

SUBMISSION ON ISSUES SPECIFIC TO WORKERS OVER 45 YEARS OF AGE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT

This is an individual submission based on my own experiences and those of friends and family.

The main problem

Although there are various issues such as retraining which have relevance to this issue I believe the basic, underlying problem which needs to be addressed first is that, in these times of high unemployment, people over 45 years of age (or even over 40) are discriminated against by potential employers.

In my experience, there are usually more than thirty people applying for every reasonable position and those over 40 don't even get called for interviews. This problem is exacerbated if the person is currently unemployed - with each month of unemployment their chances diminish further. Why, in the employers mind, take on someone old and unemployed when they have many choices of younger people who are perhaps just wanting a move from their current position?

If, the job market wasn't so competitive, employers might have to take on someone older and would be pleasantly surprised but, as it is, they don't need to take what they see as 'a risk'. Even if they interviewed some of the older candidates, they might occasionally realise their prejudices were unfounded.

I can only speculate on some of the reasons why the older person is looked on so unfavourably in a competitive situation. These might be:

- Society's current de-valuing of older people so they appear less attractive, less interesting, less able
- It is possible that in some manual jobs, older people are not as physically strong but are older people viewed as less intelligent or capable in other areas?
- When many senior managers are under forty, they may be reluctant to employ as a subordinate someone older than they are who may have more experience and might be seen by them as a threat to their authority
- Older people may be viewed as 'out of touch' with the way things are currently done, especially if they have been out of the workforce for a while.

- In certain sectors, older people are less likely to have a university degree and employers now have the choice of younger people with a degree in areas where it would not have been considered essential twenty years ago.

Issues specific to women

I believe that women may have even more difficulty than men in finding employment when they are over 45 years of age. I know of a number of very intelligent and capable single (or sole parent) women in the 40 – 60 age group who are living in very difficult financial circumstances, having given up on finding meaningful full time employment. Often they have found alternative ways to use their skills with creative tasks, voluntary work or ‘casual bits and pieces’, but of course this is not a good financial answer and the lack of regular income and/or struggling on social security brings much stress to their lives.

I think those that have ‘fallen through the gaps’ in the system include:

1. Those without suitable qualifications

There are many intelligent older women who do not have professional qualifications because these weren’t so essential in the job market of their younger days. Often they feel they are ‘too old’ now to do a major course which will leave them a few years older and *still at a disadvantage in a youth-biased job market with too few jobs.*

2. Those who no longer wish to work in their original field

Some women who did obtain qualifications in their youth, nevertheless find that, after having families and perhaps spending some time away from full time work, they have different interests and priorities. Total retraining comes with the same disadvantages as mentioned above.

3. Those in industries where ‘appearance’ is paramount

In many areas of work, ‘appearance’, particularly for women, is a major issue, whether it is admitted or not. Because youth is more beautiful in most people’s eyes, the older women finds it hard to compete. This can cover a wide range of jobs from those in the fashion and beauty industry to almost any where there is public contact, for instance in the hospitality industry or in a sales team. It’s not so much that most employers are totally rejecting of an older woman but given the choice of a vibrant younger one with the same skills, they’ll choose the younger one 99 per cent of the time. And at the moment they have plenty of choice.

Social costs

My feeling is that the social costs of the current high unemployment are particularly significant in the over 45 age group.

These include:

- Increased stress, depression, illness caused by money worries and lack of purpose
- Family problems caused by the above
- Ongoing low income and low self-esteem as these people reach retirement with no savings and insufficient funds to enjoy their leisure
- People at the lower end of this age group may still have teenage children at home whose circumstances and expectations are diminished

It is worth mentioning here that even those in this age group who have a job are under increased pressure. Many dare not leave unsatisfactory circumstances for fear they will not get another job. Others who desire to move location for family reasons, feel obliged to stay where they have employment, creating considerable family pressures. A number of employers are taking advantage of the current high unemployment, expecting unpaid overtime or otherwise pressurising employees to do more for less.

Any answers?

I think any solutions which attempt to view the difficulties of older people in isolation are going to have minimal effect on the outcome for the majority of unemployed older people.

Only a general fall in unemployment will reduce the high numbers competing for every desirable position.

At the moment the younger, inexperienced seekers and the older, possibly less qualified ones, don't get a look in *even if their basic knowledge and skills are ideal for the job* – if you're between 25 and 35, with a degree and some experience the workplace wants you. The rest of us can forget it!

My own personal solution is to structure incentives/taxes and the overheads of employing people in a way that encourages employers to reduce everyone to a four day week and take on extra staff. How much better to have almost everyone working four days a week on a reasonable income than half the country increasingly pressurised in their work, some trying to find a moment for family in their 60 hour week, while the other half struggle on social security with hours of meaningless time and no income to enjoy it.

Submission from:

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