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**COTA ACT Submission**

**Willing to Work**

**National Enquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability**

**December 2015**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to *Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability.*

COTA ACT’s contribution to the Enquiry is based on our ongoing contact with members and other older people in the ACT, and on our recent research into employment issues for older Canberrans. Our responses to the questions in the submission template are set out below.

**What is your experience of providing work/services/advocacy for older Australians?**

The Council of the Ageing (COTA) ACT is the peak organization representing older ACT residents. We work with older Canberrans to shape a more just and equitable community in which older people participate and contribute to their fullest capacity.

As such, we talk to Governments (both ACT and Federal), the media and the community about issues of direct concern to older people in the ACT. We provide a range of direct services including providing advice and referrals to individuals through the Seniors Information Line (which receives over 1000 calls a month), helping older people to access housing and aged care, administering the Seniors Card Directory and the ACT Seniors Card, publishing advice for older drivers, and offering health and lifestyle information through our Community Education programs. We also have a wide range of printed information materials, develop policy, undertake projects, and conduct research, among other things.

**Do you have any case studies of the experience of older Australians working or looking for work?**

COTA has undertaken two research projects this year on mature-aged employment issues (attached with this submission). We are continuing to research aspects of this topic, and have also received a small grant to provide an assistance program for mature-aged jobseekers early next year.

Our completed research, undertaken by Dr Sherene Suchy, comprises:

* *Mature Aged Employment: Recruitment Agency Attitudes to Mature Aged Workers*
* *Success Factors: Mature Age Workers (55+) in Paid Employment*

We are currently undertaking research into barriers to employment, by interviewing older jobseekers who are experiencing difficulty in gaining employment.

**What are the impacts of employment discrimination on older Australians working or looking for work?**

The research we have completed so far provides limited insight into employment discrimination, although it does throw light on factors important to the participation of older people in employment. It is also somewhat specific to Canberra, which is largely a ‘public service town’.

The two completed projects involved interviews with recruitment agency managers, and interviews with successful jobseekers. For this reason, straight-out discrimination as described in the terms of reference of this inquiry – namely unfair treatment because of personal attributes such as age – is not highlighted. The three recruitment agencies we interviewed did not feel that ageism was a strong factor in recruitment decisions, but rather that the attitude and skills of the applicant were paramount. They said that they did not assess or refer clients on the basis of age, and that ‘age is irrelevant’. (However, it is unlikely that recruitment agencies would admit to ageism in their referral practices, as this would be illegal). However, one older jobseeker emailed us to say that:

*One major (recruiting) firm…telephoned me after several months (of job search at a higher level), saying that he has put my forward for many APS 6 EL 1 positions but the answer was always ‘no’ … and that he departmental officers would never say why. He concluded that it was age discrimination – he added that some younger officers looking for short term appointees were ‘frightened’ by the depth of my CV.*

Successful jobseekers, we assume, are more likely to have a positive perception of their treatment in the job market, as for example the following quote:

*I ‘retired’ at 54 , went back to uni to retrain and much to my surprise was successful at getting a job in my new industry at 59-60. Its s been very positive for me.*

However, we have had numerous contacts with (so-far) unsuccessful jobseekers in the course of our research, including in relation to our current project on the barriers to participation.

This anecdotal contact indicates that older jobseekers in Canberra are often concerned about their age being a hindrance to finding and maintaining employment. When older people face repeated rejection in the job market, their skills deteriorate, they lose confidence and motivation, and they face financial strain. They often attribute rejection to ageism.

Unemployment can have a severe impact on older Canberrans’ financial security and mental health. For instance, in Canberra in recent years many older public servants have taken redundancy packages as the public service contracts: they then find themselves, several years down the track, living on a dwindling lump sum but not yet eligible for the pension. They know they have to find work but as time goes by it becomes more difficult to break back into the job market. This can be very stressful.

One jobseeker told us that she took a package two years previously from a large public service department. She was now unemployed, but ineligible for Centrelink assistance as she had her payout. Worried about her dwindling nest egg, she signed up with a recruitment agency for employment at a lower level than her previous position. The young staff member who interviewed her said that “It’ll be hard to convince employers to give you a job at a lower level than your previous position, because they’ll be worried that you’ll get a better job and then leave.”

**Do you think older Australians face barriers when they work or are in a job?**

Our ongoing research with mature-aged jobseekers suggests that older Australians certainly do face significant barriers, though without large-scale empirical research it’s hard to say whether these are primarily associated with ageism or other factors. One of our contacts who had worked as an interview scribe in Canberra told us that:

*While scribing I saw many examples of age-based discrimination by federal authorities. One stands out: A man age 42 was being interviewed for an APS 6. He was slightly prematurely bald. As soon as he left the room, the 20-something committee chair said, ‘We couldn’t employ him, he is almost as old as my Dad’ … a woman then added, ‘Somebody that old could not possibly use a computer’(!!) I felt like wringing my clients’’ necks. On another occasion before the interviews started the committee chair said: ‘No old guys, nobody over 30’. On this occasion I did speak up and pointed out that the then PM had the day before spoke on the value of older workers. I was then black-banned by the department….I proposed that the same mechanism that was established to attack sex discrimination. Viz: female officers must evaluate applications for interview and female officer(s) must be on all selection committees. I would propose that officers or consultant-advisers aged over 50, participate in application evaluation and be on all selection committees.’*

***Technology***

Older jobseekers may have problems keeping up with today’s job-seeking and application/interview related technology (and other technological skills). People who have not applied for a job in some time (because they have been retired, doing upaid/caring work or employed long-term) may not have up-to-date knowledge of job-seeking technology such as Linkedin, electronic job boards, and the like. When they apply, they may be faced with the online interview (Skype, etc) and the online application (which often requires very current software as well as skills).

***Presentation & confidence***

Older jobseekers may lack skills and confidence in presenting and marketing themselves, which leads to difficulties cold-calling, writing persuasive CVs and showcasing their skills at interviews. Sometimes people perceive themselves as having few marketable skills when they in fact do (for instance, people who have undertaken extensive volunteering or caring work). Recruitment agencies we interviewed perceived ‘self-perception’ as very important – people sometimes label themselves as ‘too old’ or fail to properly recognize their own value to the employer and marketable skill-set.

***Networks***

In an environment such as Canberra, where networks are especially important, people who are not ‘linked in’ to the world of employment find it very difficult. Recruitment agencies we interviewed suggested that older people should be prepared to ‘drop-down’ to lower levels of work to ‘get a foot in the door’ – and this approach was also mentioned by a number of older jobseekers who contacted us. However it can be a catch-22: jobseekers have told us that they’ve been rejected for jobs at ‘their’ level (the position level they are qualified for or previously worked at) because they lack current experience, and rejected for jobs at lower levels because they’re over-qualified and/or are seen as a threat to managers with less experience.

For instance, one jobseeker who previously worked at a junior executive level was told he shouldn’t apply for lower level positions because “the employer will be worried that you’ll try to tell your supervisor what to do.”

***Relationships with younger managers and recruiters***

Additionally, older people sometimes perceive that there can be problems with both hiring and management at work, under a younger manager. Progression through the ranks of the public service can be overly rapid, leading to inexperienced managers leading teams which are diverse in terms of age and other characteristics. This was recognized both by recruitment agencies, by jobseekers and by managers themselves in our research. Not only the older jobseekers, but younger managers need assistance to build good cross-age relationships.

Some recruiters are reportedly also intimidated by older jobseekers with extensive experience and skills and who have held very senior positions previously, as this person says:

*I suspect the major problem was not actually my age (as most people simply dont believe I am 73 now let alone earlier), but the high level demonstrated competencies and/or qualifications in too many fields…apparently this confuses prospective employers.*

***Health***

Older people sometimes have disabilities or health conditions which require special consideration at work – and this can be difficult to sell to an employer. One woman who spoke to COTA ACT has repetition strain injury so can’t work on computers (an almost ubiquitous tool in the white collar workplace). Another has a disability which precludes her from driving or from walking long distances, so actually getting to work is very difficult.

Publicly available research shows that carers have a lower level of health than many other Australians – and a significant proportion of carers are older people.

**Is employment discrimination a barrier (please tick all that are relevant):**

**While working in a job**

Some younger managers perceive some older workers as being inflexible, unwilling to learn new things, patronizing, and reluctant to complete tasks when asked. These perceptions would naturally have consequences for access to promotion and treatment at work. As one younger manager said

*‘Three years ago the majority were over age 45. I felt they felt threatened although we were the same level but I was not treated as an equal – treated like a receptionist. I, too, need respect. When I was an acting-EL2, older people treated me like I was an upstart, it was not verbal behaviour but they wouldn’t action work I asked them to do. Office politics, it’s a different kind – passive / aggressive. Either they (older workers) care too much or not enough. They weren’t looking to move up and were wary of being displaced within their level.’*

Dr Suchy’s reports suggests that managers in the Australian public service – which is the major employer in Canberra – are not always well trained in managing diversity, including age-based diversity. The same manager said that:

*‘There was a managing diversity course recently run by an external provider … but it did not have what you do for Gen Y. It didn’t have anything about diversity of age. Selection and interviewing – have had no training and no experience. Have had people thrust on me and would like to know how to do selection and interviewing.’*

This sometimes leads to older Australians feeling unappreciated at work and younger managers feeling disrespected.

**While looking for work**

A number of people have mentioned instances of covert discrimination occurring when they apply for lower level positions and are rejected on the grounds of being “too qualified”.

Some people report making hundreds of applications without receiving an interview or even acknowledgement of their application, despite perceiving that they have (sometimes more than) the required skills for the job. There is a very common perception that this is due to their age.

**While dealing with recruitment companies**

Recruitment companies state that they focus on getting the best match for the job, regardless of age. They also say that although they may make the initial selection of candidates, the ultimate decision is made by the employer. However, there is a perception among some of our contacts that young recruitment agency staff don’t take the time to understand what they can offer (for instance, recruitment systems can force people to try to fit into boxes such as ‘accounting’, ‘finance’ and so on when they actually have much wider skill sets). There is also a perception that managers don’t really want to hire older employees (though they can’t overtly discriminate).

Indicative of this is the following quote from a September 2015 Statistical Bulletin from the Public Service Commission (PSC), which stated that some departments were becoming ‘grey ranks’ with 55% of staff over age 45; there were no programs in place to ‘combat’ this workplace demographic and all Australian employers had to ‘cope’ with an aging workforce – the Bulletin is referred to in a Fairfax article entitled ‘Commonwealth government’s ageing workforce becoming a problem.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**What impact does employment discrimination have on older Australians gaining and keeping employment?**

If the perceptions of many older people that age discrimination is a major factor are accurate, then discrimination is obviously a key barrier to gaining work. However, there are other very important factors, including:

* Personal characteristics and attitude (such as skills atrophy (including technology skills), lack of confidence, lack of current paid experience.
* External factors such as the actual contraction of the job market (in Canberra).

Financial pressures make paid employment vital for an increasing number of older Australians. For instance, a couple recently contacted COTA ACT about their jobseeking experience (they have not been looking for long). They said that as retired pensioners, they have found that they really need additional financial resources. In an environment where more older people are renting (rather than owning their own homes), energy prices are rising, rates (in Canberra) are rising steeply, interest rates are historically low (lowering the income of those reliant on interest from superannuation or investment), and the pension age is being extended to 70, older people need to work.

**What are the incentives and disincentives in employing older Australians?**

**Incentives**

Our research suggests that there are significant advantages to employing older Australians (although it should be recognized that to stereotype older Australians as ‘reliable’ or ‘loyal’ risks the same type of bias as would be involved in stereotyping younger Australians as ‘dynamic’ or ‘vibrant go-getters’.

* Older people may have the capacity to mentor younger employees. For example, some of the COTA ACT research participants described fulfilment as mentors with younger workers (dependent on personalities, available time, and relevant skills match). They regarded the investment in younger workers as a skills transfer to keep their organisations alive and viable rather than having skills and knowledge walk out the door with volunteer redundancies.
* Retaining older workers in some capacity (even if they wish to move to flexible or reduced hours or a different role in the organisation) adds value to organisations because it retains corporate knowledge rather than having it ‘walk out the door’ with voluntary redundancies.
* Flexibility and a preference for part time work can be an asset rather than a disadvantage. For instance our research cites an example of intergenerational job sharing where an older female accountant shared a job three days a week with a young mother who worked two days per week. Younger workers benefit from the experience of older workers who, in return, experience a sense of purpose helping younger people grow and develop.
* Older employees can relate to older customers, an increasing segment of most markets.
* Older employees may have skills and experience in areas such as unpaid caring work, which match up well with the increasing demand in some industries, such as the ‘care’ industry (aged care, child care, disability care, etc).

**Disincentives**

* Older Australians need for work place flexibility may not fit with the demands of particular workplaces or industries.
* Older people may have disabilities and/or health conditions which affect their work.
* Younger workers are generally (and these days erroneously) expected to stay longer and generate more return on investment.

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

* Remove any mention of age in job advertisments and position descriptions
* Adopt age-friendly language and train recruiters and HR personnel
* Conduct a double-check for negative perceptions during the shortlisting process
* Promote work flexibility including flexible work hours
* Promote active career planning for older Australians – don’t assume that because someone is a particular age, nearing retirement or retired that they don’t want rewarding work or a career.

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

***Financial assistance***

COTA ACT is not convinced of the benefits of providing monetary incentives to employers to employ an older worker. Apart from the low takeup of such programs, it stigmatizes the jobseeker as a ‘lemon’ – someone whom the employer would not want to hire without the incentive.

However, there might be value in providing assistance to employers to meet the needs of their older employers, for instance, to pay for workplace equipment which assists the employee with disability or a health condition to meet the demands of their work.

There may also be value in helping mature-aged jobseekers with caring responsibilities to meet the costs involved in getting paid care for their care recipients while they are at work. There is some evidence that the emotional and financial costs of moving from full-time carer role to paid work is a disincentive for carers to participate in the workforce, even when they can find a job which enables them to meet their caring responsibilities.

***Support for mature jobseekers***

Mature jobseekers need access to support which is geared to the particular barriers they face. This support should not be linked to the receipt of Centrelink benefits or to length of unemployment, because older people often do not apply for Centrelink benefits for some time after becoming unemployed (they may not be eligible), and it is recognized that the longer a person is unemployed, the harder it is to find a job. So support needs to be available immediately an older person begins seeking work, and this needs to be well-publicised.

This support should address the known barriers to employment, and could take the form of:

* Mentoring, to provide emotional support, know-how and networking.
* Skills upgrading, particularly in the area of job-seeking technology and presentation (written and personal).
* Resume assistance – many older people may not have completed a resume for years.

***Management training***

In addition, training for managers in how to manage diversity, including diversity for age, should be provided at least in the Austrqalian and state public services, and could be made available to private sector managers if suitable material was developed.

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

* Challenge Australia’s cultural assumption that the end goal is retirement and leisure time. Shift awareness to career planning, lifelong learning and respect encore careers.
* Position universities as the best place to restate and reinvent transitions. Universities have a role in leading social change.
* Change beyond subsidy. Redirect finance from government-funded programs that pay employers to recruit older Australians to funding scholarships to retrain or upgrade (skills and computers) as part of the vision for lifelong learning.
* Fund upgrade packages for older Australians to be up-to date technologically. The average cost of upgrading a home-based computer system is around $3,500.00 (hardware, software, broadband network, and technical assistance).
* Older Australians are the change agents. They will need to build resilience to maintain a sense of self and capacities. Resources may include information on taxation, financial planning, resume design, interview skills, social media, and computing.

* Run workshops for employers on key drivers to retain a productive workforce of any age: commute time, pay, friendly environment, work with new challenges, recognition, flexible working hours, and able to work from home.
* Develop a mentoring program for mature aged workers.
* Management Training for younger managers: Managing cross-generational teams more effectively starts with timely training. There is a need for more effective selection and recruitment training. This needs to be accompanied by training in team development, which includes diversity management (age, gender, cultural, race).
* Make it easier for mature-aged jobseekers to engage in voluntary work which is relevant to their skills, as participation in the right kind of voluntary work can make a huge difference to both jobseeker skills and confidence but also help develop links with prospective employers. Volunteering ACT’s section targeting volunteers with specialist skills is an excellent initiative in this regard.

In regard to volunteering, one woman said that ‘The volunteer work helped because it showed that I was keeping current the particular skills that they were wanting’, while another woman rang us to say that she had undertaken voluntary work with her local church, using her skills as a project manager, and had then been hired by the church in a senior program management position. This woman said that she had ‘never had any trouble getting jobs – when employers see what I can do, in fact I’m headhunted!’

**Conclusion**

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Enquiry.

Jenny Mobbs, Executive Director, COTA ACT December 2015

1. Canberra Times, September 17 2015 <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/public-services-grey-army-grows-20150917-gjokhz.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)