

Mature Age Jobseekers & Work Readiness

An Esher House Academic
Literature Review

International research shows that discrimination against mature age workers is one of the least acknowledged barriers to workforce participation.

This can manifest in both the recruitment and retention of mature age staff. For example, euphemisms such as being *unable to fit in the current team*, *being overqualified*, *lacking up to date skills*, *being inflexible*, *slow and unwilling to learn*, *higher salary expectations* and concerns about *overall health and fitness* are often reported.

The fear of age discrimination can be enough for mature jobseekers to 'self-deselect' themselves from the job market completely.

Jobseekers are often left feeling very discouraged and just think "what's the point" as they are too old now for employers to consider hiring them. In a survey of older job applicants (aged 50+), many reported being treated differently than younger applicants.

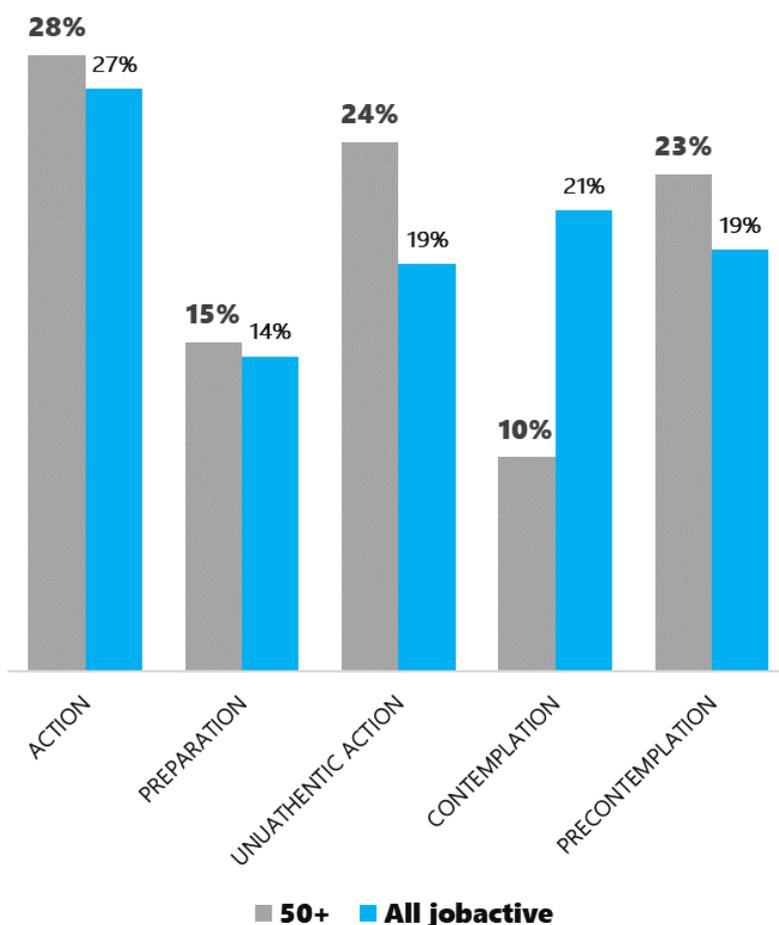
A younger worker is more than 40% more likely to be called back for an interview compared to an older worker.

Further, some professions are seen as having a more youth-focused culture such as in the information and communications technology industry. It's worth noting that one can assume that the reason they've been rejected from a job is due to their age – especially when feedback has sounded like a 'cop out reason', used to protect the employer from being seen to choose candidates based on age. These assumptions/irrational beliefs can be fuelled and exacerbated by the media reinforcing the reasons why mature age jobseekers are rejected.

Bowman et al. highlight systemic barriers facing older jobseekers within employment services systems, including the young age of many employment services' staff (mid-twenties to early thirties), which can lead to unconscious bias and misrecognition of older jobseekers' capabilities and experience. There's also the perception from staff that this cohort are just too hard to place, especially when time and resources are tight. Mature age jobseekers have witnessed more success in their job search when matched with a case manager who is of a similar age, reporting a feeling of being understood of their specific barriers.

The institutionalised categorisation of adults who are over 55 years of age, unemployed and low-skilled as 'older' and 'disadvantaged' may further affect their opportunities across a range of situations, but most particularly their employment prospects. It is claimed that categorisation can devalue an individual's human and social capital in the eyes of prospective employers and in their own eyes which may lead to a lack of motivation to participate in further education and training. Labelling does not enhance mature age jobseekers' self-esteem nor increase their enthusiasm for participating in activities to increase their employability. In fact, labelling can cause that person to end up 'behaving in the way that's expected of them' – the expectations we create for others, often become reality (behavioural confirmation).

50+ JOBSEEKERS' READINESS FOR WORK *(Esher House 2018, N = 20,251)*



The Assessment of Work Readiness unveils a jobseeker's genuine readiness and commitment to employment.

There are marked differences in 50+ year old jobseekers compared to over jobactive participants. Most notably, they are much less likely to be in "Contemplation" – knowing that they should work, and intending to eventually get around to trying to re-enter employment.

However, there are more likely to be in "Precontemplation" – in short, they have given up trying to re-enter employment, lacking the desire or confidence to do so. Additionally, they are

significantly more likely to be in "Unauthentic Action", stating and displaying that they wish to return to work, but not genuine in that commitment.

This data supports other academic research that suggests that mature age jobseekers deselect themselves and might find it easier to “hold out” for a pension. However, with extended lifespans and the considerable economic and experience asset of mature age workers, this is a huge loss of talent and a latent drag on economies.

The above data evidences that a discrete mature age employment programme is justified, as well as a refined AWR set of assessment questions. Psychological capital-building interventions (building mental toughness, self-efficacy and well-being) are likely to deliver the greatest uplifts in employment outcomes.

Both living arrangements and care-giving responsibilities can significantly impact mature age jobseekers’ ability to secure employment.

Older women (45+) are much less likely than men of the same age group to find work, largely due to a large percentage of women having disrupted their careers or education to focus on their child-care commitments. This employment gap, as noted in the Parents Next research can affect self-esteem, self-efficacy and education/skill level. Further, this cohort (both men and women) can also face the challenge of ‘balancing’ jobseeking/work commitments with caring responsibilities for elderly parents. Many older workers are interested in being able to work fewer hours or fewer days per week or having flexible start and finish times. Work is already hard to secure, but for those needing flexible employers who understand their specific needs, it can be even tougher.

Out-dated job search skills & qualifications. Studies show that mature age job seekers often possess outdated skills and knowledge or lack skills needed for the present labour market (such as current IT skills). This can discourage mature age workers from seeking employment, or to simply settle for ‘any job’ rather than more appropriate work for their interests and skills. In a survey of Australian mature aged jobseekers, participants felt that the employment services system was primarily focused on finding entry level, low-skilled jobs requiring little experience or training: jobs that were out of sync with their level of experience and skills set. As such, training in new IT skills in particular may be of benefit. Mature jobseekers realised that they might need to accept/apply for jobs one or several levels down. Once employed in a lower-level job, the skills from their previous higher-level employment were not fully utilised, leading to skills attrition and poor job retention. Once an individual loses their lower-level job, employers tended to look at their most recent employment and so they had to aim a little lower *again* than their last job. Survey of mature age jobseekers’ perceptions of employment support:

“They’re disinterested in finding jobs for relatively skilled and experienced jobseekers whereas they have tons of dishwashers and supermarket packers”

“Really only there to help you if you are looking for trade-like work...or have absolutely no idea of how to put a résumé together.”

Contractual pressures to quickly deliver employment outcomes may also orient employment service providers to steering jobseekers towards relatively low-skilled, low-paid jobs that require little experience or formal training. Such strategies effectively ensure that individuals who had once been located within skilled or professional occupations are likely to be resisted by mature-age jobseekers who refuse to be shoehorned into forms of employment different to their expectations and self-perception of who they are as “workers”.

Physical health has a major impact on early retirement, job loss, unemployment or difficulties re-entering employment. The probability of employment for men with poor health is significantly lower than for those who reported their health was in good condition. Further, long-term illness or disability is a major reason reported for not wanting to work, accounting for 68% of males aged 50-54 years and 54% of 55-59 years. **Nonetheless, workers 55+ are in fact less likely to take a sick day and are the least likely cohort to suffer a work-related injury than younger employees.**

Negative self-perceptions of ageing and negative age stereotypes are associated with negative outcomes. Older adults who hold negative attitudes toward their *own* ageing tend to benefit less from training activities compared to individuals who have a more positive attitude. Intervention programs targeting middle-aged and older adults' negative self-perceptions of ageing hold great potential to change what are mostly negative age stereotypes, and therefore promote successful ageing. Hence age-specific interventions to build psychological capital and optimism will deliver greater returns.

Mental trauma experienced from being made redundant from long-term 'careers' - some since school - can be devastating for some. There is not the modern acceptance of different careers and there is a disproportionate sense of stigma. This sense of loss and change of routine has a massive impact on an older person's purpose and sense of identity in their lives which in turn affects their physical and psychological wellbeing. High levels of depression are reported in empirical studies by those who experience involuntary exit, with participants in qualitative research reporting feelings of 'anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, and sadness'. There are also the serious long-term financial effects associated with prolonged loss of earnings and reduced capacity to save for retirement, which can lead to 'intense anxiety' among older unemployed workers 'about their ability to manage financially for the rest of their lives'.

A sense of powerlessness/helplessness about the future pervaded participants' accounts of coping with joblessness and underemployment, with several 'hanging out' for the Age Pension.

Mature age jobseekers engage less in job search activities, which explains 11-15% of their lower chance of reemployment. This may indicate that activation measures and active support for those aged fifty and over in their new job search can be effective. This activation could start as soon as they become unemployed, given the job search behaviour of those aged fifty and above is significantly lower during the first months they are unemployed and the highest proportion (72.5%) of the older unemployed do not find work as a result of their own efforts after jobseeking for three months.

55+ Jobseekers Respond Particularly Well to the Esher House

Psychosocial Intervention - Peer-reviewed data analysis evidences that 55+ general unemployed participants respond remarkably well to a programme of stage-matched one-to-ones and Resilience Workshops.

Placement outcomes increase from 24% under employment services as usual to 38% in the treatment group (N = 2,032).

Table 3.

Characteristic	Comparison (N = 12,037)				Treatment (N = 8,020)				Total
	RTW		Not RTW		RTW		Not RTW		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
All	3722	31%	8315	69%	3538	44%	4482	56%	20057
Gender									
Male	2123	33%	4385	67%	2111	46%	2449	54%	11068
Female	1439	29%	3546	71%	1292	41%	1857	59%	8134
Unknown	160	29%	384	71%	135	43%	176	57%	855
Stage of Change									
Action	NA	NA	NA	NA	1560	55%	1281	45%	2841
Preparation	NA	NA	NA	NA	782	45%	951	55%	1733
Unauthentic Action	NA	NA	NA	NA	584	42%	822	58%	1406
Contemplation	NA	NA	NA	NA	377	37%	653	63%	1030
Precontemplation	NA	NA	NA	NA	235	27%	775	77%	1010
Age 55+	268	24%	864	76%	339	38%	561	62%	2032
Aboriginal/Torres St Islander	437	31%	980	69%	600	47%	870	59%	2887
Culturally & Linguistically Diverse	615	31%	1354	69%	193	40%	289	60%	2451
Location (ASCG Class'n)									
Major Cities	1954	30%	4474	70%	680	51%	658	49%	7766
Inner Regional	877	34%	1708	66%	1799	43%	2421	57%	6805
Outer Regional	573	26%	1621	74%	956	46%	1129	54%	4279
Remote	200	44%	257	56%	90	28%	235	72%	782
Very Remote	118	32%	255	68%	13	27%	36	73%	422
Stream (Jobseeker Classification)									
Stream 1 (Limited)	11	7%	145	93%	10	43%	13	57%	179
Stream 1	907	22%	3270	78%	733	39%	1151	61%	6061
Stream 2	1271	41%	1811	59%	1240	52%	1136	48%	5458
Stream 3	723	37%	1242	63%	814	44%	1042	56%	3821
Stream 4	810	30%	1847	70%	741	39%	1140	61%	4538

Note. RTW: returned to work. Not RTW: did not return to work. NA: not assessed. Those in comparison group did not receive PS intervention nor stage-matched coaching.

Contact: darren.coppin@esherhouse.org or adrian.king@esherhouse.org

References

- Anderson, K., Richardson, V., Fields, N., & Harootyan, R. (2013). Inclusion or Exclusion? Exploring Barriers to Employment for Low-Income Older Adults. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 56*(4), 318-334.
- Australian Human Rights Commission (2010), *Age Discrimination—exposing the hidden barrier for mature age workers*.
- Billett, S., Dymock, D., Johnson, G., & Martin, G. (2011). Overcoming the paradox of employers' views about older workers. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 22*(6), 1248-1261.
- Bowman, D., McGann, M., Kimberley, H., & Biggs, S. (2017). 'Rusty, invisible and threatening': Ageing, capital and employability. *Work, Employment & Society, 31*(3), 465-482.
- Bowman, D., McGann, M., Kimberley, H., & Biggs, S. (2016). Activation and Active Ageing? Mature-Age Jobseekers' Experience of Employment Services. *15*(4), 647-658.
- Dordoni, & Argentero. (2015). When age stereotypes are employment barriers: A Conceptual analysis and a literature review on older workers stereotypes. *Ageing International, 40*(4), 393-412.
- Kossen, C., & Hammer, S. (2010). Mature-Aged Job Seekers' Experiences of Centrelink and the Job Network Services in an Australian Regional Centre. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 19*(1), 45-53.
- McGann, M., Bowman, D., Kimberley, H., & Biggs, S. (2015) *Too Old to Work, Too Young to Retire*, Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence, http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/7905/4/Workforce_vulnerabilities_in_midlife_and_beyond_research_summary_2015.pdf.
- McGann, M., Kimberley, H., Bowman, D., & Biggs, S. (2016). The Netherworld between Work and Retirement. *Social Policy and Society, 15*(4), 625-636.
- Meyers, R. (2016). What's in a name? Categorising 'disadvantaged older workers'. *International Journal of Training Research, 14*(2), 131-144.
- Meyers, R. (2016). Opportunities or Barriers? The Experiences of Disadvantaged Older Jobseekers Participating in Training. *International Journal of Training Research, 14*(1), 19-34.
- Randrianarisoa, A., & Bowman, D. (2018). *Report: On the front line. Employment services staff perspectives on working with mature age jobseekers*. Work and Economic Security, Brotherhood of St Lawrence. Retrieved from: http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/10836/1/RandrianarisoaBowman_On_the_front_line_2018.pdf
- Ranzijn, R., Carson, E., Winefield, A., & Price, D. (2006). On the scrap-heap at 45: The human impact of mature-aged unemployment. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 79*(3), 467-479.
- Riach, K., & Loretto, W. (2009) 'Identity work and the "unemployed" older worker: age, disability and the lived experience of the older unemployed', *Work, Employment and Society, 23*, 1, 102-19.
- Vansteenkiste, Deschacht, & Sels. (2015). Why are unemployed aged fifty and over less likely to find a job? A decomposition analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 90*(C), 55-65.
- Wickramasinghe, S & Bowman, D 2018, *Help, but not real help: mature age jobseeker perspectives on employment services in Australia*, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

