**Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability**

# Submission No 193

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**Submission made by**

☒ Older Australian looking for work

# Submission regarding Older Australians / Australians with Disability / Both

### **Your experience**

**Have you (or the person you are submitting on behalf of) experienced employment discrimination?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Did you take any action in relation to the employment discrimination you experienced?**

Yes

No

**Please tell us more, for example, what action you took and how effective you felt it was; or why you chose not to take any action.**

The discrimination was difficult to prove. I was excluded from the group - of much younger workers – in several different jobs. I struck young people who were not interested in interacting outside their peer group, these included supervisors. Some were highly competitive and backstabbing. A couple of referees then told future employers I wasn't a team player. Yet I have always enjoyed working with a good mix of people and work well with young colleagues who are inclusive. Everything has changed. Age groups are segregated. Workplaces are like classrooms at school now.

**Did your experience of employment discrimination impact on your participation in the workforce? (For example, did you have to stop work, change jobs or take sick leave?)**

Yes

No

**Please tell us more**

I was only in casual jobs and was frozen out. I won a permanent position in one job but they deleted the position. I did fight that but wasn't successful.

### **Barriers**

**Do you think older Australians/Australians with disability face barriers when they look for work or are in a job?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**If yes, or not sure, what do you think these barriers might be?**

1. There are too few jobs and too many people competing for them. Older and disabled people will continue to miss out unless the policy of both major parties to maintain a pool of unemployed is scrapped. Employers can pick and choose and so they pick younger, prettier applicants. In a competitive environment in the workplace, younger people win out for the same reason - they're more physically attractive and some use this to their advantage.

2. Young people on working holiday and student visas are also competing for jobs and have been filling many of the casual vacancies previously available to older workers. Since John Howard allowed temporary working visa holders to stay in one job for six months they became much more competitive in what is essentially a casual job market. Employers prefer to hire young overseas workers before older Australians.

3. The temp. recruitment agencies are the gateways to more long-term employment but they are notoriously ageist. They handle most of the casual government and NGO jobs but won't consider older applicants. I was told by a recruiter at **[redacted]** who handled admin. positions including government jobs:

"Employers insist we don't send them anyone over 40." A recruiter from a well known labour hire agency advertising for a government casual job called me because she liked my resume and cover letter, but as soon as she heard my voice realised I was mature-aged. She immediately started making excuses. "We want someone with recent cashier experience," she said. I told her I hadn't forgotten how to use a cash register in just two years. So she said, "We like to employ students." I told her I was a student but she didn't respond.

I have had potential employers make the most ridiculous excuses for not employing mature people, including " Our staff have to be able to clean the bathrooms". (an arthouse cinema), "We usually employ students and backpackers" (a supposedly progressive NGO) "We like to employ students." (another cinema)

4. The language of job advertisements and recruiters is becoming increasingly coded to exclude older applicants. Advertisements describe work cultures as young and fun. They ask for people who are energetic, vibrant, dynamic, switched-on, bubbly and with "excellent presentation." One job ad. wanted someone who was "experienced, but fresh".

At the end of a job interview for a graduate position in a government department, one of the panel - a man in his late forties - told me the position was "very dynamic" and they were looking for somebody who was "dynamic". He went on to use the word "dynamic" about six times. I didn't get the job – even though I received positive feedback about my interview.

5. Recruiters are often in their twenties and will not consider older people. I have been to several group interviews where the recruiter has directed her entire attention to the young candidates and avoided making eye contact with me and other mature job applicants.

I have had two interviews recently for call centre positions where age simply shouldn't matter and should be an advantage because of life experience and the ability to be empathetic. I have a very good telephone/radio voice and experience in customer service, including in a call centre. I'm also a recent graduate in communications and completely up-to-date with technology. I didn't get either job.

I asked for feedback after the first interview. The recruiter told me they were looking for people with previous banking experience - but they had read my resume before asking me to the interview. Not one other person at that group interview said they'd had banking experience when each of us was asked to talk about what we had done before. I don't believe the recruiters invited us all to attend, on the basis of our resumes, without intending to employ one or more applicants.

I met a fellow student later on who told me she worked at one of those call centres and everyone there was young. She said her mother was also having trouble finding a job. Several other students have told me their parents have had difficulty in finding work.

6. There now seems to be an entrenched culture of age segregation in workplaces that used to include a mix of age groups. At my most recent interview, a young man from a non-Anglo culture told me he loved that the candidates were so diverse, including young and old. The interview was for a well-known bank's call centre. I wasn't successful and a week later read another of their recruitment ads - it talked about an energetic, fun culture with opportunities to grow in the company. Older people don't fit this description. It was interesting that the young man wanted to work with mature-aged people as well as people his own age. It infantilises young people to keep them segregated - as if they're still in school classrooms.

When I was in my early twenties there were plenty of older workers in all industries, including cafes, shops and pubs, in reception, banking and administration. It has now become the norm and expectation that everyone should be young. When I told a bar manager at a pub that I had bar experience he rolled his eyes. Twenty-five years ago he would have given me a job.

**Does employment discrimination have an impact on gaining and keeping employment for older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Are there any practices, attitudes or laws which discourage or prevent equal participation in employment of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Please tell us more**

1. The media has generated and reinforced a culture of ageism and obsession with youth. Visual media and advertising in Australia are heavily skewed toward young, attractive people. Older people tend to be either invisible or are lampooned - especially women. Stories in the print media reinforce negative stereotypes by pigeon-holing people into arbitrary generational

groupings - "Boomers", "Gen X", "Gen Y". The media strongly influences public perceptions and attitudes.

For example, the ABC’s series of ads for “everybody’s ABC” represented mostly young people. They included a small sample of different older men but only one token mature-aged woman - and she was from a non-Anglo background. I think she was meant to encompass diversity. The message for me, as an older woman, said the ABC has a very un-inclusive, negative attitude toward my age group and gender.

I heard a university Journalism lecturer ask a student who was applying for a TV internship how old she was. She said, 25. The lecturer told her she’d be "pushing it", implying she would be considered “too old”. I've heard people in the Journalism world say all TV broadcasters employ people on the basis of their "f**\*\*\***ability" and one recently brought in a policy of removing their presenters from in front of camera after age 40. This dictates 'image' and what is acceptable and desirable.

Online comments in news media, including progressive mainstream news, are frequently ageist - eg. about Bronwyn Bishop, Rupert Murdoch and other public figures. The commenters use expressions such as: “It’s time he/she was put out to pasture,” “the old cow, old bag, witch, croc” etc. The moderators block offensive racist comments, but ageism is still considered fair game.

I once complained about an ANZ TV ad lampooning older women in customer service. My complaint was published online, and people commented that the ad was “funny” and mocked me for not having a sense of humour. Maybe it would have been funny if older women were fully represented in the media and employers didn’t discriminate against older job applicants.

More recently, I lodged a complaint about a series of billboard ads. for GoGet that depicted older women as complete bimbos with technology. This was also supposed to be comical, but it’s very unfunny when employers take one look at you and assume you won’t know anything about technology and won’t be able to learn because of your age. I received no response.

I have encountered many, extremely negative attitudes about my age and arbitrary age grouping: “[So-and so] can’t stand baby boomers.” (Student introducing another to the class, to much tittering which stopped suddenly when I pointed out our lecturer was a 'baby boomer'.) "Universities are for the young." (a University staff member). "Our accommodation is for young students." (staff member at another university's Student Housing). "Why are you studying? Haven't you got anything better to do?" (university student).

2. Older people are blamed for not having up-to-date skills, but they face discrimination as above if they enrol in courses and still encounter the same hurdles when they complete their study. There aren't enough jobs and employers won't hire mature-aged graduates or entry-level applicants out of TAFE courses. I completed a security training course because I was told employers wanted females and my age wouldn't be an issue. But now these courses are flooded with tertiary students who want jobs while they study, so employers can pick and choose.

3. The current anti-discrimination law puts the onus on the individual to prove he/she has experienced discrimination. When people are unemployed or only in casual work, they don't have the resources to take legal action. Free legal aid agencies have had their funding slashed and don't have enough staff to take on any but the most extreme cases.

**What are the incentives and disincentives for older Australians/Australians with disability to work?**

**Incentives:**

It is impossible to live adequately without a decent job, especially on Newstart which is impossible to live on without extra assistance.

People say, "Do some voluntary work." They think this will lead to finding a paid job, but it is just as competitive to find a relevant voluntary job or internship. And Work-for-the-Dole is a demeaning concept. Everyone - under the UN Declaration of Human Rights - is entitled to employment and to be paid an adequate wage for the job they do. This is what creates self-esteem, having control over your life.

**Disincentives:**

I broke my foot some years ago and couldn't look for work while on crutches because it was just too hard to get around. It made me aware of the seriously limited access to railway stations, public transport and buildings for people who are permanently disabled. And no employer would have considered me, even when I was hobbling speedily around in a boot for several weeks after the plaster came off and limping for a while after that. I had no hope of competing with young, able-bodied people.

### **Good practice**

**Are there examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Please tell us of examples of good practice in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability in work that you are aware of.**

### **Solutions**

**What action should be taken to address employment discrimination against older Australians/Australians with disability?**

1. Jobs. Jobs. Create many more jobs. Maintaining a pool of unemployed will always maintain the status quo - employers will continue to pick and choose and it will continue to be musical chairs with the same people missing out every time.

2. Positive role models in the media. Portray people of all ages and abilities in ads and tv shows and as presenters.

3. Governments must take strong action against employers for using ageist terms in recruitment ads and for practicing discrimination. Don't leave it up to individuals. And audit companies' recruitment statistics.

4.Government departments should advertise casual and contract positions in-house, not through labour hire companies.

**What should be done to enhance workforce participation of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Create enough jobs for everyone. All other programs will be a waste of time and money without adequate provision of jobs.

Improve access for the disabled to public transport, parking, pathways and buildings.

Legislate that employers provide on-the-job training and penalize them if they continue to demand experience when they are not prepared to train new staff.

**What outcomes or recommendations would you like to see from this National Inquiry?**

1. The Job Service providers have been useless in helping me to find work and I do not want to see them included in the equation. They represent a complete conflict of interest - they can not provide a proper public service when they are there to make a profit.

2.The policy that keeps people unemployed must be scrapped and jobs have to be created. Menzies did this after WWII by boosting the public service. It is perfectly feasible.

3. There should be affirmative action for older and disabled jobseekers, including access to on-the-job training to upgrade specific skills and also access to continued opportunities for training and promotion. Bribing employers hasn't worked. Penalising them for discrimination is a much better solution. The government has to be proactive in this.

4. Employers have a civic and moral responsibility to employ and cater for a diverse range of workers because they benefit from the income generated by people who are in work. The government has to start media campaigns to counter-balance the prevailing ideal-image fetishes and to prosecute businesses and organisations and withdraw any subsidies from those who break anti-discrimination laws and fail to meet their full responsibilities.