The Ageing Workforce: Issues and Proposed Solutions

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Responding to an invitation by the Australian Human Rights Commission, I would like to submit the following for the "Willing to Work Inquiry". The ageing workforce is the focus of this submission. I provide relevant background, highlight a number of challenges, and propose applicable strategies with which to address them in the workplace. I hope that this submission progresses to a fruitful dialogue between me and the Human Rights Commission so that the programs and interventions I have developed and outline below will be incorporated in actual workplace practice and relevant policies.

Progressing medical practices see people living longer and other factors, such as lower birth rates, result in increasing proportions of older adults. Prolonged longevity, however, does not preclude people from normative ageing declines, which place increasing burdens on financial as well as health care systems. Further, and of particular relevance is the baby boom generation, which is the cohort of those born post WWII, between the mid-1940s and early 1960s. Being the largest in recorded history, this cohort has a significant effect on dependency ratios, the number of people in gained employment versus those who are not gainfully employed. For example, Australia is predicted to have more than 25% of its population over 65 years of age by 2050 and similar figures are quoted for the USA as well as Canada. Some countries, such as Switzerland, have already reached such age proportions. It has been clearly identified by various economists as well as the World Bank that supporting the growing proportions of older adults through pension funds is not sustainable.

One proposed strategy with which to address the potential fiscal deficit related to population ageing is for older adults to remain in paid employment longer. This has been suggested to increase the tax base and facilitate a relatively balanced dependency ratio. Various steps have been taken by governments and policy makers to this end, for example, delaying the age of eligibility for pension and/or superannuation funds, which is aimed at motivating older adults to prolong their employment participation. Another initiative seeking to increase the attractiveness of older workers has been providing monetary incentives to encourage employers to hire older workers.

Whilst proposing that older adults work longer in the context of the current discussion stands to reason and appears economically viable, there are a number of significant challenges to the implementation of this strategy. These include the general reluctance of employers to hire older workers, intergenerational tensions in

the workplace, and older adults' motivation and willingness to work as well as the fit between workplace culture and older adulthood. I review each of these challenges in turn and propose applied strategies as well as approaches to addressing them socially with particular emphasis on the workplace.

The Reluctance of Employers to Hire Older Workers

Age discrimination against older workers in hiring has been well documented over the past 40 years. Various reasons have been suggested to account for the phenomenon, with strong empirical evidence of negative stereotypes being at the heart of this form of ageism.

Employers have been consistently found to hold negative stereotypes toward older workers on characteristics they consider significant in making hiring decisions. This has been the case in Australia, the USA, Canada, Singapore and many European countries despite various campaigns that have been lodged to promote positive attitudes toward older adults. The stereotypical views on older compared to younger workers in general are that they are superior on some aspects and inferior on others. Characteristics on which older workers are considered superior to younger ones include reliability, loyalty, dependability, and competence. Characteristics on which they are considered inferior include adaptability, trainability, ambition, and interest in new technologies. It is curious to note that even employers who stated that they were satisfied with the performance of older workers in their employ have asserted that they would not be likely to hire older workers.

It is important to understand that ageist attitudes and related stereotypes are a general socio-cultural phenomenon and are not confined to the workplace. Children by the age of 12 have been found to have established attitudes toward older adults even though they may have had little exposure to this population beyond their family context. Thus, employers' attitudes toward older workers are simply a reflection of maintained congruency of their worldview. Being in positions where their decisions have direct impact on the life of older workers, however, means that their views attract more attention than those of other people.

It should also be born in mind that it is not the ad hoc intention of employers to discriminate against older workers. Hiring decision makers, typically, seek the best person for the job. Being biased by negative stereotypes against older workers, however, often results in ageist discrimination. Stereotypes are activated automatically as a result of relevant cues. So, for example, a person's age, appearance, or even date of graduation from secondary school are all relevant cues for the activation of age related stereotypes. Once a negative stereotype has been activated it affects cognitive processing, perception, and judgement. Thus, despite best intention, employers' judgement is automatically biased by ageist stereotypes to the extent that they may miss the best person for the job in cases where it happens to be an older worker. Conditions such as time constraints, large workloads, and

needing to sieve through a large number of job applications increase the vulnerability of hiring decision makers to utilising stereotypes as well as other cognitive shortcuts. Thus, older workers suffer ageism and that is often the case even against employers' best intentions. I will return to negative stereotyping and its effects on older workers in a later section, but the question that is most relevant at this stage is what can be done about the above forms of ageism. As explained by a number of social psychologists, asking people to refrain from stereotyping is futile. Assisting people in controlling their behaviours following the activation of stereotypes, however, has been productive as is explain below.

The most common interventions attempting to address negative attitudes toward older workers have been in the form of top-down policies and fact sheets, with the former aimed at enforcing fair practice and the latter at providing relevant knowledge. Whilst these are well intended, they typically fall short as such policies meet with psychological reactance and fact sheets are incongruent with employers' worldviews and are seen as incorrect. Psychological reactance refers to a situation where people feel that they are being dictated to think and/or behave in particular ways to the extent that their freedom and agency are threatened. Consequently, they strengthen their hold of their original views and resist changing their behaviour. Thus, in order to promote positive attitudes toward older workers and increase the likelihood of their hiring, the internal motivation of employers should be tapped.

I have developed and tested interventions with which to promote positive attitudes toward older workers among Australian employers and increase the likelihood of their hiring. One novel and unique intervention tested successfully in a randomised controlled trial. It tapped internal motivation and employers who took part in that intervention showed more positive attitudes toward older workers overall compared to those in the control condition, stated that they were more than likely to hire older workers whilst controls stated that they were less than likely to do so, and considered age to be less important in making hiring decisions compared to controls.

The intervention could compliment relevant policies and be implemented in the workplace to better address issues related to older adults' employment. It taps employers' internal motivation rather than dictates to them how they should behave. Hence, non-discriminatory practice toward older workers becomes the conscious intention of hiring decision makers, which is congruent with their moral values as well as work objectives and creates a buffer against typical stereotype-based behaviours. A brief explanation follows.

Having made employers aware that discriminating against older workers was incongruent with their own values as well as potentially counterproductive, employers were asked to make a public commitment that they refrain from age discrimination and believe in fair go. In addition, employers were provided a fact sheet listing common misconceptions about older workers against empirical data that refuted them. The principles that have been uniquely combined in this this

intervention are well founded in social psychology and are explained next. Practical implementations of this intervention in the workplace will be outlined in the final section of this submission.

Before I can explain the mechanics of the intervention I must make clear what cognitive dissonance is because it has been a principle aspect in the intervention. Cognitive dissonance is a mentally unsustainable state that is evoked when a person holds two contradictory thoughts and/or beliefs simultaneously. This is particularly meaningful to the person when his/her self-concept is threatened by the incongruent cognitions. People are naturally and internally driven to reduce cognitive dissonance and this has been equated to natural drives such as hunger and thirst. For example, most people believe that they are egalitarian and being presented with evidence that counter this believe sets the conditions for cognitive dissonance to be evoked. A common such occurrence can often be seen when a person is made to realise that she/he has unintentionally offended another. This realisation contradicts the basic belief of being egalitarian and can evoke cognitive dissonance. Driven to reduce the mental discomfort, the person may accept that they have been insensitive on a particular occasion or attribute the negative experience to the other person. For example, deciding that the other is too sensitive or lack in understanding. The principle utilisation of cognitive dissonance as leverage to attitudinal change is well established and the mechanics of the specific intervention under discussion are explained next.

We have identified specific characteristics for which older workers were stereotypically viewed as inferior, compared to younger workers. These were misconceptions that are refuted by empirical data and were used to develop an information-based intervention in the form of a fact sheet. The fact sheet lists these misconceptions and explains their inaccuracy in light of empirical data.

The potential effectiveness of cognitive-dissonance based interventions may be enhanced by the incorporation of six factors, namely *choice*, *knowledge of inappropriate past behaviour*, *publicity*, *commitment to appropriate behaviour in the future*, *preaching to others*, and *threatening the self-concept*. The cognitive-dissonance-based intervention we developed was novel in its incorporation of all these six factors. Combining the cognitive dissonance based intervention with the fact sheet produced the strongest effects. This combination comprised one page letter incorporating the cognitive dissonance related elements and a one page fact sheet.

Hiring decision makers were given the choice of whether or not to respond to the materials they were provided and were advised that employers were found to discriminate against older adults. Thus, the factors of choice and being reminded of unsatisfactory past behaviours were addressed. Participants were advised that their names were going to be published as people who oppose hiring discrimination against older adults and who are committed to non-discriminatory practice. Thus, the

factors of publicity, commitment to change, and preaching to others were incorporated.

To understand the mechanisms related to the effectiveness of the above intervention we need to consider the structure off attitudes. The prevailing model of attitudes in social psychology is that they comprise three main elements, namely an affective component; a cognitive aspect; and a behavioural tendency. It is well established that attitudes are relatively resistant to change as they form part of a person's worldview. Utilising the six factors explained above created the conditions for cognitive dissonance to be evoked in employers when they next considered hiring an older worker. Providing them with information that refuted their misconception allowed hiring decision makers to reduce their cognitive dissonance by replacing some of their stereotypes with the new information and view older workers more positively. This way, they were able to maintain self-integrity as well as professionalism because these were now congruent with fair treatment of older workers. Thus, all three attitudinal components were affected by the intervention and it was the internal motivation of hiring decision makers that drove them to embrace positive attitudes toward older workers as well as express their willingness to treat them more fairly. Beyond ageism in hiring, older workers have been reported to be challenged by intergenerational tensions, which is the focus of the next part of this submission.

Intergenerational Tensions in the Workplace

Socio-cultural ageist attitudes permeate the workplace and exert significant effects on the working experience, well-being, and quality of life of older workers. Such negative attitudes are often held by both younger and older workers alike. When held by older workers, these are often referred to as self-stereotyping. Whilst when held by younger workers, these are simply referred to as ageism, it is paramount to recognise that younger workers become older with time, which makes ageism a unique case. In this section of the submission I will explain the potential effects of self-stereotyping along with empirical evidence; relate to the negative effects of ageism on younger workers; and suggest constructive approaches with which to address these challenges.

Self-stereotyping occurs when older workers internalise negative attitudes that are held toward them. This is a common and debilitating phenomenon. We often hear older workers saying that, having forgotten something, they had a "senior moment" or that "at their age" they are never going to be promoted. These are expressions of self-stereotyping. In one study of self-stereotyping, older adults were primed by either positive or negative age-related stereotypes and were later assessed on various cognitive as well as physiological variables. Those who were primed by negative attitudes showed significantly inferior performance compared to those who were primed by positive attitudes on numeracy, literacy, memory, fluid intelligence, heart rate, galvanic skin response, respiration rate, and gait. Thus, the

effects of self-stereotyping on performance as well as health related factors were clearly demonstrated.

In another study, younger adults were primed by either the word "young" or the word "old" and were then asked to sort positive and negative adjectives. It was found that when primed by the word "old" these young adults were significantly faster at sorting negative adjectives and significantly quicker to sort positive adjectives when primed by the word "young". This demonstrated that the term "old" was associated with negatively viewed cognitions whereas "young" was associated with positive cognitive domains.

In a study that sought to assess the perceptions of audiences to similar behaviours as a function of performers' age, two presenters, a younger and an older adult, each delivered a talk. At the start of the talk the presenter apologised saying that he forgot his notes at home and continued to deliver the presentation with no notes. Both presenters were well prepared and performed well. Members of the audience who were then asked for their opinions of the presenters said that the young adults performed very well despite not having his notes and that the older presenter did ok but that he may be showing signs of dementia as he forgot his notes. This demonstrated the perceptual bias as a function of age, which often negatively affects line managers' perceptions as well as reports of older workers' performance.

Confirmation bias on the part of both the young and the old is important to recognise in the context of the current submission. Confirmation bias is a logical fallacy whereby we seek evidence as well as arguments in support of our preconceptions and ignore those that contradict them. Conformation bias is very common and often plays an important role in our decision making. In the current context, we must be aware of this fallacy so not to disadvantage older workers in our employ.

A number of writers asserted that attitudes as well as the acceptance of older workers will naturally change for the better as their numbers in the workforce grow. We decided to assess this assertion by investigating the attitudes of nursing recruiters in Australia. The nursing industry overall is significantly older than most other, with more than 50% of nurses older than 45. It thus stood to reason that nursing recruiters' attitudes would be more positive toward older nurses than the attitudes of employers in other industries. We assessed both private and public hospitals and found that whilst nursing recruiters were willing to hire older nurses, their attitudes toward them were slightly more negative than of employers across other industries. Further, in depth investigations with older nurses revealed that such negative attitudes did adversely affect the working experience and well-being of older nurses. Thus, whilst population ageing may necessitate increasing numbers of older workers, it is not likely to change ageist attitudes, which would negatively affect the quality of life of older workers.

A number of studies reported the deterioration of filial piety even in cultures where this has been enshrined, including Japanese as well as Chinese cultures. Whilst such cultural shifts exert profound effects on the workplace and are a hindrance for older workers, they are also injurious to younger adults generally and to younger workers specifically. As mentioned earlier, younger workers grow older with time and harbouring ageist attitudes means an inevitably bleak future. This further increases intergenerational divides because older workers represent the inevitable and undesirable to younger ones.

Another paramount aspect of work culture that profoundly affects older workers is its synchrony with lifespan changes. In depth investigations we conducted with older adults revealed that they find work culture lacking flexibility to accommodate changes they consider most important in their lives. As people age their worldview, life circumstances and interests change. Relevant to the current discussion are aspects such as competing interests, time for recreation, extended family obligations, and bureaucracy.

Older adults often prioritise various aspects in their life differently to the way they did when they were younger. So, for example, having experience losses of loved ones they view spending time with significant others more importantly as they may do certain social activities. Whilst it may be tempting to draw a hard line and state that older adults should conform to existing work culture, I urge the reader to engage deeper reflection on such issues and to ponder over the meaning of and well as the reasons for work overall. Inconsideration of issues that are of significant importance to older adults simply means that the culture of work is not suitable for older adults. As the inevitable ageing of the population necessitates employing older workers, we must approach this challenge constructively and have our minds open to adaptations that would facilitate the positive accommodation of older workers.

Time for recreation is another issue that has been raised by older adults as a challenge in the context of work. Older adults related that they needed "time to smell the roses". This was no reflection of laziness but rather of a change in perspective that the workplace would do well to understand. Extended family obligations related to caring for grandchildren as well as significant others. To this effect, older adults indicated that they would benefit from flexible working hours so that they would be able to fulfil such obligation while working. Finally, older adults explained that as work culture changed over the years it became increasingly more demanding and particularly so in the context of job application as well as the process of hiring. This may be an important aspect in various domains where older job applicants may be understood accordingly in terms of written job applications and ensuing interviews.

Our investigations into ageing and work have highlighted a number of areas that could alleviate intergenerational tensions and assist both older as well as younger workers in this context. These include mentoring; recognition of elders' wisdom; and synchronisation of work and lifespan factors.

Much research has reported the willingness of older workers to mentor younger ones. This is an important initiative many organisations adopted. It facilitates constructive intergenerational interaction, provides meaning as well as value for the older worker, and assists the newer worker a positive entry into the workplace. Further, implementation of mentoring in an organisation sends a clear message that older workers are valued, which assists in reducing negative stereotyping and fosters a positive outlook on advancing years among younger workers.

Recognition of elders' wisdom is another concept that has been recognised as potential facilitator of positing intergenerational dynamics. This is different to mentoring as it involves recognition of older workers as a sub population possessing wisdom and experience that would be valuable to younger generations and the organisation alike. For example, older male farmers in Australia have clearly indicated their desire to form as well as be part of such a community of elders that would assist other farmers learn and negotiate various challenges. Facilitating the establishment of such a body of the organisation's elders recognises their wisdom and contribution as a group, which reduces self-stereotyping, enhance self-esteem as well as agency and fosters a positive outlook toward later years among younger workers.

Finally, synchronisation of workplace culture with lifespan factors is vital for positive as well as constructive incorporation of older adults in the workforce. In order for such flexibility to be adopted, workplace culture requires a shift from being focused on performance and productivity to being increasingly attentive to the human aspects of employees. Such attention would likely be required if we are to keep members of the baby boom generation in paid employment well into older adulthood. The remaining area of discussion in this submission relates to the motivation and willingness of older adults to engage paid employment and remain in the workforce longer than they have anticipated when they were younger. This discussion follows.

The Motivation and Willingness of Older Adults to Work

The willingness as well as motivation of older adults to remain in paid employment mirror socio-cultural norms and values. Prior to the industrial revolution, people worked for as long as they were able. Life past working life was not as long as it is today and wisdom that has been gained by experience was highly valued so that the more physically abled consulted the elders. It was the Austrian Chancellor Auto Von Bismarck who declared that public workers would be cared for by the state past the age of 65. Whilst this may suggest humanness on the part of the Chancellor, not many people lived much past 65 in the days of Bismarck. Nevertheless, 65 as the principle age of retirement has been upheld since by a large number of countries.

The age of 65 does not mark any particular normative ageing declines that would hinder an individual's work performance; hence the current propositions of postponing eligibility for old age pensions and super annulation funds should not be alarming in such respect. Still, those who grew to become older adults currently facing such changes meet them with mixed feelings and perspectives. These form the focus of this part of the current submission.

In our in depth investigations with older adults it was made clear to us that they view work as a complex construct. The majority saw meaning, contribution to the community, and social engagement as positive as well as valued aspects of work. These, however, were not necessarily aspects of paid employment and could be satisfied by volunteer work.

Paid employment was viewed by the majority of our participants as contingent of financial viability. That is, older adults explained that if they do not have sufficient funds to support themselves then they would accept the need to be gainfully employed. They related that paid employment brought with it pressures and stress that were not involved with volunteering that they found beneficial as well as rewarding. Older adults generally recognised that having to work past 65 was the end of a dream they held onto for many years during which they have worked hard and anticipated their retirement. This must be recognised and appreciated if we are to keep older adults in paid employment longer. It is a prospect that is unique to the baby boom generation that may be relaxed after this largest cohort passes on. Bearing in mind that the individuals who make up this cohort did not ask to be part of it, along with the fact that for a long time people have been retiring at 65, with many even sooner, senses of disillusionment and frustration are understandable. Thus, we must approach the notion of prolonging the life of baby boomers with sensitivity and understanding.

Another significant aspect related to prolonging the working life of older adults is that of what came to be known as the "sandwich generation". This term refers to those older adults who find they are caring for elderly parents while supporting adult children and often caring for grandchildren. Consideration of competing commitments as well as stress and personal as well as emotional pressures is vital for the successful integration of such older adults in the workforce. The final part of this submission concludes and offers practical implementations for the workplace to alleviate some of the challenges related to the ageing workforce.

Conclusions and Practical Suggestions

In this submission I have discussed a number of principle issues related to the inevitable ageing of the population and to the ageing workforce. I have discussed ageism in employment and detailed a novel and unique intervention with which to promote positive attitudes toward older workers among employers and increase the likelihood of their hiring. I have discussed aspects of intergenerational tensions in the

workplace and the motivations as well as willingness of older adults to prolong their paid working life. In this final section, I propose ways that can be implemented in the workplace with which to alleviate the challenges discussed earlier.

Implementation of the cognitive dissonance fact sheet combination intervention can be done by following the detailed account provided earlier. Two specific details requiring attention are choosing the value and the medium for publicity to be used in the cognitive dissonance aspect of the intervention. The value must be one that is enshrined in the culture of the personnel of interest and the publicity medium can be in various forms. For example, a dedicated webpage/site could be set up that would include the names of each one who took on the commitment. This could also be done in a print form publication and/or a noticeboard. The important aspect here is that public commitment has been made. Further details on the approach can be found in my publications that are listed in the bibliography of this submission and I would be delighted to assist any organisation who is interested in implementing the intervention.

To address intergenerational tensions in the workplace, I suggest including the following strategies. Firstly, encouraging older workers to act as mentors for new and younger employees, this would validate their importance in the organisation and foster a positive power gradient between the young and the old, thus allowing younger workers to view later life employment positively. Secondly, recognising older adults and, by extrapolation, older workers as possessors of wisdom. Establishing a community of elders, this does not need to be large in number, which would be recognised as able to give advice to less experienced employees and to the organisation as a whole, could reduce the effects of negative self-stereotyping as well as foster positive attitudes toward the older worker and the prospect of becoming one. Thirdly, recognising and considering the various pressures as well as life span issues that operate on older adults and extending efforts to accommodate those so that the workplace would be friendly to older workers.

The willingness and motivations of older adults to prolong their paid working life was the final topic of discussion. For older adults to positively and willingly prolong their work life the workplace must consider the unique position this population finds itself in. It is clear that lacking the funds to support themselves would force older adults to work. It is also envisaged that being forced to work due to financial pressure would be injurious to the well-being of older adults, which in turn could have a negative widespread rippling effect on individuals, family units, and the community at large. In closing, whilst older adults are most capable to continue and contribute to the workforce, to positively as well as constructively engage them to prolong their working life we must understand their circumstances and make the workplace accommodating and relevant to their aspirations as this would likely enhance their internal motivation to work.

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