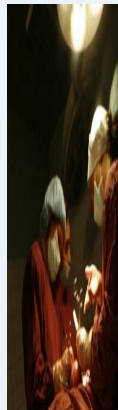
Some older workers resented this, others said it was okay, because these employees needed them, also more compliant

Employers seen as gatekeepers in the provision of opportunities

Opportunities for advancement differed according to work as well as age

Perceptions of older workers either not wanting to secure advancement, or else they would have shown interest earlier.

Younger people more likely to be given opportunities for promotion than older workers, however, older workers might not be seeking promotion



### Sustaining mature age workers: so what?

From our sample, there was no clear consistent pattern of age-related bias

Securing development opportunities (i.e. workplace or institutional support) may be premised on factors other than age (kinds of work, kinds of workplaces, individuals' themselves)

Younger workers may get training opportunities

Likely to leave the workforce if their personal needs are not met

Yet, all workers will require access to developmental experiences, and of the kind to access 'new' learning

Likely need for these experiences to be supported to greater and lesser degree depending upon kinds of work and workplaces, and workers themselves

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