



# **Rethinking the Value of Older Workers: A Resource Growing in Importance**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many managers are denying their organizations valuable returns and productivity levels due to misguided employment practices based on inaccurate perceptions of the capacity of older workers, rather than reliable performance indicators. Employment practices that discriminate against age are widespread in Australia and in other developed countries - despite a growing body of research showing that productivity levels (and potential for productivity) among older workers are favourable. It will be argued that managers who do not seek to take full advantage of the available labour resource pool, by discriminating against older workers, are failing to act in the best economic interests of their organizations.

While labour surpluses in recent decades have invoked discrimination against older workers, our demographic shift toward an older population is predicted to cause major labour shortages in the future. According to (Meltzer 2000) there will not be enough younger workers to replace those older workers exiting the workforce.

While it is argued that managers need to be better informed about the productive capacities of older workers, communicating this message is problematic due to deeply embedded negative perceptions of older workers (and the ageing process) within both our social and organisational cultures.

This paper reviews the literature on age discrimination in modern labour markets. *Idealised cognitive modelling theory* is then used as a framework for examining how biases residing in the preconceptions that inform society's understanding of ageing workers function to create and sustain negatively distorted perceptions of older workers.

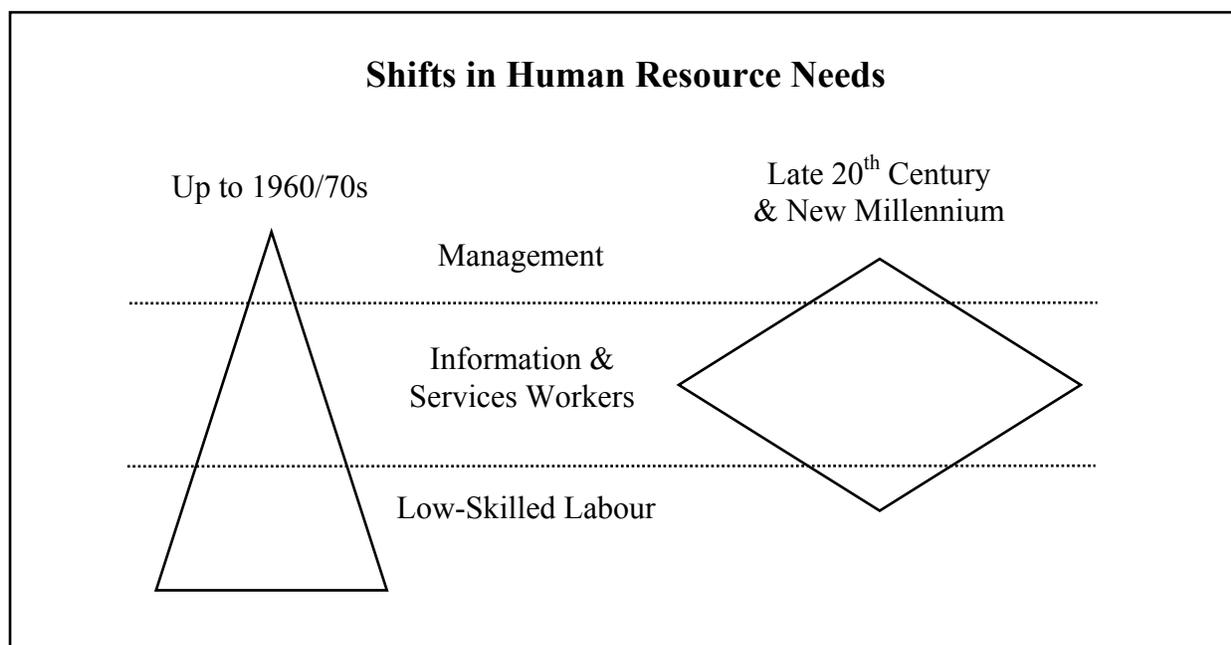
**Keywords:** older worker, employment, age discrimination, productivity, idealised cognitive models (ICMs).

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: LABOUR MARKET TRENDS

### *Industrial Restructuring*

Changes in industrial structuring over recent decades have been identified as a major factor contributing to disproportionately high levels of unemployment among older workers. This group has traditionally relied heavily on industries experiencing the largest labour market declines, namely, agriculture, manufacturing and construction (Bureau of Labour Market Research (BLMR) 1983). The downsizing of managerial jobs sometimes referred to as the “*shrinking*” of middle management jobs has also displaced many older workers (BLMR 1983; Buys & Buys 1996). Indeed the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that workers 45 years and over account for over one third of those unemployed (ABS 2001b; ABS 1995). This decline in positions available for older workers is expected to continue in traditional male employment sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing. Figure 1 (below) provides a graphic representation of the change in demand for labour toward information and services workers and away from unskilled and middle level management workers.

**Figure 1**



(Constructed from information sources cited above)

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### ***Economic Downturns and Organisational Downsizing***

Much of the decline in employment participation among older workers has been due to the adoption of early redundancy policies by employers. These policies were embraced to facilitate the shedding of workers during the labour market downturns of 1974-5, 1982-3, and 1990-1 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD 1992a; OECD 1992b; Trindler, Hulme & McCarthy 1992). Studies have shown that the majority of Australian companies support early voluntary retirement (Stienberg *et al.* 1996).

Modern day ***Market Economics*** (often referred to as ***Economic Rationalism***) - as an approach based on the prioritisation of profit maximisation (and cost reduction) over the short term – has discouraged organisations from acting in ways that place value on the longer-term well-being of organizations themselves let alone human and social well-being. The logic of *Market Economics* with its approach to cost minimisation (i.e. “downsizing”) has been a major factor in the large-scale retrenchment of older workers as they have been the target of early redundancy policies as a means of shedding labour.

While it would be erroneous to assume that layoffs due to downsizing are always bad and unnecessary, an over reliance on downsizing as a means by which to increase short-term profitability or cost savings, is short-sighted and not in the best interests of organisations or their societies. According to Gertz and Baptista (1995, p.3) years of downsizing have left companies leaner but not necessarily richer. Furthermore Bernstein (2002) argues that downsizing has had a detrimental impact on many organisations in the U.S. and has substantially stifled opportunities for innovation and growth.

In a Commonwealth parliamentary report, Jones (1992, p.27) noted that 80% of males aged 55 to 64 were employed in 1968, and that this had fallen to nearly 50% in 1989, and is expected to fall to 34% in 2001. The International Labour Office (ILO 1995) notes that the decline in participation rates of older workers in industrialised countries runs counter to demographic trends of ageing populations, inducing older-age dependency and welfare expenditure. As a result there are more older people in our society than ever before, but they are less involved in paid employment than in the past.

Riley and Riley (1996) use the term “*structural lag*” to describe the tendency for a society’s older established structures to fall behind the changing needs of its people. They suggest that the structural lag that now exists in the labour market has resulted in a “*poor fit*” between people’s needs and desires and society’s lagging labour market structure:

*We have entered a historical period in which men and women live, on average, almost 20 years beyond the usual retirement age ... the middle years of adult life are chronically overloaded with the combined activities of two-career families, child rearing and home making. [By contrast,] ... we now have an extended period of older age that is essentially without formal structure, an entry into the time of the “roleless role.”*  
(Riley & Riley 1996, p.viii)

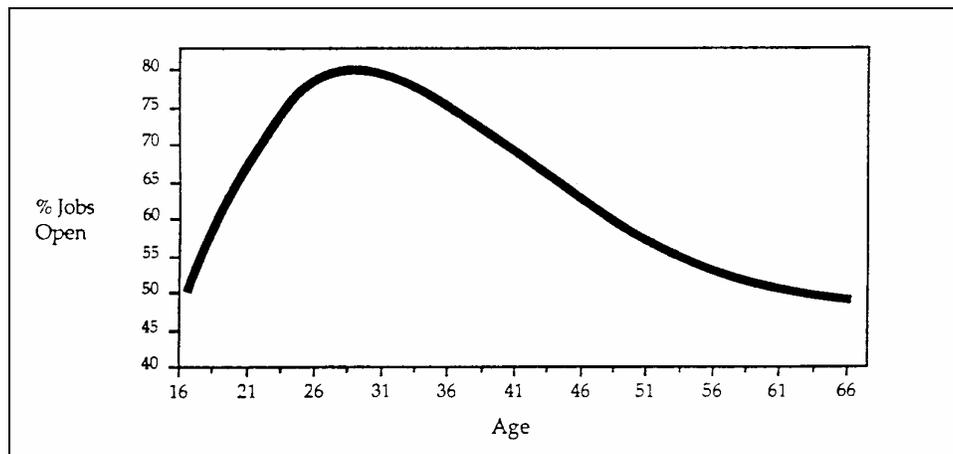
These changes are especially pronounced in industrialised countries in which “*people over 40 years are regarded as nearing the end of their working lives*” (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 1997, p.5). Hence a person’s post-working life can be double that stated by Riley and Riley. Riley and Riley’s term “*roleless role*” also indicates the importance of employment to identity and community recognition. In our society, work carries with it the coded implication of “*He/she’s still useful*” (Jones 1992, p.25).

The World Bank (1994) notes that early retirement is a costly solution to the unemployment problem and an expensive way to restructure enterprises. Early retirement reduces a country’s experienced labour force and output, as well as discounting political pressures to reduce unemployment. The personal costs to older workers forced out of paid employment are also high. Many studies have concluded that a negative relationship exists between health and wellbeing and forced early retirement (Creed 1998; Herzog, House & Morgan 1991; McGoldrick & Cooper 1988).

### ***Older Workers: 45 Years and Over***

Most studies define *older workers* as those 45 years and over (Hendricks & Hendricks 1986; Steinberg *et al.* 1994), while official ABS and OECD figures categorise people 55

years and over as older workers. Studies in the United Kingdom have shown that age discrimination in job advertisements is a common occurrence. For instance, a graph produced as part of a British study (Figure 2) illustrates the relative disadvantage by age for older workers in the UK.



**Figure 2: Disadvantage in recruitment** (Institute of Manpower Studies (1991).

This graph was constructed from data obtained in a study of advertised job vacancies, and shows that employment opportunities for men are at a maximum in the 20s, and that a drop-off begins at around 30 years of age and continues until the average retirement age.

However it is important to note that the disadvantage faced by many older workers is not solely (or simply) based on economic downturns or industrial restructuring. The disproportionate impact on older workers is due largely to widely held misconceptions about their productive capacity. Negatively prejudiced views about older workers can be seen to inform both government policy (the Mature Age Allowance, for example) and industry policy (for example, early retirement incentives programs).

### ***The "Lack of" Impact Of Anti-Discrimination Policy***

ABS Statistics (1996, 1997) revealed that the majority of people over 45 seeking employment report age related reasons as their main difficulty in finding work. Research

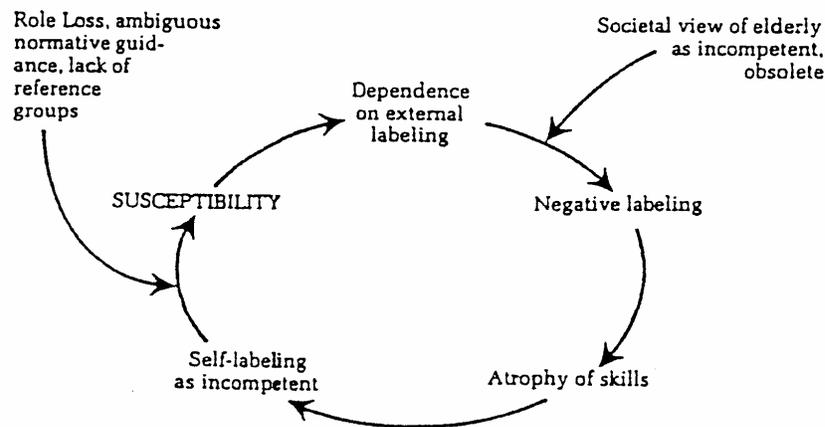
has also shown that when people over 45 years of age become unemployed there is a high probability that they will become long term unemployed (Steinberg *et al.* 1994, p.5).

Taylor and Walker (1994, p.569) identify systematic disadvantage against older workers based on the perceptions of employers. A major factor disadvantaging older workers is their lack of access to employer sponsored training programs which would help bring them *into line* with younger workers (Taylor & Walker 1994, p.2). Wooden, Vandenhoevel & Cully (2001) report that a lack of access to training programs is continuing to disadvantage older workers in the new millennium. This lack of access to training works to generate a *self-fulfilling prophecy* whereby older workers are much more likely to reach a point where they lack up-to-date (or relevant) skills.

Hence Taylor and Walker (1994) are concerned that older workers may be increasingly confined to peripheral jobs and unemployment. Harris (1991) also identifies a circular pattern of systemic disadvantage affecting the employment prospects of older workers saying,

***Once an older worker becomes unemployed he or she is less likely to be re-employed because they are old. Being less likely to be re-employed means that they will remain a longer time unemployed. Being long-term unemployed further reduces their chance of re-employment... Being unable to find work they will stop looking and hence become “discouraged workers”, or redefine themselves as “sick” or “retired” and hence not be classified as active. (Harris 1991, p.109)***

This explanation once again demonstrates the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy of disadvantage for older workers. As Chapman (1994, p.9) points out, even before reaching a point of long-term unemployment, this group has poor labour market prospects. Figure 3, based on the work of Kupers and Bengtson (1973), helps to illustrate the compounding impact of a psychological and perceptual downward spiral of disadvantage faced by elderly people. Older workers who become unemployed are also susceptible to this kind of downward spiral with the erosion and loss of industry current skills, brought about by lack of access to employment and ongoing job training.



**Figure 3 Social Breakdown of Competence** (Kuypers & Bengston 1973)

In order to counter perceptions such as those illustrated in Figure 3, age discrimination and compulsory retirement for most occupations has been legislated against (for example, Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991). The impact of this legislation on employment prospects for older workers has, however, been negligible. The proportion of people leaving employment involuntarily rises according to age, and a recent survey revealed that 82% of those aged 45 years and over involuntarily left their last job (ABS 1997, p.10). Research has also shown that, despite the fact that many early exits from the workforce are voluntary and the result of a desire to *retire early*, a considerable number of older workers want to continue in employment (Sinfield 1981, p.78; Steinberg *et al.* 1994, p.69).

A 1994 worldwide review of policies concerning older workers revealed that the impact of anti-discriminatory age-related legislation is quite low (International Review of Policies Towards Older Workers 1996). Harris (1991) notes that the labour market surplus removed all incentive for employers to organise the workforce in ways that favour older workers. Employers see the prime working age as between 25 and 44 years as opposed to the inexperienced young and the *allegedly out-of-date* older workers. The

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Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner (1991) reported that age discrimination was the most significant ground for complaint after discrimination based on sex and race (cited in Jones 1992, p.50).

A 1994 Queensland study involving a survey of almost 1000 employers and employees in the Brisbane metropolitan area found substantial evidence of age discrimination toward older workers (Steinberg *et al.* 1994). The study showed that, although older workers were regarded as loyal, dependable and friendly, they were commonly seen as being less mentally alert, less adaptable to change, less healthy, less ambitious, less creative and less hardworking.

Encel (1997) found that most organisations preferred recruiting 26 to 35 year olds for most job categories and that 52% preferred people in the 36 to 45 year age group for management positions. Research by Studencki and Encel (1995) concluded that ***“there is a reluctance by employers to hire people over the age of forty-five”*** (1995, p.5).

Evidence is also starting to emerge of a growing pressure for people to ‘cosmetically’ avoid and delay ageing as a strategy to fend off employment discrimination. A survey study of Australian men and women who had undergone cosmetic surgery found that more than 50% did so in an effort to extend their time in the workforce and improve their employment prospects (Mieniczakowski 1998).

## **THE REDUCED PRODUCTIVITY MYTH**

Australian studies have shown that attitudes discouraging employers from employing older workers included doubts about the capabilities of older workers in terms of assumptions about poor memory, poor physical endurance, being more accident prone, need for more sick leave due to health problems, and being less adaptable to change (for example, ability to work with new technologies). These kinds of doubts result in the perception that older workers are therefore not suitable for employment or retraining (Buys & Buys 1996; Jones 1992).

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However, in spite of this cluster of negative assumptions held by many employers, substantial studies commissioned by the American Bureau of Labor Statistics contradict the negatively skewed stereotype of older workers, finding that, “*Not only are older workers more likely to remain on the job, they are also less likely to incur job-related injuries*” (Hendricks & Hendricks 1986, p.327). Australian studies have also shown that employers’ perceptions of older workers as less productive than their younger counterparts is erroneous (House of Representatives 1990; Jones 1992; Pickersgill *et al.* 1996). Older workers have been shown to have:

- lower rates of absenteeism (an indicator of good health);
- fewer accidents;
- remain in the same job longer (lower staff turnover); and
- contribute beneficial experiential knowledge.

(Harwood 1988, p.3).

Furthermore research has consistently shown that there has been a considerable degree of success in cases where older workers have been provided with training (see, for example, Taylor & Walker 1994). This concurs with much of the physiological research into ageing. Numerous studies show that commonly held perceptions about the rates of physical and mental decline that occur with ageing are greatly exaggerated (Gibb 1990; Harwood 1988; Mark & Mark 1990; Riegle 1982; Sunderland, *et al.* 1986; Yesavage 1985). Statistical evidence reveals that in Australia most people will survive and remain healthy until over 70 years of age (Jones 1992, p.158). Nonetheless distorted perceptions prevail and make a large proportion of people’s adult life problematic and stigmatised.

### **Organisational Costs Associated with Retiring Older Workers**

Studies have shown, however, that ageist based recruitment practices in many cases are not in fact rational in terms of maximising available skill levels and reducing recruitment

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and (re)training costs. A two-year study in the United Kingdom, for instance, concluded that having older workers within the organisational structure of a business leads to increased profitability as it can result in decreases in labour turnover, decreased administrative errors, decreased stock shrinkage and decreased theft (Internal Revenue Service (IRS) 1996, p.3). One large American corporation also reported yearly savings of about \$17,000 in recruitment and training costs for each employee who retired after 60 when compared to early retirements around 50 to 54 years (Mor-Barak & Tynan 1993). A North American corporation also estimated that the costs of retraining its engineers was one third of hiring a new graduate (Mor-Barak & Tynan 1993, p.51). Studies by Trindler, Hulme and McCarthy (1992) have also shown that lower rates of turnover and sickness related absence among older workers substantially reduce costs incurred by employers. In economic terms, the results of these studies suggest that organisational rationalisations by way of early redundancy policies are often the reverse – that is, *economically irrational*.

Studies have shown that there are substantial benefits associated with employing older workers. For example, that in banking organisations “*Older workers are particularly good at dealing with elderly customers, or customers with difficulty in dealing with basic transactions*” (Pickersgill *et al.* 1996, p.63). The continuing shift to an older population is also set to place greater demands on being able to service older people effectively.

**Noteworthy points:**

- It is interesting to note that age discrimination in employment is much less of a problem for a variety of job types including: University lecturer; in legal professions including magistrates and judges; and for politicians.
- It is also worth keeping in mind that certain job types (making up a small percentage) appear to genuinely require stringent age requirements for example, fighter pilots.

## **THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE: A SHORTAGE OF WORKERS**

### **THE PREDICTED DEMAND FOR OLDER WORKERS**

Forecasts from studies into demographic and labour market trends indicate that the fall in birth rates of people born after the post world war II, “*Baby-Boom*”, combined with the rates at which this (*older worker*) cohort are now exiting the workforce will result in a labour market shortfall. According to (Meltzer 1999), there are not enough younger replacement workers (Meltzer 1999). Sherrid (2000) goes so far as to say that companies in the near future may well end up “begging” older workers to stay offering them flexible hours, semi-retirement, and other incentives to simply keep them on the payroll. Hence it seems likely that managers in the future will be forced to re-evaluate current employment and recruitment policies and practices.

Carmody and Adie (1990) predict that businesses with employment practices aimed at attracting and retraining older workers can better their competitive position (cited in Buys & Buys 1996, p.160). On this basis, recruitment practices that take advantage of older workers appear to be economically sound and desirable. Indeed managers not taking full advantage of the available labour resource pool, fail to act in their own best interests. Seedsman (1996, p.163) argues that the building of a competitive Australian economy will be weakened if the skills and levels of experience of older workers are not better utilised.

Although managers at present can choose from a very competitive supply of relatively young labour, continued demographic shifts are likely to result in future labour shortages (particularly in growth industries). Bernstein (2002) believes that after three plentiful decades of labour supply corporate America is ill prepared for the predicted shortfall with some economists projecting that the U.S. could be short by 10 million workers by 2010.

It also seems reasonable to assume that the less physically demanding work of the Information and Service ages provide greater opportunities for older people to stay productive for longer. Indeed the new post-industrial economy affords society the

opportunity to extend the working life of older workers. Further to this many people are now staying more physically fit in their older years (Futurist 2000). Studies are now starting to recognise the value of older workers in their capacity to retain corporate memory and wisdom. Accordingly, recent studies have argued that a strategy of age diversity is the most prudent for maximising workplace productivity including innovation (Economist 2002).

### **THE NEED TO SKILL AND RE-SKILL AMONG OLDER WORKERS**

It is important to keep in mind that many older workers have been put at risk in recent decades as the economy shifted from industrial to information and services. Many of these workers entered the workforce in a time when demand for unskilled labour was very high. This has limited their opportunity for higher levels of literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills that enable people to respond to changes in the nature of work. Well-developed generic literacy, numeracy and now computer skills provide people with what are often referred to as transferable skills. Transferable skills are skills which can be transferred across a range of workplace environments (Bennett & Dunne 1999). Other important transferable skills include those in the areas of: task management; problem analysis; communication, time management across tasks [or multi-tasking]; self-monitoring and a well-developed ability to learn from experience [which takes in adaptability] (Bedford 2001; Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) 2002).

Hence it is imperative that all workers, become proactive in pursuing training and multi-skilling opportunities as a means of “job proofing” themselves. In addition, it may be prudent for older workers to make extra efforts to demonstrate and “sell” the idea that they are flexible and possess up-to-date skills and training to prospective employers in order to combat perceptions to the contrary.

Not surprisingly the literature has shown that employers tend view older workers as being less able to learn and remain up-to-date and any inability by older workers’ to demonstrate flexibility and up-to-date skills exacerbates the problem. Yeatts, Folts and

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Knapp (2000) also note that performing single-task jobs over an extended period can to impair one's ability to be adaptive to changes in the nature of work.

Remaining viable in the employment market requires that all workers embrace a philosophy of life long learning. This concept (or philosophy) is likely to be more alien to older workers than their younger counterparts. Organisations also have a major stake in ensuring older workers are included and targeted in their training and staff development programs. The training and development of older workers can be viewed as an investment in helping to minimise future exposure to a shortfall in skilled labour.

## **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF OLDER WORKERS**

As previously stated, future downturns in the supply of skilled labour will pressure managers to rethink perceptions of the value of older workers to productivity. However the prevailing stereotyped image of older workers, so deeply ingrained in the existing mindset of many managers (and members of the wider community), makes the reconstruction of this prevailing view quite problematic.

### ***Idealised Cognitive Modeling Theory***

This paper posits that the social realities (i.e. commonly shared perceptions) of a society depend upon the socially available ways of thinking about phenomena. Accordingly Lakoff's (1987) theory of *idealised cognitive models (ICMs)* holds that people process information through primary sets of mental models called ICMs. Essentially, interpretation is viewed as a process of weaving phenomena encountered through these ICMs or preconceptions. Working from the theoretical assumptions of ICM theory this paper will attempt to analyse the way biases residing in socially common and shared *preconceptions* inform society's understanding of ageing in ways that create and sustain unduly negatively (i.e. distorted) perceptions of older workers.

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### ***The Deficit Accumulation Model of Ageing***

Post-adult maturity in our society can be viewed as being based on a mental-model (or ICM) of ageing as decline and biological deterioration or ***deficit accumulation*** (Green 1993, p.129). This model frames the ways in which ageing is conceptualised in our society. Much of our socially shared knowledge on ageing is constructed from a ***deficit accumulation*** ICM model which emphasises older age as a period where people experience rapid and substantial mental and physical decline (Green 1993). In spite of this, research shows that the declines which human beings experience occur over a lifetime and are usually gradual, with some declines beginning at as young as twelve years of age, for example, sense of smell (Hendricks & Hendricks 1977).

The deficit accumulation model exaggerates rates of physical and mental decline that occur with ageing. Emphasising decline functions to de-emphasise the positive aspects of ageing often to the point where positive aspects are overlooked. As a dominant mental framework, the decline model leaves little room for accommodating an alternative view that age also provides increased opportunities for the accumulation of knowledge and skills.

Ng and Bradac (1993) also acknowledge that the choice of particular mental models can function to mask alternative paradigms. Distortions encroach upon, and thereby limit, employment opportunities for older workers. In contrast to prevailing perceptions about the ability of older workers to learn and adapt, as implied by a model of decline, research to date has shown that intellectual functioning among older workers can improve with age and that older workers can be re-trained in a cost effective manner (Taylor & Walker 1995, p.10).

The assumptions a society makes about the capabilities of older people dictate their opportunities for learning. In relation to the workplace many employers appear to hold the view that ***“you can’t teach an old dog new tricks”*** (Davis 1994, p.29)

***Because there are valid grounds for supposing that the value of some workers in some occupations declines over time, it is likely that this will inform (and already does inform) a prejudice against all older workers as a category thus motivating employers to prefer to discharge older workers and not to re-employ them.***

(Harris 1991, p.115)

Extensive studies by Chapman and Chapman 1969 show that illusory-correlation effects can be “***extremely resistant to contradictory data***” (cited in Tversky & Kahneman 1982a, p.13). For example, when applied to commonly established perceptions of older workers, studies have shown that instances of high productivity among older workers, often goes unnoticed by employers (Hendricks & Hendricks 1986). Furthermore, ICM models are flexible enough to adjust and accommodate contradictory information, while still remaining intact. Tversky and Kahneman (1982b, p.126) note that it is “***easier to assimilate a new fact within an existing causal model than to revise the model in light of this fact.***” If an employer’s typified view of older workers is that they are typically slow and lethargic, then contact with a nimble and competent older worker is likely to be interpreted as an isolated instance, or an ***exception to the rule***, hence preserving the established view. ***Exception to the rule*** type phenomena are often linguistically marked with labels like “***she’s active for her age***”, as is the case with other differentiations from ideal type constructs such as, “***female doctor***” and “***male nurse***”.

### ***THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE (SOCIAL/ FORMAL)***

Common social perceptions of ageing as modelled on decline also appear to inform the discourses of formal knowledge on ageing such as social gerontology. Lakoff (1987, pp.118-119) says that ordinary people (without the specified technical expertise) have “***folk***” theories about aspects of importance and relevance to their lives, and that “***scientific theories [can] develop out of folk theories.***” Gubrium and Wallace also make the point that specialists are not the only ones who theorise about age as “***we all do to the extent that we set about the task of attempting to understand the whys and wherefores of growing old***” (1990, p.132). Gubrium and Wallace go on to argue that striking parallels between specialist-scientific theory and everyday social theorisations are not uncommon.

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### ***Disengagement Theory: A Formal Knowledge Theory***

Disengagement theory exemplifies a formal knowledge theory that parallels the common knowledge theorisations based on a model of biological decline. Disengagement theory views ageing as a process whereby people progressively withdraw from their roles and participation in society as they become aged. The implication is that older people experience a substantial degree of decline in biological terms, which in turn takes away their opportunities to contribute to society.

***The process of phasing out older people from the mainstream of society thus becomes institutionalized as stable routine norms are developed to indicate which individuals should be disengaged and what forms of behavior should occur at this time. Accordingly, societies develop norms requiring that an individual retire from work at a certain age.***

(Cockerham 1991, p.52)

This view of ageing is affirmed through the social convention of retirement and further institutionalised by compulsory retirement, a practice which has only recently been legislated against for most occupations. Disengagement theory appears to be based on inferences on a common knowledge “folk” model of age as (biological) decline. Hence, the constructions of formal modes of knowledge are not immune to the distortive influences residing in the social stock of knowledge.

Husserl (1931), Schutz (1970), Berger and Luckmann (1966) have argued that the scientific domains are based on and guided by the underlying constructs of social stock knowledge. Bytheway (1995) explains the construction of theory on ageing in terms of a metaphorical process whereby dimensions of understanding are mapped onto given theorisations:

***The first element in any theory about age is, of course, time. We see our lives mapped out on the continuous dimension of time ... Given these models, we can begin to theorize by plotting other dimensions against it. A simple example is height against age. The facts are indisputable and we call the initial rise in height growth.***

(Bytheway 1995, p.109)

Bytheway (1995) acknowledges the ideological significance of growth, with its positive associations, as opposed to that of “*decline*” with ageing, which Haber (1986, p.76) says has come to be defined as a “progressive disease”. Green (1993, p.43) says that medical discourses like gerontology have functioned to linguistically erase the notion of a “*healthy old age*” and Hazan (1994, p.20) agrees saying that the concept of old age now equates with a state of “*sickness*”.

### ***Pitfalls in Knowledge Construction***

Walker (1975, p.133) states that theories gain their power as conceptual devices because they can be used to highlight particular aspects of reality. However, the highlighting of certain aspects can occur at the expense of downplaying other aspects, in the case of ageing, the accumulation of certain intellectual capacities. Sless (1986, p.103) says,

***Theories are attractive precisely because they offer to explain so much within one intellectual scheme. But one has to have had experience outside the prison house to know what restrictions are placed on the prisoners.***

Accordingly theoretical constructs can function to restrict the parameters from which reality is constructed, understood and articulated – because they provide parameters for reality construction.

Alternative models and theories (i.e. to *deficit accumulation* and *disengagement*) can, in contrast, acknowledge and embrace the value of maturation, and the opportunity for the accumulation of more skills and development of wisdom and good judgement. But in spite of this, constructions of ageing modelled off *deficit accumulation* continue to prevail and distort society’s understanding of older workers and the ageing process. So while “*Disengagement is not what most older people want. It is, however, what many older people get*” (Atchley 1988, p.273).

In spite of this the parameters upon which social perceptions of ageing are constructed can, and have, changed over time. For example, Hareven (1995, p.119), notes that it was in the late nineteenth century that North American society passed from a view of ageing as a natural process, to a view of it as a distinct period of life characterised by decline, weakness and obsolescence.

### **Impact on Older Workers**

The impact of age discrimination in the employment market can have harsh consequences for a generation of older workers who saw that ***“age was once synonymous with authority and respect, but is now considered a liability in the job market”*** (Kinsella-Taylor 1997, p.21).

How members of a society understand ageing as a process and people as they grow older has a significant influence on policy-making, practice and people’s behaviour toward individuals. Ultimately the emotional physical and financial well being of a person is affected by these factors of influence.

***“The human life cycle is certainly based on the biological process of aging - the reality of any stage of life depends on how a society defines aging and socially structures personal experience.”***

Macionis (1989, p.345)

While the influence of biology is evidenced by the undeniable limits it places on a human life-span, the social world also ***“imposes limits on what is biologically possible to the organism - In other words, society determines how long and in what manner the individual organism shall live”*** (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p.202). In fact, the deeming of some groups as being less suitable for unemployment can impact negatively upon their life span. Local and international studies show quite convincingly that, across all economic classes, ***“the mortality rate of unemployed people is higher than those with jobs”*** (Creed 1998, p.178).

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## CONCLUSION: RECONSTRUCTING THE DOMINANT PERCEPTION

While the dominant views of a society do become entrenched, they are not absolutely fixed and are ultimately open to *reconstruction*. However, the inertia of culturally dominant views mean that they can be slow in responding to the changing needs and nature of a society (i.e. *lag*). Hence reconstructing more accurate and representative understandings of workers' productive capacity requires applying significant amounts of social pressure to force a revision of prevailing views.

That ageing does involve some physical decline is not, however, in dispute. Indeed an realistically and overly optimistic view of ageing which exaggerates the benefits and denies or under-rates the physiological effects of decline that do occur, would also lead to distorted perceptions and understandings of ageing. This, in turn, would be likely to misinform social and institutional practices in counterproductive ways.

Nevertheless views that conceptualise ageing as being a process of *progressive decline* or *deficit accumulation* beginning at forty-five years of age remain inaccurate and unproductive – and in need of revision. Developing a more appropriate view of older workers requires moving away from polarised preconceptions to a more balanced view which can realistically accommodate the phenomena of decline and accumulation through the trajectory of the ageing process.

While research (including medical and scientific) provides us with more accurate information on the true nature of ageing, it has been shown that the existence of *corrective* information on its own is not sufficient for short to medium term social change. However, it does seem reasonable to suggest that the demographic shift toward an ever-older society is likely in the longer term, to force a rethinking of how ageing is perceived and understood.

In the shorter term, however, pressure can be used to help facilitate a faster reformation of a more balanced view of ageing and older workers. This requires a more 'public' strategy type approach in order to place the issue more prominently on the social agenda.

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Accordingly, **discourse-based** strategies can be used to help place this issue (i.e. the need to revise our understanding of ageing) more prominently on the social agenda. This kind of approach should include increased impetus and initiatives in **education and awareness promotion** at all key levels including local managerial, wider community, and institutional and political spheres.

*Discourse-based* strategies (i.e. speaking out about the issue in an effort to place it on the social agenda), provides a strategic means by which to challenge prevailing views and argue the merits of alternative and more balanced views on ageing as a process and the capacities of older workers. It involves a **grass roots** approach to tackling the sites where socially prevalent perceptions are constructed and reconstructed (i.e. *worked-out*). Alternatively, the continued uncritical use of the culturally conditioned *deficit accumulation* model, is likely to prolong distorted understandings of older workers and the ageing process in ways that run counter to the common interests of our society.

Note:

A discussion on the formulation of potentially effective discourse-based tactics is beyond the scope of this paper.

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