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Inquiry into " The social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment or establishing a business, following unemployment".

I wish to make a personal submission to the above enquiry based on my own experience.

I pre-empt my comments with a brief CV. With an education in agriculture I had become a Branch Manager of a major livestock agent and agricultural supply company in the early 1980's. Due to corporate changes and an industry downturn my career changed track and by the late 80's I was managing the main branch of a mining supply company.

In early 1990 I became self employed, purchasing equity in an industrial supply company with a well established market in the home building sector. Within months we struck the effect of the high interest rates of the " recession we had to have" and although the business struggled on for another two years it never recovered.

Since the business became unable to support me (and my family) I returned to paid employment and, in the merry-go round of employment in the 1990's have held 8 (eight) positions in the same number of years.

Of those eight jobs, four have ended in retrenchment caused by company collapse or restructure, two ended due to re-organisation of the position and two simply failed to produce income. During this period I estimate having submitted approximately 500 applications and attending about 100 subsequent interviews in my search for employment.

The scary thing is that I will be 45 years old on my next birthday.

I have prefaced my submission with this history for two reasons. Firstly I believe it qualifies me, with experience from the sharp end, to comment. Secondly I believe that it illustrates a trap that unemployed can fall into and highlights some of the misconceptions of the employment industry that I will explain later.

I should also mention that during this period I have been ineligible for any form of government assistance, be it financial or training.

The Issues

In addressing the question I will limit my reply the issue of seeking employment only as statistically 70% of those trying to establish a small business are likely to fail within 5 years and end up back on the employment queue. The exceptions are those that have taken a redundancy package and have the financial resources to buy an established business or those with a good idea and the will and skill to succeed and these people I wish well.

Issue 1: Age

Although not quite 45 years old I have experienced the bias against the older job applicant, most noticeably since reaching the 40 landmark. As employers are not allowed to discriminate for age this is hard to prove, more often than not with an implied answer from employers or their agents when pressed. I recently attended a self help seminar run by DOME (Don't Overlook Mature Employees, a WA government agency) and this sentiment was expressed by all attendees.

Issue2: Skills

Many job advertisements that previously nominated a requirement for experience now seem to require tertiary qualifications as well. An absurd example recently was an advertisement for new graduates to train to sell motor vehicles. We have also created new qualifications, in areas that did not exist 20 or 30 years ago with their own set of terminology and buzz words. While acknowledging the need for re-training and qualification in specialist technical fields I would still maintain that the commercial world has too much dependence on degrees when a little experience and commonsense would suffice. The degree has in many instances merely become a tool for grading applicants. Even in the cutting edge computer software industry I regularly hear of examples of 1970's principles and training being used to solve 1990's problems.

Issue3: The Roundabout

As mentioned earlier my own experience highlights a problem of many mature jobseekers. The large, well resourced organisations that have structured inhouse training are employing younger, higher (but not better) qualified staff which means the older applicant then has to seek employment with a smaller, more entrepreneurial employer. This company can not afford to update its employees training and when it succumbs to commercial reality, the under trained employee is forced to look at an even higher risk employer. The cycle becomes self perpetuating. Another scenario is the mature employee that is made redundant and decides to retrain. If they were to retrain to gain higher qualifications in the industry in which they have 20 - 30 years experience what is the chance of re-employment in that industry given the reason for their redundancy in the first place. Just ask any geologist. Alternatively should they change course there is an element of doubt as to who is going to employ a 50 year old graduate with no experience in their new vocation.

Issue 4: Economics

There is a perception in parts of the workplace that older jobseekers have less need for money. Whether employers think that you should have paid off the house by now, or that you have received a redundancy package or that they just know how vulnerable the mature applicant is, or maybe its just related to their own companies fortunes, there seems to be a trend to cutting salaries paid and offering more as incentives which are as elusive as the pot of gold over the rainbow. Most of us still have mortgages, children at school and all of the other commitments of life in the late 20th century.

Issue 5. Peer Pressure

Although the population of mature age jobseekers is growing the majority of the peer group, probably best described as "baby boomers", have grown up with the notion of a job for life and the concept that if you are unemployed it is due somehow to your own making. This was highlighted to me at the DOME seminar I attended recently. All of the participants expressed the same concerns that spouses and peers expected them to "just get a job with no real understanding of the problem and with no concept, without Personal experience, of the frustration's involved. As a group who had all experienced the sharp end there was a real feeling of empathy for others in the same situation. On a personal level my wife admits that as hard as she tries to understand, she can not really comprehend the feeling of having to read "dear john " letter number 83.

Summary

Several times in this submission I have drawn attention to a Western Australian initiative called DOME (Don't Overlook Mature Employees) and one of the courses they are running. The aim of the course is to help the mature jobseeker to look at the options around him or her and to offer a support network of others

in the same situation. This is not a case of a highly paid guru giving advice from the high ground but of true peer support. I would suggest the committee seriously examine the work of DOME in this area. As a baby boomer who grew up with the concept of jobs for all for as long as you want them, the past few years have been very difficult to accept.

As youth we were encouraged into the workplace by large, secure organisations offering traineeships and long term security. These companies have gone through a significant change in the past 25 years and the same insecurity that our children are being prepared for by the education system, we also face, but without the skills to deal with it.

In those traditional companies that employed us were these old people, probably the same age we baby boomers are now, who acted as mentors, teaching us the company ethic and the rules of the game. They also taught us the history, how to learn from the mistakes of the past and how to behave in the world. These mentors are now being encouraged to work in schools with our youth to replace the grandparents that are not always available due to our modern lifestyles. They are also making a comeback in the market leading economies like the US. Maybe, we also need to see the mentor returned to our workforce.

I am aware this submission lacks the structure and justifications of a report prepared by a group of academics or civil servants but it is an attempt by one individual who has been through the job seeking mill a number of times and who has mixed confidence in his own future.

I hope it offers some insight into the thoughts of those in the hotseat.