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I learnt this week from our local newspaper of an invitation for submissions concerning the scarcity of employment opportunities for people over 45. I am writing especially on a pernicious but widespread phenomenon: "I'm sorry, but you're over-qualified for the job".

In 1993, I was retained full-time by a newly-formed public company as general manager of technical development, having operated as a senior techno-economic consultant since 1984. As events unfolded, the planned float of the company in 1997 failed; along with others involved, I was cast to the draft at the age of 58 (with almost \$200,000 of retainer still owed).

Not surprisingly, it proved daunting to re-activate my previous consulting practice after more than three years away from it, so I had no alternative but to sign up for the Newstart scheme. Over the following 13 months, I applied formally for more than 150 advertised positions that were clearly related to my fields of expertise: over 35 years of domestic and international experience (in Australasia, the Asia-Pacific region, North America and East and West Europe) as a chartered chemical engineer, including 15 years as a senior executive and director both of international engineering companies in Australia and the US, and of merchant banks in London and Sydney. All to no avail! Amongst all this and while continuing to scout for consulting work, I took anything I could get, all casual: for example, eight weeks as relieving office manager (and typist!) for a small technical consultancy, text editing for an advertising agency and window cleaning for neighbours. Eventually, I managed to claw back enough of a client base to retire from Newstart with some semblance of professional and financial dignity.

Back to the my formal applications for employment, all prepared most seriously. Only 16 of the 150-plus had the courtesy of acknowledgement by their recipients. Of those, four said, in effect, thanks, but no thanks or "don't ring us, we'll ring you" followed by deathly silence. The consistent theme of the other twelve was that I was "over-qualified"; in only two cases, did I get to a first-stage interview, and none beyond. It became quite evident that "overqualified is now the standard euphemism for "too old", a tacit acknowledgement that to say the latter would be a form of age discrimination, and hence un-PC and illegal. I have since talked privately with three professional head-hunters; all confirmed this interpretation without hesitation, while lamenting more-or-less sincerely the foolish obduracy of their clients.

I am well aware that my experience merely mirrors that of so many others, who have the misfortune to find themselves regarded as unemployable geriatric has-beens the moment they become unemployed - for whatever reason - at middle-age or beyond. It is clear that, in this lucky country of ours, there is a pervasive culture of "youth = energy = excellence", which sets at nought the value of practical and professional experience that can be acquired in no way other than by the passage of years. In this, we are far removed from prevailing attitudes in Europe and North America, for example, where long experience at senior levels in the business community is well-respected and more importantly - often sought after.