

**Submission by the Employment Strategies Council (Brisbane North) Inc. to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations on**

**“An Inquiry into Issues Specific to Workers over 45 years of Age Seeking Employment or Establishing A Business Following Unemployment”**

The following information is provided in addition to the Employment Strategies Council's previous submission to the Standing Committee on unemployment in over 45s.

The material has been compiled as a result of consultation specifically with the Job Network providers in the Brisbane North region. All providers were invited to a discussion group, held at the Employment Strategies Council office on Thursday 14 October. The opinions expressed by the providers present are summarised below. A representative from the Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry was also present.

Attendees:

Joe Cazey	Career Employment Australia
Kit Ison	Employment National
Karen Vierow	Sarina Russo Job Access
Margaret Nash	BAVE
John Lucas	The Salvation Army Employment Plus
QCCI	Donna Mildren
Sandy Mikami	Employment Strategies Council

**BARRIERS TO RE-ENTRY**

Attitude: the most important factor

Providers agreed that the biggest single barrier to workforce re-entry for mature aged workers is their attitude. The older workers who are most difficult to place are those with feelings of anger, fear, despair or general negativity. A poor attitude will be apparent in their appearance and demeanour. One provider suggested that blue-collar workers who have done hard physical jobs for many years are often “45 going on 55” – very tired and worn out. The attitude of the mature aged unemployed not only affects the way they interact with prospective employers, but also makes it very difficult for them to ask for help when they need it.

Providers agreed that with the right attitude, all manner of obstacles can be overcome. No matter what the age, if a person has the right attitude - ie is positive and willing to do what is necessary to get a job - they will be able to find employment.

Inflexibility

Also part of the general problem of attitude is the issue of inflexibility. In particular, many white collar workers have unrealistic expectations, and expect to get a job at the same level at which they were working before. In other words, their pride and ego can be an obstacle to re-employment. Such workers may also feel very uncomfortable in an interview situation if the interviewer or prospective employer is younger than they are.

### Outdated skills/qualifications

Providers noted that often mature-aged people do have considerable skills and qualifications, but these may not be what the market is currently demanding. Lack of computer skills, or even just a lack of confidence in their level of computer literacy is also a problem. For example, a job applicant may have general computer skills, but still not feel able to tackle a firm's own customised, internal computer system. It should also be noted that computer literacy is fast becoming incorporated into the definition of literacy.

### Poor interview skills

Sometimes mature-aged workers may not have experienced a job interview since getting their very first job, and they are terrified. And once again, their attitude can be a major problem in an interview situation: if they are angry and resentful about being unemployed, it will be apparent.

### Attitude of the employers

The providers believe that the attitude of employers is also a crucial issue in the ongoing problem of mature aged unemployment.

If there is a pool of people to choose from, many employers will tend to choose the younger person, because they make assumptions about the qualities that the younger person will bring to the job, as opposed to the older person. This may happen consciously or even unconsciously.

This elimination of older workers can happen at the resume sorting stage: resumes which betray the applicant's age may not progress past the first cut.

Some image-conscious industries (such as fashion or retail) will also show a bias towards younger people. For other industries, their employment practices are governed by strictly financial considerations - they need to pay junior wages to remain viable.

There are also certain "myths" which exist about mature aged workers, such as:

- they need to take more sick leave (the reverse is usually the case);
- redundancy payments for over 45s, should they be necessary, are much higher (the difference is only minimal, and it only occurs under some awards).

Finally, employers may on some occasions suspect that the mature aged worker is just "filling in time" before collecting their super.

### Lack of literacy and numeracy skills

A lack of literacy and numeracy skills can be a huge barrier to re-entry, and this is an issue particularly for blue collar workers and workers from a non-English speaking background. Providers reported that some companies are now doing pre-employment literacy and numeracy assessments which can eliminate applicants before they reach the interview stage.

### Substance abuse

Finally, substance abuse, such as alcoholism, can sometimes be a problem with older workers and this will inevitably affect a person's general employability.

## **POSSIBLE STRATEGIES**

### Improving attitude and presentation

The key to improving the employability of older workers lies in improving attitude, self-confidence, and the way they present themselves in an interview.

Providers agreed that the best hope lies in more preparatory work. This includes:

- Developing interview skills by role playing and mock interviews. Video playback can be useful for giving feedback to the client.
- **Develop skills based resumes with specific related employment experience.**
- Bolstering confidence with success stories.
- Helping clients to explore realistic career options.
- Improving overall physical presentation.

### Volunteering

Encouraging older workers to do volunteer work in the community is also a way of preparing them to re-enter the workforce. Volunteering can:

- build confidence;
- put routine and structure back into their week;
- encourage them to reach out and start communicating again; and,
- improve their sense of self-worth.

### Training

Training is often necessary for the older worker, and may include computer skills, general literacy and numeracy and so on. One approach that has been taken in the civil construction industry (South East Motorway project) is to incorporate literacy and numeracy units into the workplace training for employees.

Providers also noted that it is important to recognise that older people will respond to a variety of learning modes. The best approach is to use a number of interactive techniques, and not just the "lecture" situation.

### Small Business Training

Starting a small business ("buying a job") can be a popular option for the mature aged unemployed, but one which is fraught with danger. The failure rate for small business at

any age is staggeringly high, and financial counselling and small business skills training are absolutely necessary for the older worker considering this path. The New Enterprise Incentive Scheme currently does provide such training, but has certain eligibility requirements which can preclude older applicants if they have personal assets over a certain amount.

One option suggested is that the “Network Practice Firm” program (currently run for youth across Australia) could be made available to older workers. This sponsored program provides an opportunity for participants to set up a practice firm in a simulated, supervised environment. Participants rotate roles (marketing, finance etc) and experience day to day business practice and problems without actually taking any financial risks. This could be a good way to build confidence in older people, and also give them the opportunity to test whether they are really suited to the business world.

### Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning

As well as helping existing mature aged unemployed, attention should be given to preventative measures. Lifelong employment is gone forever, and workers of all ages should be encouraged to continually develop their skills. They may well need to change positions within the company, and or change career directions completely at some stage, so staying flexible and able to respond to market changes is crucial.

### Changing employers’ attitudes and practices

Of course, strategies which target the employer are also crucial.

Providers agreed that we need programs to encourage age balance in the workplace. This would involve “selling the benefits”, including that older workers are:

- very reliable;
- have a strong work ethic; and,
- take fewer sick days.

One provider suggested that many older workers are also loyal, because they know that they have very limited chances of getting another job. The provider used the term “economic conscripts” – ie they can’t afford not to be a model employee.

The Salvation Army Employment Plus is in fact already running a successful program which involves targeting key businesses and “selling the benefits”. A significant success factor seems to be that when they wish to open dialog with a company, they target an employee/manager who is an older worker themselves. This approach is working and could be replicated.

### Conclusion

A multi-faceted approach to the problem of mature-aged unemployment is obviously necessary, but the foundation of all progress lies in achieving attitudinal change, in both the mature aged worker and the employer.