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I'm writing this letter to you to give you a sense of what its like to work daily with people over 45, "re-inventing" themselves for job and life change as well as taking small business initiatives. I want to thank Don, Zandra, Bern, Jim, Lyn, Dave, Bill, Phil, Carol, Paul, Moira, Maureen, Rob, Michael and Donna for contributions to the ideas here. I note in statistics persons over 45 constitute 20% of Australia's unemployed but our training program so far has catered mainly for mature aged job seekers. I'm not sure what that reflects as we only provide flex 2 training but we are very conscious of this group and its specific needs. Over the 15 days of job search skills training with mature aged individuals I see their shifts and the resistance. For some the challenge of coming into the job/business market 1999 style is frightening, humiliating, threatening and immobilizing. However, for most of the people in this age group I have worked with, they do shift from initial resistance to change, living in the past, to a more proactive and positive view of themselves. This different perspective involves an acknowledgement that the local, national and international economic and political market forces have changed circumstances but they are not powerless victims. Often they are able to see how they have contributed to their own current position and work on ways to make it better. I am challenged to support them, addressing the disadvantage they face in terms of gaining employment and starting small business

We're a group of people who need acknowledgement. We are, here; we're real, not part of the garbage. We need to take something back into our own hands. You don't feel you have much control (Lyn)

A lot of things cause us to get out of the workforce but we all end up in the same boat. Getting back is the hard part. (Don)

I have an enormous fund of 'stories' about the experience of being unemployed after 45 and the problems of starting a small business. Daily I sit and encourage the telling of these 'stories' so that people can articulate what its like for them, their starting points, their observations, their growth points and insights, their full stops. It's the blocks, the silences, and the anger that makes me most uncomfortable. I'm powerless to provide solutions, we cannot do for each other, but we can sit there and be present to the development of an individual's acceptance and moving on.

I think our training room is probably distinctive. A small space painted yellow and mauve, carpet that has seen better days, distinctively homely. Recycled training room chairs, tables and computers, a slim stock of books and videos give a sense that there is a structure through which we plan to address job search. Each day we work morning and afternoon sessions but it is rolling start so the groups are fluid. We've evolved our program so that we make a virtue of this shifting group and shared experience. I know how vital it is to offer a safe, informal, conversational place for recognition and change. People have the opportunity to hear about and contribute to each other in unexpected ways. The resources in print and media are strangely distant from the day's stories. The books are authoritative about what should be done; the videos from employment settings are concerned with goal setting, OHS, behaviour management. We watch the videos, I use the books, some of the clients read them but they are a minority. The changes in us all come with the telling of stories and the release that this offers for self-education initiatives. Over the 15 days I generally see changes in how each person looks and mostly for the better. They start with their own stories, they listen to each

other, they try ideas on each other and on me. They work on the computers, writing about themselves, drafting job search documents, surfing the net for resources for personal and business development

Often people don't start well; they are deeply confronted by the request they turn up for training. I'm disconcerted by sharp accounts. It may be of an abrupt redundancy, the move to the former family holiday house, the breakup of a relationship; the return to aged parents. Some have an enormous and mounting maintenance debt they have no intention of paying because they can't imagine how they would ever earn enough in the new life to enable them to fund the past and the new. That is a place of strong resistance. For some there is a slowly emerging account of a problem with alcohol. Clients include long time residents in the area, people who have recently returned, new comers. Invariably they say *"It's not what you know but who you know in this town that gets you a job"*. Most recognise a lack of social support, the difficulty acknowledging not being in work and often find it hard to describe being unemployed. It's a satire to say *"I'm working for the government"* but this line is also often used.

Others have been waiting and are ready for support. They recognise that they can do with this intervention, that there are new tracks to go down, other paths they can take, that computer literacy is useful, that there are other jobs and options including small business and voluntary work that might be generative.

We have explored the following small business possibilities: home handy people, cleaning, building inspection, gardening, lawn mowing, trash packs, houseboats, a camping ground, mud brick making, greeting cards, boat building, cooking ventures, fishing for women

I think these are the things at issue

1. People over 45 will not get work. Mature workers who are in receipt of benefits generally do not see themselves positively nor do they believe employers, media representation, the government and society see them as valuable potential employees.

A person will hold out a touch screen ticket to job network staff and say *"I'm probably too old for this"*. They are generally not used to "selling/marketing" themselves.

Many coming out of long, stable careers feel 'humiliated' at the thought of going to employers to discuss the possibility of employment. They perceive they will be discriminated against, that employers want young, less expensive workers. *"They want young people, who are, easier to mold"*. *"We, don't look so good in the new corporate tee shirt image, we've got the credentials but they want the good looks"*. In our year as job network providers none of our over 45s clients have been successful in job applications for government positions, though the applications have been careful. Tertiary educated 45 plus workers have particular difficulty obtaining work that would make use of any of their skills

2. We locate the problem of unemployment in the people who are in receipt of benefits. They are seen as lacking confidence, training and relevant skills. It is because they are deficient that they cannot find employment this time. The story line wavers, *"Those old guys who have passed their use by date need to stop living in the past and get real"*. *"I've tried everything, I'm willing to do anything but nothing has turned up, I just don't seem to crack it any more"*.
3. Mature aged people often are experiencing concurrent serious life challenging situations, negativity towards themselves, domestic problems, addictions, illnesses, poverty, reduced physical capacity, depression and anti-social problems. Many still have significant family responsibilities so the trend to "casualisation" of the work force they will experience at re-entry, will make it hard for them to find work that is reliable and sufficiently remunerating.

4. They are unrepresented and do not have advocates. There is a lack of knowledge about the options and possibilities available and an unwillingness to take action. Isolation, lack of solidarity, the fear associated with taking initiatives, the feeling that a particular person's employment difficulty is unique, the lack of money (many mature aged unemployed have already lived for a couple of years on their own savings before coming back to try to re-enter the workforce via new start) hamper people working on the problem collectively. We have publicised REAMP (an organisation started in the ACT to represent mature aged workers and to lobby on their behalf) but have had no takers.
5. Lack of access to further training and small business preparation. We provide very basic computer literacy and have worked with a number of job seekers to develop a small business development strategy. But this is definitely only an entry point. These people need to be able to build on this initial foundation to develop some competence.

Finally we discussed what we could offer that might help for you as a Committee to think about

"There's a reality about this. No one will change, their behaviour and policy unless there is a benefit. The Government needs to look at these increasing numbers of 45+ as part of the voting population. The thing needs to be mapped, maybe an Agency for 45+ could look at special needs "(Bern)

Serious consideration of the experience and expertise of this group and how it needs to be re-developed, re-trained in terms of potential employment opportunities. This group has many more years of productive life, how can this be valued

- A development and listing of industries which have the potential to take on employees
45, -Employment and unemployment is manipulated by the Government We, no longer have factories to take up the bulk of employment. We import rather than manufacture and that system has never been replaced".(Don)
- A subsidy wouldn't hurt for the over 45s to get employers to consider them as workers.
- Adequate retraining opportunities both for further employment and for preparation for voluntary work and retirement options.
- Provision of a range of follow on education and training courses.
- More positive media portrayal of mature aged workers as a group with skill, experience and resourcefulness.
- Support and fund self-help groups like REAMP so that volunteers would have resources to back them organising unemployed individuals so that they could publicise their offerings to the community.

It is important that your Committee is considering the needs of this disadvantaged group. We look forward to initiatives we can share that will be of benefit.