

BARRIERS TO MATURE AGED RE-EMPLOYMENT: PERCEPTIONS ABOUT DESIRABLE WORK-RELATED ATTRIBUTES HELD BY JOB-SEEKERS AND EMPLOYERS

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ABSTRACT

Mature-aged unemployment and underemployment are serious concerns in Australia, and policies designed to increase mature-aged workforce participation have been largely unsuccessful. The aim of the present study was to see if job-seekers and employers had differing perceptions of the relative importance of work-related skills and attributes, since this could be a factor in the poor success rate of older job-seekers. It consisted of a questionnaire survey of 143 mature-aged job-seekers (aged from 45 years and over) and 42 employers from a range of sizes and types of organisations. The results showed that the job-seekers and employers agreed that the three most important attributes for finding employment were reliability, punctuality, and competence. There were significant differences on nine out of 32 attributes, but these were not rated as among the most important by either group. While older jobseekers did nominate age-related factors as barriers to their re-employment, they did not rate them as highly as other factors. More importantly, employers did not nominate age-related factors as barriers to the re-employment of older jobseekers. It was concluded that age incongruence between employers and mature aged job-seekers could be a factor in mature aged unemployment, although there may be a case for further research to see if employers do, indeed, act in ways consistent with their stated positions.

Key words: mature aged; employment; unemployment; underemployment; employment policy; human resource management

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present study was to extend the literature about the barriers to re-employment facing mature aged job-seekers, defined as 45 years of age or more. It is acknowledged that this is an arbitrary age and that the definition may vary depending on the kind of industry, but this figure was chosen because unemployment statistics show that re-employment becomes markedly more difficult after this age. It is essential to increase mature-aged workforce participation because of the potential financial impact on the public purse of long-term unemployment of older workers, and also because of the projected skill shortages.

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Once older workers leave their present employment, whether through downsizing, being offered an early retirement package, or some other reason, they characteristically experience great difficulty in re-entering the workforce if they wish. Mature aged Australians contribute disproportionately to the ranks of the long-term unemployed, and have much greater difficulties than younger people in obtaining re-employment. Official figures show that 31 percent of jobseekers aged 45-54 years, and 40 percent of those aged 55 or more are unsuccessful in obtaining work (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000). The comparable statistic for younger job seekers is 28 percent (for those aged 35-44 years). While there is increasing difficulty in obtaining work with increasing age past 45, demographers predict there will be a serious shortage of workers in Australia by about 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999), although the awareness of this issue seems to be not as well developed in Australia as it is in other countries (McEvoy & Blahna 2001; Price 2001; Stone & Wiener 2001).

Theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that older workers have many advantages that should be attractive to employers. A large body of literature demonstrates that they are loyal, reliable, and conscientious, have low turnover, are productive and hard-working, have fewer accidents, are trustworthy, mature, enthusiastic, experienced, and dedicated (e.g. Ranzijn 1999; Remenyi 1994). Furthermore, it has been shown that they are as trainable in new skills as younger workers (Bushko & Raynor 1999; Salthouse & Maurer 1996) and they may have added advantages such as greater creativity and problem-solving skills (Moody 1998; Ranzijn 2002).

There have been many strategies implemented to attempt to reduce discrimination against mature job-seekers in Australia and overseas. They have included anti-discrimination legislation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999; Neumark 2001; Schulz & Borowski 1991; Taylor, Steinberg, & Walley 2000; Taylor & Walker 1993; Ventrell-Monsees 1993), financial incentives for employers to hire older workers (Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia 1999), and education of employers (Taylor & Walker 1993). So far, these measures have had little success, except in the short-term. This could be because employer incentives may send out the wrong message, namely, that older people are really not as good as younger workers, otherwise they would not need government assistance to obtain work. Webster (1998) argues that wage subsidy programs show the most reliable post-program effects in Australia for all target groups, although there are problems with evaluations, including the lack of research designs that include control groups. There is also some evidence that wage subsidies are less effective in Australia than overseas, regardless of the selected target groups, but comparisons are difficult since different countries tend to emphasise different evaluation criteria, including employability, outcomes and earnings differences (Webster 1998).

Preliminary work undertaken by the present authors to explore other ways of addressing mature aged unemployment revealed that employers have specific negative impressions of mature aged job-seekers, but a poor understanding of the importance of the issues (Ranzijn, Carson & Winefield 2002). Twenty companies and organisations including small and large organisations in manufacturing, government, retail and hospitality, were asked about their employment policies in general and policies about employing older workers in particular. The employers said that they valued the experience of their own older employees, but regarded older workers in general as inflexible, fussy, and unwilling to adapt to new technology and changing work conditions. There was little or no awareness that one of the consequences of

population ageing will be a shrinking future workforce as older employees retire with fewer younger people to replace them, and consequently little or no evidence of long-term planning to ensure a viable pool of employees. Most employers seemed to assume that the pool of willing workers would be available in the future just as it has been up to now.

The preliminary work also included interviews with key informants in human resource agencies, who agreed with employers' perceptions that older job-seekers had unrealistic expectations about their skills and the kinds of jobs they hoped to find. The reported perception was that job-seekers seemed to think that their life experience and previous employment would be a big advantage, whereas this seemed to count for little among employers. In summary, the preliminary work indicated that one reason for the poor success rate of mature job-seekers could be this apparent incongruence between the expectations of employers and job-seekers. Therefore, the present study was designed to test the hypothesis that a mismatch would be found between the expectations of job-seekers and potential employers regarding the work-related skills and personal attributes necessary to find and retain paid employment.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and eighty-five people participated in this study, in two categories. There were 143 job-seekers (88 men and 55 women) and 42 employers (19 men and 23 women). 'Job-seeker' was broadly defined as anyone in the specified age-range who either wished to obtain employment or, if currently employed, wished either to extend their working hours or to change employment—the other criterion being that they had experienced difficulties in achieving these goals. Because of the anonymous nature of the recruitment (see Procedure) it is not possible to gauge the response rate accurately.

Of the job-seekers, 49 were aged between 45 and 49, 81 between 50 and 59 years, and 13 were aged 60 or more. Twenty-two of the employers were aged 39 years or younger, ten were between 40 and 49, nine were aged between 50 and 59, and there was one aged 60 or more.

The employment status of the job-seekers is shown in Table 1. In total, 73.5 percent had no current employment while 26.5 percent had some kind of paid employment. Four job-seekers (2.8 percent) were enrolled in the Work for the Dole scheme, which (at the time) was voluntary for job-seekers over 35. The length of time since satisfactory employment was positively skewed, ranging between zero (only just unemployed) and 360 months (30 years—one outlier, the next longest time unemployed being 240 months), $M = 50.6$ months, (about 4 years) $SD = 62.3$ months, median 24 months.

Table 1: Employment status of job-seekers (N=140)

Employment status	n
Unemployed:	
1. and given up	12
2. and confident	22
3. and not confident	48
4. and volunteering	21
Casual part-time	19
Permanent part-time	5
Contract	6
Casual full-time	5
Permanent full-time	5

Note: The categories are those used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, except for the four sub-categories of 'unemployed', which were devised for the present study. Three people did not provide their employment status.

Employers from 110 organisations were contacted in person and 42 surveys were returned, a response rate of 38 percent. A broad range of industries was represented in the obtained sub-sample of employers, including retail, tourism, finance, manufacturing, government, and telecommunications. The size of the organisations (measured as number of employees) ranged from 10-20 employees to over 20,000, with the modal size being 21-50 employees.

Materials

The relevant questions were almost identical for job-seekers and employers, with minor wording changes. Note that the results reported here comprise part of a larger study. Full results are available in a comprehensive report on the project available from the authors on request (Ranzijn et al. 2002).

The materials consisted of a questionnaire which firstly asked participants to list the five most important attributes they thought employers looked for in their employees. This open-ended question was followed by a list of 32 attributes that had been identified from the literature and from previous exploratory research as skills and characteristics linked to finding employment (the employers were asked to rate these when considering hiring a new employee). Participants were asked to rate each of these as essential, desirable, or unimportant. The attributes included reliability, adaptability, being able to meet deadlines, coping with pressure, having computer skills, and having life experience. The attributes are shown in Table 3 and the full list, with the exact questions that were asked, is provided as Appendix 1. The job-seekers were asked for their current state of employment or unemployment, participation in the Work for the Dole scheme, sex and age. The employers were asked about the type of industry they worked in, how big their company was, and their sex and age-group. There was also space provided in both versions of the questionnaire for additional open-ended comments.

Procedure

The job-seekers were recruited by two means: direct contact with employment agencies who made copies of the questionnaire available to their clients, and an editorial in the free local newspapers inviting people to participate. The selection criteria were that participants had to

be aged 45 years or more and that they had to be wanting to find employment if they had none, or change to more satisfying employment if they were already employed to any extent.

To recruit the employer sub-sample, a list consisting of a wide selection of industries was drawn up and the employers were approached by telephone. They were given four options for participation, namely, fax, email, hard copies of the questionnaire, and answering the questions over the phone. Data collection occurred between early August and early November 2001. Pen-and-paper questionnaires were returned to the researchers by stamped self-addressed envelopes. Almost all of the participants completed the pen-and-paper versions, although some employers answered the questions which were read to them over the telephone.

RESULTS

Responses to open-ended question on skills and attributes required to obtain paid employment

There was no pre-determined coding system. The responses were entered into an SPSS file as a string variable, and a frequencies analysis indicated the number of times each attribute was mentioned. The three authors each looked at the frequencies and agreed on the grouping of responses into categories.

The 'top five' responses (categories ranked in order of decreasing frequency of response) are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Most frequent responses to open-ended question about important job-related skills

Job-seekers		Employers	
Skill	<u>n</u>	Skill	<u>n</u>
Personal attributes	189	Personal attributes	38
Adaptability and flexibility	58	Specific task-related skills	22
Specific task-related skills	52	Appearance	16
Experience	46	Communication skills	12
Appearance	41	Adaptability	8

Note: Total numbers exceed sample sizes since question asked for five responses. 'Personal attributes' include punctuality, honesty, reliability, enthusiasm, honesty, and being hard-working. 'Flexibility' refers to attributes such as being willing to work flexible hours and move for employment

Being young was mentioned by 42 (29%) of the job-seekers, but by none of the employers. 'Customer focus' was mentioned by eight (19%) of the employers, but by none of the job-seekers.

Responses to closed question on skills and attributes required to obtain paid employment

The participants were presented with a list of 32 work-related competencies and personal attributes that could be important in finding and retaining paid employment. Participants were asked to rate the attributes as either essential (ESS), desirable (DES), or unimportant (UN). The responses, listed in decreasing order of 'essential' responses given by job-seekers, are

shown in Table 3 in which the numbers refer to percentage of respondents. The significance of the differences between job-seekers and employers was calculated using Chi-square analysis. Because of the large number of analyses, only differences associated with a probability of .01 or less were considered important for interpretation.

**Table 3: Ratings of importance of job-related attributes (percentages)
listed in order of importance**

Characteristic	Job-seekers (n=143)			Employers (n=42)			p Diff (≤)
	ESS	DES	UN	ESS	DES	UN	
Reliable	88.7	9.9	1.4	97.8	2.2	0.0	.177
Punctual	85.3	13.3	1.4	86.7	13.3	0.0	.727
Competent	80.6	18.8	0.7	88.9	11.1	0.0	.410
Adaptable	77.6	22.4	0.0	75.6	24.4	0.0	.773
Communicate	76.8	22.5	0.7	71.1	28.9	0.0	.596
Deadlines	74.8	24.5	0.7	73.3	26.7	0.0	.823
Polite	69.2	29.4	1.4	75.6	24.4	0.0	.572
Hard worker	67.6	30.3	2.1	75.6	24.4	0.0	.435
Initiative	65.0	32.9	2.1	71.1	28.9	0.0	.521
Take orders	64.8	34.5	0.7	77.3	20.5	2.3	.160
Get on with all ages	63.1	36.2	0.7	73.3	26.7	0.0	.412
Cope with pressure	61.5	36.4	2.1	55.6	44.4	0.0	.421
*Relevant skills	61.3	36.6	2.1	35.6	60.0	4.4	.010
Enthusiastic	59.9	39.4	0.7	57.8	42.2	0.0	.815
*Computer skills	58.0	37.8	4.2	25.0	54.5	20.5	.001
Confident	58.0	40.6	1.4	40.0	60.0	0.0	.062
Good health	54.2	44.4	1.4	36.4	59.1	4.5	.074
Neat and tidy	53.1	44.1	2.8	56.8	36.4	6.8	.366
Referees	50.4	39.7	9.9	31.1	55.6	13.3	.078
Loyalty	48.3	43.4	8.4	43.2	54.5	2.3	.233
Problem-solving	44.8	53.1	2.1	20.0	77.8	2.2	.012
Anticipate change	42.0	54.5	3.5	26.7	68.9	4.4	.184
*Previous work	40.1	53.5	6.3	11.1	73.3	15.6	.001
Flexible	38.5	55.2	6.3	33.3	57.8	8.9	.735
Manage people	35.2	56.3	8.5	16.3	72.1	11.6	.062
*Network	31.5	58.7	9.8	2.3	38.6	59.1	.001
*Being young	29.4	34.3	36.4	0.0	8.9	91.1	.001
*Qualifications	28.2	59.2	12.7	11.1	57.8	31.1	.004
*Know company	27.3	67.8	4.9	6.7	60.0	33.3	.001
*Life experience	20.3	55.2	24.5	2.2	48.9	48.9	.001
Ambitious	19.7	55.6	24.6	13.3	66.7	20.0	.408
*Willing to move	14.1	50.0	35.9	0.0	18.2	81.8	.001

Note: p Diff = significance of differences in frequencies between sub-samples. The variables in which there were significant differences ($p \leq .01$) between job-seekers and managers are indicated by an asterisk. 'Previous work' = having previously done that kind of work.

There was a very high degree of consistency in the attributes rated as 'essential' by both job-seekers and employers (Spearman rho = 0.99). The same attribute, reliability, was top ranked for both groups, and there was also the same top three (reliability, competency, and punctuality). The significant differences between the groups in ranking the attributes were generally in attributes which ranked among the lowest percentages of 'essential' ratings in both groups. The differences were in the following nine attributes: having relevant skills, having computer skills, having previously done that work, having a network, being young, having qualifications, knowing the company, having life experience, and being willing to move. The responses were also analysed according to two categories of sub-groups. There were no significant differences on any of the 32 attributes between job-seekers who had been unemployed for less than two years ($n=67$) and those unemployed for two years or more ($n=57$). Likewise, there were no differences between those totally unemployed ($n=103$) and those employed to any extent ($n=37$).

DISCUSSION

It had been hypothesised that there would be a mismatch between the expectations of job-seekers and potential employers, in particular that there would be differences in the work-related skills and personal attributes that these two groups would consider important for finding and retaining paid work. This was not supported. On the attributes rated as most important by both job-seekers and employers, there were no significant differences, in fact not even a trend to differences. The most important attributes, on the basis of the 'essential' ratings, identified by both groups were reliability, punctuality, and being competent.

There were some noticeable differences on the rated importance of some characteristics, which were, however, not ranked among the most important attributes by either job-seekers or employers. Notably, computer skills were rated more highly by job-seekers than employers, with over half of the job-seekers rating this as essential whereas it was rated as essential by only a quarter of the employers. Also, having a network, having qualifications, and having life experience were rated as essential by about a quarter of the job-seekers, whereas very few employers rated these as essential. These differences may reflect the current emphases of employment agencies concerning skills training and job search training. The former is commonly centred around obtaining computer skills—the kind of training which is easily organised and measured—and the latter tends to focus on job-search techniques that include utilising informal networks, as well as 'cold calling' approaches to employers. Since many of the participants were recruited through employment agencies that were funded to arrange for training, as well as act as brokers between job-seekers and potential employers, some of the respondents may have answered on the basis of what they had been taught was important when seeking work. This is particularly likely since many of the participants (exact number unknown) were recruited through a mature aged employment agency.

Another noteworthy difference is that 75 percent of job-seekers viewed life experience as being essential or desirable, whereas almost 50 percent of employers viewed this as unimportant. This may reflect the changing nature of work, in which the ability to perform the tasks required in the modern workplace is more important than having accumulated generic life skills, no matter how important job-seekers may think they are.

Finally, it is also notable that 40 percent of the job-seekers rated having previously done the required work as being essential, whereas just over 10 percent of employers did. A possible

interpretation of this is that it is trainability, not experience at the job, that is important to employers. We will return to this presently.

To summarise the discussion so far, the initial hypothesis for the research was that there would be incongruence between the expectations of employers and job-seekers. There was indeed some difference between the groups, although only in the factors that were not rated as the most important, but, more than that, the difference was not in the way we expected. In fact, it was the job seekers, not the employers, who emphasised the potential age-related barriers to the employment (and/or re-employment) of older workers. There are a number of possible explanations for this mismatch. One possibility is that mature age job-seekers mistakenly attribute their lack of success to age or age-related factors. Another possibility is that what employers say they do (or say they believe is essential or important) may not correspond to what they actually do (or actually believe is essential or important). Their responses to the questionnaire may have been influenced by the 'demand characteristic' of not wanting to seem prejudiced by age. Further research is needed to throw more light on these possible interpretations.

Most of the employers were relatively young, more than half being under forty years of age. Admittedly, it was a small sample and may not be representative, but it is interesting to speculate whether the relative youth of the managers reflects the shedding of older middle managers in the era of downsizing, and their replacement by younger people. It is possible, though untested, that there could be a cultural mismatch between mature job-seekers and those who are responsible for hiring, since there may be a tendency to favour people who are like oneself, rather than different. There is support for this interpretation in recent evidence from the Netherlands which shows that older employers have a more favourable attitude towards older workers than do younger employers (Henkens 2003).

What then are the policy implications of our findings? It is not clear if the 90 percent of employers who did not require previous experience at the job were thereby indicating a preference for either informal 'on-the-job' induction/training or 'off-the-job', specific skills training. In developing policy and program interventions to improve the competitiveness of older jobseekers, there are two possible implications of the findings. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive options, since they can complement each other. First, if expectations of older workers' 'on-the-job' trainability contributed to employer indifference to previous experience, then the provision of wage subsidies for older workers would increase their prospects of being in work situations and thereby in a position to receive such training.

Second, if the possibility of employees accessing specific 'off-the-job' training contributed to employer indifference to previous experience, then it indicates the merits of developing specific skills training tailored to the specific needs of particular industries in which older jobseekers can participate with a view to gaining competitive advantage in the labour market.

Australia does not have a strong tradition of structured 'off-the-job' training. New strategies in the UK and the USA, for example, link job-seeker training more closely to the task-specific demands of particular sectors and large employers. Job-seekers are trained in packages of skills—both task-specific and also soft (generic) skills—deemed to be necessary for that employment, at the same time as the agencies broker employment outcomes for trainees. Strategies from overseas do not automatically translate into Australian conditions, where most employers are small and medium enterprises and may not be able to generate the critical mass

required for the development of systematic 'off-the-job' training that nevertheless satisfies their need for 'job-ready' applicants (Carson, King & Roland 2000).

It may be necessary for government to take an active role in fostering and promoting awareness of the value of such training. In particular, it may be useful to regard mature job-seekers similarly to younger people straight out of school or university, since the nature of work has changed so dramatically in the decades since many mature aged workers started work. Given that many mature job-seekers, if employed, are capable of working for a number of decades, it may be useful to regard them as being in transition between two work eras in their lives, and hence transitional arrangements could be put in place, including the kinds of 'pre-job' training and work experience available to young job-seekers.

Employers may be unwilling to invest in training of older employees if they regard it as wasted investment, since they may perceive that older workers will only stay on for a short time (Wooden, Van den Heuvel, Cully & Curtain 2001). However, given the likelihood that people will keep working for longer in the future, the irony is that the investment in training of older workers may be more profitable, not less, since older employees may possess more of the 'soft skills' which enable them to learn faster than younger people (Ranzijn 2002), and hence the company may recoup its investment sooner. Furthermore, if there is a shortage of workers in the future, it is more likely that younger workers will be enticed away from their present employment than will older workers, who generally are less geographically mobile because of greater family commitments (such as supporting their young adult children through university and caring for their own parents) and deeper-rooted social networks (Carson & Kerr 2003). This is yet another reason for trying to recruit and retain older workers. Companies that make a strategic effort to retain experienced older workers and to recruit new ones may be less vulnerable when workforce shortages really start to bite, as predicted (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999; McEvoy & Blahna 2001) during the next decade.

There is a need for caution in interpreting the results. Because the sub-samples were not randomly selected, external validity cannot be assured. Being recruited by general invitation may have attracted people who were particularly unsuccessful, which could reflect on the job-seeking or other abilities of the sample and may not be representative of mature-aged job-seekers overall.

Finally, the results of this study have implications for employment agencies, as well as employers. At present, training programs for job-seekers in Australia are mainly in skills which are easy to teach and easy to monitor, such as computer skills. These may be important, but it appears that what employers really look for is the trainability of a potential worker, and it is important to ensure that both on-the-job and formal 'off-the-job' training programs are available in forms that support more effective use of the potential capacity of older workers.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire of work-related attributes.

Introduction for Job-seeker version. The following is a list of skills and characteristics that have been linked with finding employment. Some of them may be more important than others. Please indicate, by ticking one of the options, whether you think each of these is an essential (ESS), desirable (DES), or unimportant (UN) characteristic.

Introduction for Employer version. The following is a list of skills and characteristics that have been linked with finding employment. Some of them may be more important than others. We would like to know what is important for a potential employee who wants to work in your organisation. Please indicate, by ticking one of the options, whether you think each of these is an essential (ESS), desirable (DES), or unimportant (UN) characteristic.

Being a hard worker	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being able to anticipate changes	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being able to cope with high pressure and meet deadlines	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being able to get on with workers of all ages	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being able to manage people	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being adaptable and able to learn new skills	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being ambitious	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being competent at the tasks required	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being confident	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being enthusiastic	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being flexible and willing to work at odd hours and short notice	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being neat and tidy	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being polite	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being punctual	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being reliable	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being willing to move interstate or to the country if the company requires it	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being willing to take orders	ESS.....	DES	UN
Being young	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having a good knowledge of the company	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having a network of useful contacts	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having broad life experience	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having computer skills	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having good communication skills	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having good health	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having good problem-solving skills	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having previous experience in that kind of work	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having relevant skills	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having formal qualifications	ESS.....	DES	UN
Having supportive referees	ESS.....	DES	UN
Loyalty to the company	ESS.....	DES	UN
Showing initiative and being self-motivated	ESS.....	DES	UN
Working to deadlines and meeting goals	ESS.....	DES	UN