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INQUIRY INTO OLDER WORKERS

I am 54, a computer programmer, recently retrenched from the CSIRO Division of Land and Water in Griffith NSW.

I have found amazing difficulty in getting work. I was on part time with CSIRO, and then finally retrenched. CSIRO took the view that scientists should write their own computer programs.

Over the last two years I have applied for some 50 jobs, some within CSIRO, and have had 8 interviews. All the interviews went well, and I took a positive and proactive approach to each interview. None resulted in a job.

I have a superannuation pension, paid early, and supplement this pension by driving a taxi.

I have applied for what few computing jobs are available in my region, and also many administration jobs, many of them junior. I went to Canberra for a week last year, and spent the week going round the computing employment agencies applying for work. I approached 14 agencies, and was interviewed by 8. The agencies thought I could do programming, or I could liaise between the client and programmers, or I could do technical writing. No jobs resulted.

From my experience, it appears that employers are faced with a glut of labour, including skilled labour. I suggest that employers react to this glut in the following ways:

The employee is expected to fit the job as exactly as a key fitting a lock. Any mismatch will mean some time for retraining, and employers are unwilling to accept the need for any retraining. Employer feel that if they wait a little longer, then exactly the right person will apply for the job.

Experience counts for nothing unless the experience fits the job exactly. A partial match is not regarded as good enough.

Employers appear to fear that an older person will expect a higher income than a younger person.

Employers know that many older retrenched people are likely to have some money from redundancy or other sources, while younger people are less likely to have any source of income outside a job. Employers may feel that younger people may, on average, be more committed to a job than older people, because the younger people need the money, particularly if they are starting a family.

Employers seem reluctant to hire someone who is older than the prospective supervisor. I have had interviews where I realised that if I got the job I would be the -oldest person in the workplace unit, and older than the supervisor or boss. I suspect that younger people feel uncomfortable if faced with supervising someone older and perhaps more experienced than they are. A young supervisor may fear that an experienced older person might eventually take their job. An extreme example was an interview I had for a job as a laboratory assistant in a local rice mill. The supervisor of the laboratory was a woman about 30, and all the other staff were women who were younger than she was. I knew that some of my rivals for the job were young women. I did not get the job, and I suspect that the supervisor felt more comfortable hiring another young woman. I am not saying this is good or bad.

In short employers want someone who needs no retraining, will work for a modest income, and is unlikely to be a threat to the supervisor. Most of the time, employers get what they want.

I have a friend who is a retired electrical engineer, but not retired by choice. He is 64, and has worked on projects in the Middle East and South East Asia. His last contract ran out 5 years ago, and he applied for other jobs, but could not get them. He discovered that if he applied for a job which he knew he was well suited for, he was unlikely to get an interview. If he applied for a job which he could do, but which was slightly outside his speciality, he was more likely to get an interview, but in the interview, the panel would ask questions designed to trip him up. The implication was that the employer had someone in mind for the job, and went through the process of advertising the job and interviewing people only for form's sake.

It is illegal to discriminate against job seekers because of their age, but this is what happens.

I hope these thoughts are of value.