

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.

SUBMISSION FROM

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ISSUES FOR MATURE AGED UNEMPLOYED

Currently, persons over 45 years constitute some 20% of the unemployed in Australia. Work place changes, as well as global and technological changes continue to impact on the work force in multifarious ways. In response, numbers of mature workers have elected to take voluntary separation packages from their places of employment. Other mature workers have had retrenchment imposed upon them. The result of these actions has, for many, led to economic difficulties and disadvantage.

Certainly, an increased sense of insecurity is expressed by the unemployed as the trend to casualisation, part-time employment and contract work continues to emerge. These fearful feelings are compounded for mature unemployed when they predict their financial futures for retirement. It would seem many have sustained inappropriate investment attitudes, including failing to invest in superannuation. For some, creeping panic is experienced with their impending older age. In this situation, they are readily seduced by 'quick' money schemes and the lure of small business.

Of the long-term unemployed clients SERTEC, a Job Network agency in south east New South Wales, provide with employment assistance, the majority are males of 45 years plus. Statistically, this group has been found to remain unemployed longer than any other cohort of unemployed persons. SERTEC's experience supports that contention.

Generally, this group is confounded and angered by employer attitudes to their age. Many maintain a belief that employers prefer younger workers who are more flexible, open to new learnings and physically able. This perception is often supported by evidence when younger employees are actively sought by employers. ABS publications on Job Search Experience of Unemployed Persons identified that unemployed persons in NSW reported a prime difficulty in acquiring work as they were 'considered too old by employers'. In discussion, mature workers express their disappointment and sadness that their experience, stability and wisdom is not valued or sought by employers. Continued unemployment impacts on their self respect and esteem and is manifested in their temperament, health and personal presentation.

Individuals in this group are frustrated by their lack of qualifications and experience in the new growth industries or for those jobs that require technological skills and understanding. Some clients seek retraining opportunities whilst others are unable to appreciate that reskilling will improve job chances. People who have participated in study that has not led to gaining employment naturally tend to be cynical of such education programs. However, most are open to the possibilities. For those persons who have been employed in unskilled and labouring work it is crucial that relevant and meaningful training for new employment be made available to them. It is interesting to note that of the people unemployed in New South Wales in 1998, 77% had a preferred occupation. Furthermore, among those who had sought work for the entire year and had a preferred occupation, 21 % were labouring and related workers. (Source: ABS publications that led to LTU Job Search Experience by Economic Analysis Unit, DEWRSB).

Some 45+ unemployed males are characterised by personal attitudes that create barriers which prevent them from considering employment opportunities in traditionally gendered work roles such as aged care, hospitality, office and retail industries. These are work areas where mature aged women can and do succeed in gaining employment.

Our mature age clients educational qualifications are consistent with ABS findings with about 50% having not completed the highest level of secondary school and greater than 50% without a post school qualification. Many have not embraced the notion of life long learning, but rather see education as pre-vocational.

A significant number of clients are still to overcome the barrier of having very poor literacy and numeracy skills. At times, it is difficult to immediately identify the level of literacy. Some clients have mastered necessary survival strategies and

others have had to develop ways of concealing poor language and mathematical skills. Sensitively devised, individually tailored, self paced programs of development would assist these persons. Ensuring relevancy and empowerment in their learning will be important features of this education.

An overwhelming feeling expressed by mature aged unemployed persons is that nobody cares. Employers, society and government have abandoned them in a rapidly changing work environment that they do not fully understand. We have a responsibility to improve employer attitudes to mature workers through appropriate focus and labour market programs. Self-starter grants for those with skills and understandings, may be considered. Retraining and reskilling of the mature aged are priority concerns for employment strategies

Greg Malavey Chairperson
SE NSW Area Consultative Committee.