



**OLDER WORKERS AND THE JOB NETWORK:
A SNAPSHOT SURVEY**

A SUBMISSION TO

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION
AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

**“Inquiry into issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment,
or establishing a business, following unemployment”**

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Mission Australia Employment Assistance

This submission from Mission Australia explores the manner in which unemployed over 45 year olds interact with Federal and State Government employment initiatives, particularly the Federal Government's Job Network scheme. The focus of the submission is to provide a detailed analysis of feedback gathered from Mission Australia staff working in employment services, specifically Job Matching, Intensive Assistance and the Community Support Program, and their working observations of the barriers facing over 45 year old jobseekers nationally. The data gathered from Mission Employment staff is combined with analyses of existing literature and statistical material to provide a clear picture of the social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over 45 years of age.

Mission Australia, formerly the Sydney City Mission, was established in 1862. In 1978 the Mission pioneered training in the labour market program sector forming the Sydney City Mission Vocational Education and Training Services, now known as Mission Employment (in all States except Victoria trading as Mission Australia NEIS Managing Agents). Although Mission Australia had provided homeless, youth and aged care services for decades, the organisation recognised there was a need to break the cycle of poverty induced by unemployment and therefore to assist unemployed people gain work.

In 1988 Mission Employment began delivering labour market programs under the *SkillShare* initiative, as part of the previous Government's *Working Nation* Employment policy. Labour Market Programs were delivered across Australia under *Working Nation* until the May 1998 inception of the Job Network competitive employment services market. Mission Australia is one of the largest providers within the Job Network, delivering Job Matching (FLEX 1), Job Training (FLEX 2), Intensive Assistance (FLEX 3) and New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) from **98** sites throughout rural and urban Australia. Mission Australia also delivers the Community Support Program (CSP), Work for the Dole, Jobs Pathway, Employment and Training (JPET), Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and a variety of State Government funded employment services. Staff are experienced and adaptable to the changing trends evident not only within the labour market but also within Government policy pertaining to the labour market. Further, staff are empathetic to special needs groups, have strong links with employers and peak industry bodies and are familiar with the general needs of unemployed people and employers.

Survey of Job Network Providers

In an informal snapshot survey, Mission Employment staff were asked to respond to key issues relating to workers aged 45 and over. The issues highlighted were distilled from a review of the small, but growing, literature surrounding mature workers. Permeating the survey, the literature review and the statistical analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data were a set of aims designed to provide a clear picture of the experience of unemployment for those aged 45 and over: expressly the social, economic and industrial issues specific to these workers. In particular, we sought to understand:

- The particular needs of over 45 year old job seekers as opposed to other groups of unemployed job seekers;
- A specific comparison of the needs of over 45 year olds as opposed to under 25 year old unemployed job seekers, the latter being the focus of much research and policy attention in recent years;
- The diversity within the group;
- The manner in which the Job Network assists mature workers;
- The associated social and economic issues, both at the level of the individual and the level of the Australian community in general; and
- Industrial issues impacting on those aged 45 and over.

In addition to the above, the survey work included questions designed to:

- Test some of the assumptions located in the literature; and
- Provide a conceptual and practical framework for assisting mature age workers.

Setting the Context

A striking statistical picture of the extreme change in workforce participation by mature workers is provided in the Council on the Ageing's report *What Now? Over 45 and Unemployed* (1992). During this century, participation by older people in the workforce has decreased. In 1911, **86%** of men in the 60 to 64 age group were in the labour force, whereas by May 1992, only **32%** remained. Part of the reason for this decline are improved pension provisions and the wider use of superannuation schemes. However, since the 1970s, there have been further reasons including (but not limited to): restructuring of industries, micro-economic reform and a general increase in the unemployment rate.

Recognition of the special situation and particular issues impacting on mature age unemployed jobseekers surfaced occasionally over the past two decades, but came into particular focus only in the early 1990s. This focus highlighted mature workers' susceptibility to long-term unemployment. Interviews with persons aged 45 and over detailing their experiences of unemployment reveals a consistent theme that seemingly contributes to these long periods of unemployment: the attitude of employers is identified as one of the greatest barriers to gaining re-employment in this age group. However, in spite of an ongoing pattern of long-term unemployment and other crucial consequences of unemployment, such as the depletion of economic resources and a tendency towards social isolation, policy makers have consistently ignored this group. Small programs exist in two states – the Mature Workers Program in NSW and Don't Overlook Mature Experience (DOME) program in South Australia. However, no action has been taken at a Commonwealth level to implement programs directly targeting the over 45 year old unemployed jobseeker, with the focus instead heavily biased towards youth unemployment, up to and including the Federal Budget 1999-2000. This is not to say that youth unemployment is not deserving of attention and resources, however there is detailed evidence supporting claims for the need to extend attention to the other end of the increasingly narrow (in terms of age) workforce.

It is our intention within the confines of this submission to tease out some of the underlying issues resulting from labour market and policy changes, and the consequences for the over 45 age group in terms of impact on their lives. This study is set firmly in the social, political and economic environments and the interaction between individuals and aspects of these environments are examined. Section Two details a selection of responses from Mission Employment staff to a series of questions relating to interaction between mature workers, the Job Network, and employers; and provides commentary to draw out important threads and issues. Section Three combines data from the survey with a review of the literature in this area, filling out the details of the issues and extending the discussion. In Section Four, which overlaps and complements the earlier sections, relevant ABS statistics are presented in table form to illustrate recent employment/unemployment trends and patterns for the over 45 age group. Finally, Section Five takes the analyses forward into proposals for ameliorating the labour market difficulties for workers over 45 years of age.

Mission Australia's work with disadvantaged people is underpinned by Christian values from which flow certain fundamental or 'foundation' principles. These are:

The primacy of the human person and human dignity

- The role of society as protector of human dignity
- The rights of citizens to participate in society
- The priority of social or distributive justice
- The provision of adequate access to resources for every person
- The honouring and protection of human rights and responsibilities

In this context, work is an important aspect of participation in society. Work is both paid employment and non-paid input to society, which contributes to the common good. The economy, through wise government, needs to provide opportunities and incentives for paid employment for all those who wish to take it up, and wages for that employment should allow workers to live with dignity, no matter what their age.