



Australian  
Human Rights  
Commission

**WILLING  
TO WORK**

Qualitative study of  
employment discrimination  
against older Australians

6 April 2016

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# Australian Human Rights Commission

A qualitative study of employment  
discrimination against older Australians

(EY Sweeney Ref No. 25397) - 6 April 2016

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## Management summary

In 2015 the Australian Human Rights Commission engaged EY Sweeney to conduct qualitative research to supplement the 2014 quantitative national prevalence survey. The overall objective of this study was to explore the experience and impact of employment-related age discrimination amongst older Australians.

The study included 52 depth interviews with older workers aged 50 years and over and 5 focus groups with managers both of whom had participated in the quantitative survey. The fieldwork was conducted between 3 December, 2015 and 3 February, 2016 across metropolitan and regional locations in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT.

### The key findings

There are a number of factors that frame the individual experience of age discrimination. These factors represent long standing social perspectives and macro industry dynamics, and are beyond the control of the individual. They include the limiting attitudes and beliefs around ageing and work life, the business dynamics and economic demands pushing for continued productivity and profit and driving a trend toward transient workforces, the individuals' personal capacity to cope (resilience), through to the language that of optimism and energy that appears to be strongly and selectively associated with the younger worker.

These factors establish circumstances (structural, social, attitudinal) where age discrimination can more readily occur.

### Age discrimination experience

Just as age discrimination occurs in a context, it also cannot be defined as a single type of experience. This study revealed four key types of age discrimination that stretch from the point of recruitment to workplace settings whereby the end result being excluded from the workplace through to having diminished opportunity:

- |                            |              |   |
|----------------------------|--------------|---|
| 1. <b>Shut out...</b>      | Recruitment: | unable to get an interview or secure a position           |
| 2. <b>Pigeon holing...</b> | Workplace:   | becoming stuck or constrained in their role               |
| 3. <b>Structural...</b>    | Workplace:   | being targeted for redundancy or restructure              |
| 4. <b>Cultural...</b>      | Workplace:   | subject to discriminatory culture or management practices |

Each of these experiences was characterised by different behaviours and outcomes. Some behaviours clearly presented overt age discrimination:

- ▶ Targeting older groups for redundancy
- ▶ Clear intent to manage out an individual despite performance and expertise

In many instances, the experience was the result of more subtle and indirect age discrimination, for example:

- ▶ The interest expressed in an applicant which fades once their age is apparent
- ▶ The passing comments, made in jest, that implied the worker was old or out of touch
- ▶ The assumption that the older worker would not be able to understand technology

- ▶ The lack of consideration for training opportunities and new projects
- ▶ Not being 'taken seriously' for a promotion.

Consequently, in most scenarios, older workers either tolerated the experience or chose to move on. It was rare they took any formal action as the age discrimination was considered too difficult to prove. This reluctance was compounded by the perceived risk of taking action to no avail, and subsequent fear of being saddled with the tag of 'trouble maker'.

## Impacts

The impacts of age discrimination in employment were very real for older workers. Whilst some could 'dismiss' the experience and 'learn' to tolerate, it could also have a profound impact. The degree of impact was influenced by: the scale of the incidence, whether it was one off or a constant occurrence, the older worker's sense of security in the workforce overall, their personal resilience and what they felt was at stake.

Age discrimination had the capacity to affect all aspects of an older worker's life, resulting in financial, personal, working life and emotional impacts. Ultimately the impacts of age discrimination diminished the individual, and had direct bearing on their current and future productivity, as many ultimately started to question their longevity in the workplace.

## Barriers

The barriers to older workers within the workforce and recruitment process were apparent at both an organisational and individual level. Arguably, there were incidences where older workers may have reflected negative social stereotypes, and therefore helped to establish or reinforce barriers themselves.

From an organisational perspective, there were two dominant barriers apparent. Firstly, there was a perception that older workers could be more costly to a business due to the diminishing value of their skills and experience relative to their salary; and secondly, a bias toward older workers based on negative stereotypes such as, they: lacked the hunger to progress, had less energy and enthusiasm than their younger counterparts, were close minded and inflexible with an inability to embrace ideas or change and could struggle with technology.

Barriers were also apparent via sector bias (ie. where specific industries positioned themselves as more 'youth' orientated), the challenges displayed by younger managers as they struggled with or actively avoided engaging with older workers, workplace isolation from being ostracised by colleagues and, as suggested by some HR managers, organisational structures that 'unwittingly' resulted in age discrimination.

Older workers were not always without responsibility in this regard. In some instances, older workers can also create barriers through manifesting some characteristics that align with the negative stereotypes or presenting as being deliberately difficult.

The recruitment process also presented significant barriers to older workers. The professional risk that HR managers and recruiters associated with making a poor employment decision and the desire to ensure some tenure in the new recruit both worked to the disadvantage of older workers. Moreover, older workers finding themselves seeking employment for the first time in a long period, said that their understanding of recruitment processes and job interview skills were 'out of date'.

## Solutions

To address age discrimination in employment comprehensive solutions are necessary. Solutions need to involve engagement of all parties including community, organisations, recruiters and workers.

A fundamental requirement is the necessity to shift the stereotypes and misconceptions around older workers, their capacity and capability and inspire a more positive understanding and appreciation of the older worker.

Education and awareness solutions ranged from broad discussion, communications campaigns, social initiatives to break down intergenerational barriers through to targeted campaigns for the business sector.

Training was considered an essential requirement to shift attitudes and behaviours, specifically amongst HR managers and recruiters through to managers that supervise older workers. Older workers also need training on career planning and skills development in regards to recruitment and transitioning into new employment.

Given the challenge faced by older workers, an advice line (to provide objective support and assistance to those encountering age discrimination) and dedicated recruitment services (to work with recruiters who genuinely understand and appreciate the value of older workers) were also suggested as solutions that should be considered.

To motivate change, in a relatively timely fashion, a clear focus is required on organisations, including recruitment and management practices. Although incentives or penalties can be employed to encourage corporate compliance, for genuine progress, it has to be recognised that businesses are unlikely to pursue activities that are in conflict with their broader organisational goals. Older workers need to be viewed as fit for purpose and able to effectively contribute to the needs of the organisation. In some instances, this may not be feasible, in others it may be a matter of more flexible work practices or new ways of working that recognise different life stages, whilst in others it may require a change of attitude.

Although some progress may well have been achieved in that overt age discrimination is less prevalent, the current challenge is to shine a light on the subtle behaviour and bias that result in age discrimination. To continue to challenge that organisational decision making and behaviour is based on the older workers' actual capability and potential rather than an assumed diminished state.

# The detailed report

## Constraint

Focus group discussions/depth interviews evolve ideas and generate hypotheses. They are not intended to be a precise and definitive index of what happens in the marketplace. This report should be interpreted with that constraint in mind.





## Background

The economic and social costs of age discrimination and low labour force participation amongst older Australians are significant.

Reduced workforce participation results in higher unemployment and premature retirement resulting in increased expenditure on income support. At the individual workplace level, the impacts of lower participation and experiences of employment discrimination include loss of knowledge, loss of skilled and experienced staff, reduced productivity and workplace diversity and higher recruitment and training costs.<sup>1</sup> Age discrimination has a range of implications for the individual including a detrimental effect on people's self-esteem or mental health.<sup>2</sup> Other impacts include short and long-term unemployment, involuntary early retirement, social isolation and financial stress.

The Commission has undertaken a range of previous research that highlights that older workers are particularly vulnerable to experiencing age discrimination due to employers' negative attitudes and assumptions about their skills and competencies.

## Previous research

In November 2014 the Commission conducted a national survey to investigate the prevalence, nature and impact of age discrimination in the workplace amongst the Australian population aged 50 years and older. The national prevalence survey was published by the Commission in April 2015 and is available at [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/national-prevalence-survey-age-discrimination-workplace](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/national-prevalence-survey-age-discrimination-workplace).

The overall objectives of this survey were to:

- ▶ Quantify the prevalence of workplace discrimination amongst those aged 50 years and older
- ▶ Identify the nature and impact of this discrimination.

This survey of 2,109 respondents found that more than one in four (27%) of Australians aged 50 years and over had experienced some form of age discrimination on at least one occasion in the workplace during the previous two years. Workplace age discrimination was most prevalent among people aged between 55 and 64 years. Furthermore, one in three (33%) people who had experienced age discrimination stopped looking for work as a result of this experience.

## The present study

In 2015 the Commission engaged EY Sweeney to conduct qualitative research to supplement the 2014 quantitative national prevalence survey. The present study involved follow-up interviews and consultations with respondents to the previous project who have agreed to be re-contacted. The research specifically explored the experiences, types and nature of age discrimination experienced by Australians 50 years and over.

This work will form part of and contribute to the *Willing to Work Inquiry* into employment discrimination against older Australian and Australians with disability. It will also be used to inform the Age and Disability Discrimination Commissioner's future agenda and advocacy work in key areas of public policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, Australian Human Rights Commission (2015) *Willing to Work: Issues paper*, Sydney. (2015), p 45.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *ibid.* (2015), p 45.

# Objectives

The overall objective of this study was to explore the experience and impact of employment-related age discrimination amongst older Australians

Specifically, the research was required to address the following:

<p><b>Experiences and impacts of age discrimination</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To identify who experiences employment-related age discrimination</li> <li>▶ To explore the nature of the employment-related age discrimination experience</li> <li>▶ To reveal the impacts of such discrimination, especially in terms of participation in the workforce</li> <li>▶ To examine the extent to which age discrimination contributes to people being employed, unemployed or underemployed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reducing and mitigating age discrimination</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To understand age-related barriers to obtaining employment or in the workplace and potential solutions to overcome these barriers</li> <li>▶ To explore perceptions of the effectiveness of existing laws and regulatory mechanisms in reducing age discrimination</li> <li>▶ To understand the employee and employer perspective on what may be implemented to reduce or mitigate age discrimination</li> </ul>
<p><b>Good practice and policies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To compile examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians or Australians with disability</li> </ul>

# Qualitative research methodology

## Target audience

Research was conducted with the following two audiences:

- ▶ **Older Workers...** including individuals aged 50+ who are currently employed and job seeking
- ▶ **Managers...** defined as key decision makers with responsibility over the hiring and managing of staff, and including General Managers and HR managers...
  - Some managers also personally experienced age discrimination and provided insight from both a manager and worker perspective. When their sentiments are included from the latter perspective, we refer to them under the 'older worker' descriptor.

## Sample structure

A total of 52 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups (with 22 participants) were conducted with workers and managers:

- ▶ The total number of participants across the interviews and focus groups were 74 participants, of whom 45 were workers and 29 were managers.

The sample structure was as follows:

### Older workers

Older workers – In-depth interview structure				Older workers - Group structure	
Target market		Metro	Non Metro	Total depths	Metro
50-54	Male	3	-	5	50-69 1 group
	Female	2	-		
55-59	Male	2	2	11	50-59 1 group
	Female	4	3		
60-64	Male	3	1	8	60-69 1 group
	Female	2	2		
65+	Male	2	2	8	-
	Female	3	1		
<b>Total</b>		<b>20 depths</b>	<b>16 depths</b>	<b>32 depths</b>	<b>3 groups</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>32 depths and 3 groups</b>			

## Managers

Managers – In-depth interview structure					Managers - Group structure
Target market		Metro	Non Metro	Total depths	Metro
Small/ large employers	Male	4	3	<b>10</b>	1 group
	Female	1	2		
Medium/ large employers	Male	6	3	<b>10</b>	1 group
	Female	1			
<b>Total</b>		<b>12 depths</b>	<b>8 depths</b>	<b>20 depths</b>	<b>2 groups</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>20 depths and 2 groups</b>			

## Recruitment

Participants in the research were recruited by EY Sweeney’s specialist recruitment team using the sample list of respondents who had previously taken part in the Commission’s 2015 national prevalence survey.

To be eligible for participation in the depth interviews, all prospective participants had indicated that they:

- ▶ Had previously experienced age-related workplace discrimination and
- ▶ We are willing to be contacted to take part in further research.

The group sessions were supplemented by contacts provided by the Commission. The additional contacts were individuals who had participated in public consultations held by the Commission in 2015 as part of the Willing to Work Inquiry. They represented 3 of the 13 workers who participated in group sessions and 2 of 9 managers.

## Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted between 3 December 2015 and 3 February 2016. Fieldwork was primarily conducted face-to-face, supplemented by telephone interviews to accommodate participants who were unable to take part in a face-to-face interview and/or those who lived in regional locations:

- ▶ Fieldwork was conducted in both metropolitan and regional locations in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.
- ▶ All interviews and groups were conducted with the aid of a discussion guide (see **Appendix 1**).

## In-depth interviews

- ▶ 52 in-depth interviews were conducted in total, with 34 conducted face-to-face and 18 by telephone. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in people’s homes, in other community settings (such as cafes) and at EY Sweeney’s facilities in Melbourne and Sydney. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.
- ▶ Participants were provided with an incentive for taking part in the group (\$80 for workers and \$150 for managers). These incentives are in line with industry standard, and typically managers are offered a higher incentive as their participation is based on their professional capacity.

## Focus groups

- ▶ All focus groups were conducted face-to-face, at EY Sweeney's facilities in Melbourne and Sydney. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and involved 3-6 research participants.
- ▶ Participants were provided with an incentive for taking part in the group (\$80 for workers and \$150 for managers).

## Analysis and reporting

Interviews were digitally recorded (with consent), with the recordings used for analysis purposes. The key issues and themes were identified through the discussion guide and through a review of the qualitative data.

Verbatim quotes have been provided throughout the report to illustrate the main findings. To protect participants' anonymity, quotes have not been attributed to any individuals and instead show the participant type and their location (for example, Worker NSW Regional and Manager, VIC Metro).

Words are shown in square brackets to indicate words added [like this] to make the meaning of the quote clearer. Ellipses (such as...) have been used to denote when words have been omitted to make the quote easier to read.

A series of case studies has been provided to bring to life some of the issues raised and experiences recalled by older workers and managers (**Appendix 2**)

## Limitations of this research

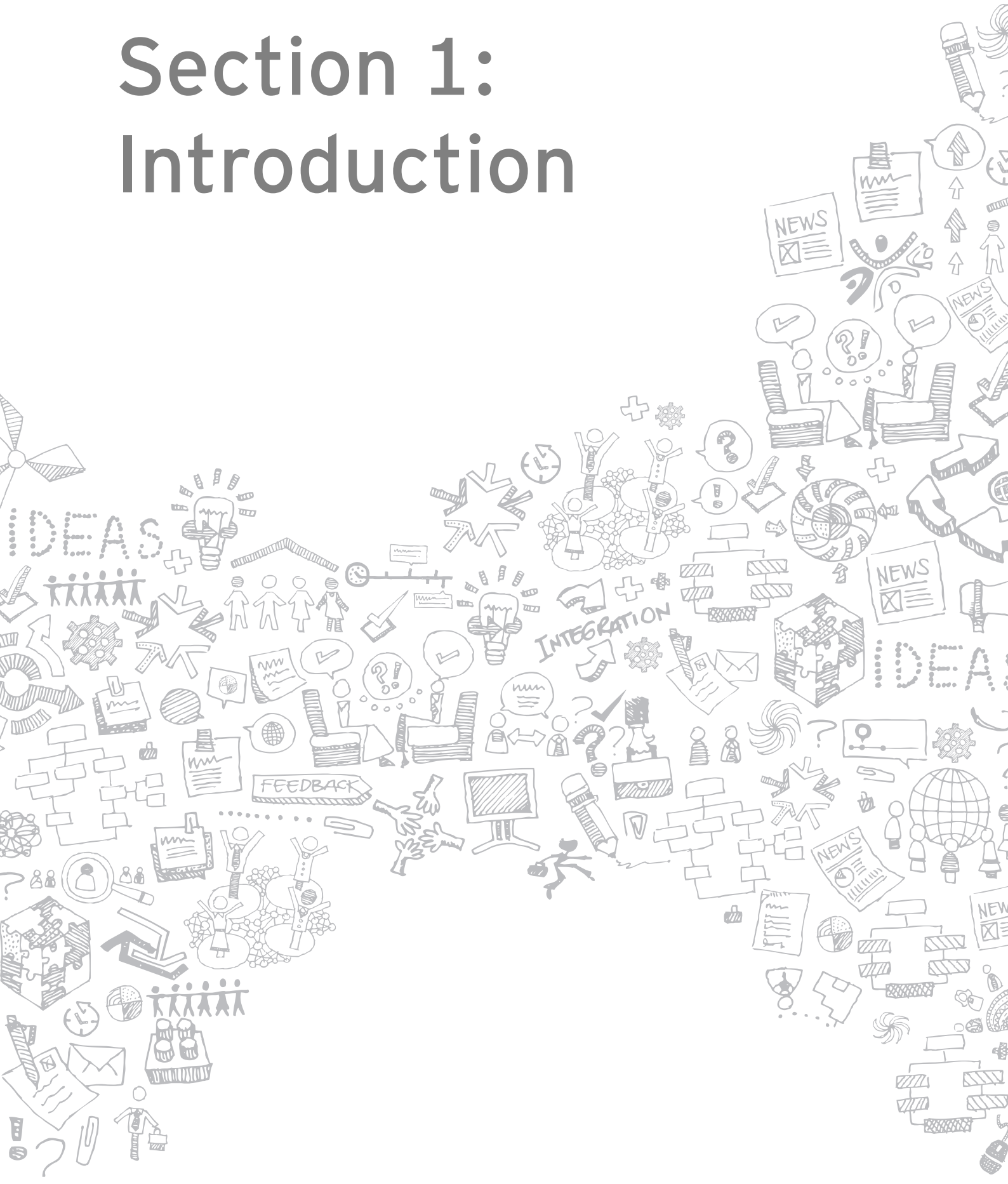
The primary research was qualitative in nature, and hence the findings are presented in a qualitative manner. The report explores themes and issues identified by research participants. It is not intended to provide statistically representative results.

Qualitative research provides an understanding of some of the broad dynamics that exist in relation to an area of exploration. While the results are representative of those who have participated in the research, they should not be considered as representative of the whole population. Qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews are not intended to provide a precise or definitive overview of what happens. This report should therefore be interpreted with this constraint in mind.

## Terminology

- ▶ **Respondents:** are the individuals who participated in this study. This descriptor is used interchangeably with 'older worker' or 'managers' as an alternative.

# Section 1: Introduction



# 1.0 Introduction

There were a number of broad factors that framed the individual circumstances and personal experience of age discrimination. These factors were largely beyond the influence of the individual and were reflective of long standing social perspectives and macro level industry dynamics;

- ▶ **The concept of age...** the notion that age is still largely considered from a narrow, chronological perspective only
- ▶ **The role of resilience...** and how it varies by individual
- ▶ **The work stage theory...** the continued focus on a single pathway approach to work
- ▶ **Macro workplace dynamics...** key forces dictating organisational attitudes to older people
- ▶ **The diminishing value of experience...** a common justification to cull older workers
- ▶ **Euphemistic language...** the language surrounding youth versus mature workers is distinctly different

## 1.1 The concept of age

Chronological age is the traditional measure of age in Australia, and one that has been utilised for this current study (i.e. by including workers over the age of 50 years). However, one of the most pertinent observations that could be made about the participants involved in this research was that there was a distinct and apparent variation in how old two respondents of the same age could appear.

There has been much research undertaken around accurate measurements of ageing, and chronological age has been identified as the least accurate measure<sup>3</sup>. In fact, biological age which is the physiological ability of the individual is considered a more accurate indicator of a person's age. An individual's physiological ability at age 60 can deviate by up to 20 years. For example, two 60 year olds could have very different physical capabilities, spanning from that of a 40 year old up to an 80 year old. In addition to chronological and biological measurements, psychological and social factors can also be used to determine a person's age, and subsequently, how they perform and engage within the workforce.

As individuals highlighted that they often had to compete against younger workers, their chronological age often dictated whether they were able to do so or not without consideration of their physical, social or psychological capability. What transpired, however, was that some workers were in fact very energetic, enthusiastic and 'youthful', and able to compete with their younger counterparts (whereas others, at similar ages, had slowed considerably).

The focus on chronological age also tends to fuel the 'deficit' focus in relation to ageing. This deficit focus works on the premise that age is a continuum of diminishing capability and potential of an individual. This premise underpins much of the stereotype thinking that drives the negative attitudes toward older workers. Again it was apparent in this study that individuals could defy this expectation and maintain or increase their health, vitality and enthusiasm for life and work.

<sup>3</sup> Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology:  
[https://books.google.com.au/books?id=nAJqQ7meAIMC&pg=PA547&lpg=PA547&dq=psychological,+biological+and+chronological+measures+of+age&source=bl&ots=int1u8Rm4O&sig=aJqcPNB275WFqzXHqac6p\\_oF\\_74&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjlr6bBie\\_KAhUDmpQKHh0QCCgQ6AEIjzAB#v=onepage&q=psychological%2C%20biological%20and%20chronological%20measures%20of%20age&f=false](https://books.google.com.au/books?id=nAJqQ7meAIMC&pg=PA547&lpg=PA547&dq=psychological,+biological+and+chronological+measures+of+age&source=bl&ots=int1u8Rm4O&sig=aJqcPNB275WFqzXHqac6p_oF_74&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjlr6bBie_KAhUDmpQKHh0QCCgQ6AEIjzAB#v=onepage&q=psychological%2C%20biological%20and%20chronological%20measures%20of%20age&f=false)

## 1.2 The role of resilience

In the context of age discrimination, how an individual responded to and managed the impact it had on them, was influenced by their personal resilience.

At its core, resilience is an attitude – it relates to an individual's ability to be flexible, their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances (in this case, the potentially changing nature of the workplace, changing roles, etc.), their level of optimism when faced with adversity, and their capacity to learn and adapt from experiences.

Within the context of this study, some respondents were much more capable of putting incidents of age discrimination into a broader perspective and were subsequently able to manage the impacts much more effectively than others.

## 1.3 The work stage theory

Across workers and managers it was clear an overriding assumption is that one's career occurs in a linear and predictable fashion. Moreover, there is a perception that as a worker journeys through the course of their working life there is an expectation and desire for continual progress and promotion. This post-industrial notion of the workplace engagement assumes an individual follows a standard pathway that starts with accumulation of experience, followed by a period of consolidation and by the time the individual reaches 50 years old he or she begins to transition out of work. This is partially driven by the assumption that by this age, most workers will have reduced financial needs. However, in today's community these assumptions are not necessarily valid for many workers.

Although this framework may still have some relevance it does not reflect the range of options that older workers suggested they were prepared to consider in order to retain their work status. Rather than a progressive, stepwise, decline toward exiting the workplace, older workers often sought to;

- ▶ **Continue...** the upward progression through development and growth
- ▶ **Shift down and plateau...** by stepping down their responsibilities but continuing with work
- ▶ **Re-start...** through reinvention and transit through a another career curve

As such older workers are demonstrating a flexibility and desire to continue to work, to gain new and different workplace experiences, build new or different skills, and are not necessarily seeking to transition out in a traditionally defined manner.

## 1.4 Macro workplace dynamics

An important contextual factor when looking to address age discrimination in the workplace is to understand the nature of the sectors within which individuals are working. There are a number of dynamics at play, each of which has the potential to disrupt efforts to eliminate age discrimination.

**The bottom line:** Businesses and organisations are constrained financially and motivated to make a profit. The perceptions that older workers are more expensive to employ, that they take too much time off, or are less efficient (impacting productivity) consequently can influence hiring decisions. Ultimately, if there is any suggestion that the employer is not going to get value for money from hiring someone older, this will impact hiring decisions in favour of a perceived cheaper, more efficient workforce.



**Value in youth:** within some industries, there is a much greater emphasis on employing younger workers for a number of reasons:

- ▶ **Presenting a youthful image:** certain industries or organisations looking to align themselves with being “youthful” tend to lean towards recruiting younger staff who reflect this image
- ▶ **Speed, energy, agility:** some organisations hire younger workers because of the assumption they are quicker, and more energetic. This is particularly important in fast paced roles, where it is more important to churn through the workload than to carry out tasks thoroughly.

It may therefore be challenging for workers as they age to stay in these roles, or to move into these roles at a later date.

**Physical demanding roles:** those industries that are more physically demanding than others can take a toll on workers’ bodies. For example within the construction and building industry, where manual labour is part and parcel of daily duties, a younger team can be viewed as more capable to work with the physical demands of the job. For some individuals who have worked in physically demanding positions for a number of years, their physical capacity to continue in the same role may dwindle and this can pose a challenge if the workplace does not offer flexible options to cater for their changed circumstances. Much like the ‘youth focused’ industries, this means that for some workers, they either have to progress up into managerial positions, continue with physical labour that is increasingly difficult to maintain, or transition out of the industry altogether (which can be considered a challenge, if they have few other qualifications or experience).

*“If you’ve been in the construction industry all your life—your body, your joints are pretty much worn out by the time you get to 55 and I know of—all my friends who have worked in the industry—I don’t know of any of those who are actually now working in the industry”* Manager\_Small-Medium

**Transient workforce:** the trend towards temporary, contractual employment has resulted in a much more transient workforce across many industries.

*“Also the fact is, and this is a fact of life with the public service, because of the recruitment freeze we can’t bring in permanent staff so we’ve got to go to the agencies and get ourselves contractors. Most of the people doing contract work are probably younger because they like to move around a lot more and they don’t really need the stability that someone in my position needs.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

Some businesses bring in casual, contracted staff to allow them to manage the ebbs and flows of workload that the business world faces. This can result in greater employment uncertainty and less job security. This presents a number of challenges for the older workers:

- ▶ **Lack of security:** older workers with financial and family commitments look for security within their roles.
- ▶ **Competing against a younger pool:** contractual positions are associated with younger workers, who are thought to be less reliant on a fixed contract, preferring the flexibility that contract work offers.
- ▶ **Subtle discrimination:** businesses and organisations are knowledgeable around the legislations and practices of hiring and employing workers. Businesses were aware that overt references to age were inappropriate. Consequently, much of what was understood to be age discrimination was presented as lawful reasons for not employing individual making it a difficult concept to prove. This essentially means that age discrimination can be hidden, subtle and difficult to identify or ‘call out’ with certainty.

## 1.5 Diminishing value of experience

A key point of tension with workers was the perceived diminishing value of their experience. Clearly where experience was outdated due to changes in technology and systems, then workers could appreciate that their skills had become redundant. However, there also appeared to be a number of instances where the worker experience had been considered no longer sufficient to justify a higher cost to business. The confounding factor in this scenario was that workers could then find themselves being 'used' to train up others with their skill set, or were no longer able to leverage their skills in a positive manner to progress their career.

Experience is a key driver of value and contribution of human resource. It can play a significant role in helping a worker form their professional identity and status in an organisation. To devalue a workers experience can be akin to devaluing them as individuals. Consequently, this experience can play a significant role in undermining the older workers confidence, role, and sense of future with the organisation and in the workplace generally.

## 1.6 Euphemistic language

The language used throughout the study to refer to younger workers was distinctly different to that used for the older workers. Language typically used for younger workers alluded to energy, confidence, fresh ideas, new thinking, and flexibility (e.g. "the bright young things"), highlighting that on the flipside, the perception of older workers was at odds with these typically positive attributes.

# Section 2: Age discrimination experiences



## 2.0 Age discrimination experiences

Workplace discrimination affects people from all walks of life – older workers, males and females, and people living in metropolitan and regional locations. It affects people working across the gamut of industry sectors and in small through to large employers. Indeed, it was apparent that once workers and managers crossed an undefined threshold and were seen as ‘old’ in the context of employment, age discrimination could impact anyone.

Older workers who had experienced employment-related age discrimination reported a wide range of experiences. These experiences spanned relatively benign one-off incidents with generally minor consequences through to sustained encounters with profound impacts. Some experienced multiple forms of age discrimination.

The key dimensions framing older workers’ experiences of workplace age discrimination were thus:

- ▶ **Discrimination context...** whether the discrimination took place during the recruitment process or in the workplace
- ▶ **The nature of discrimination...** whether the discrimination was direct (or overt), with language signaling that the individual was being treated less favourably on account of their age or whether it was indirect (or covert), with the discrimination inferred from people’s language, attitudes and behaviours
- ▶ **Complexity of contributing factors...** the extent to which discrimination experiences were merely rooted in negative stereotypes of older workers and managers, or involved other factors such as performance management issues and/or personality dynamics that contributed to the overall discrimination experience
- ▶ **Management involvement...** the extent to which management was an active player in the discrimination experience, and/or condoned the discriminatory behaviour of other people within the organisation.

Age discrimination in employment occurred on a continuum, beginning with recruitment and then expanding into the workplace environment where experiences ranged from subtle incidences of discrimination (in which older workers became ‘stuck’ or ‘pigeon-holed’), to ‘structural’ forms of discrimination (in which discrimination occurred in the context of organisational restructures and redundancies), through to the more pronounced ‘cultural’ forms of discrimination (encompassing bullying and harassment) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Age discrimination experience types

Recruitment settings	Workplace settings		
▶ <b>'Shut out'</b> ... unable to get an interview or secure a position	▶ <b>'Pigeon-holing'</b> ... becoming stuck or constrained in their role	▶ <b>'Structural'</b> ... being targeted for redundancy or restructure	▶ <b>'Cultural'</b> ... Subject to discriminatory culture or management practices



The continuum of discrimination includes four broad types of age related workplace discrimination. Key characteristics of these discrimination experiences are outlined below, and then explored in greater detail over the following pages.

Discrimination type	Key characteristics of discrimination experience
<b>Shut out</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Context...</b> Occurs during recruitment at both the job application and interview stage; applies to both external and internal recruitment</li> <li>▶ <b>Description...</b> Older workers repeatedly unable to secure a job interview (and infer it's due to their age). Interview panels indirectly convey that they wish to hire younger people. Job applicants told that they will not be considered due to age. May present as an organisation avoiding hiring older workers, could be an easy part of the culling process as employers look for ways to manage large numbers of applicants</li> <li>▶ <b>Actions taken...</b> Older workers typically conceal information from job applications which might allude to their true age. They may contact employer to seek feedback on progress of job application and/or reasons why unsuccessful in gaining employment</li> </ul>
<b>'Pigeon holing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Context...</b> Occurs in the workplace – may occur anytime</li> <li>▶ <b>Description...</b> Older workers “stall” in their careers and become “stuck” or “pigeon-holed”. Management appear to stop encouraging them to further their careers. Workers feel they are overlooked for development and promotional opportunities as management wait for them to retire and exit the organisation. These incidences can be viewed by workers as management reflecting social stereotypes rather than being personally targeted.</li> <li>▶ <b>Actions taken...</b> Few actions taken as incidents are often relatively minor, they may be concerned about appearing “petty” and as it can be difficult to prove age discrimination has occurred.</li> </ul>
<b>Structural</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Context...</b> Occurs in the workplace during organisational change and restructuring</li> <li>▶ <b>Description...</b> Restructures of the whole organisation through to individual work units. Older workers perceive they've been targeted for redundancies due to their age as their organisation looks to reduce organisational costs</li> <li>▶ <b>Actions taken...</b> Older workers generally take no action as they feel powerless to change the situation. They may accept the redundancy, or try to keep a low profile and/or work on repositioning themselves in the organisation.</li> </ul>

## Cultural

- ▶ **Context...** Occurs in the workplace – may occur anytime
- ▶ **Description...** This form of workplace age discrimination could have a much greater impact on older workers. It may involve older workers being denied the same opportunities as younger colleagues; relationship tensions when they are managed by a younger manager; a lack of support with issue resolution from management; bullying and harassment; and derogatory language and name calling. This behaviour could be undertaken to belittle and humiliate the worker or manager until they decide to leave the organisation.
- ▶ **Actions taken...** Older workers generally take several courses of action: take no action; discuss with manager; make a formal complaint to an external organisation; engage the union and/or a workplace lawyer; speak to a health professional; and/or seek support from family, friends and colleagues.

## 2.1 Shut out ... unable to get an interview or secure a position



“Direct” and “indirect” forms of age discrimination were evident at different stages of the recruitment process:

- ▶ Job application stage
- ▶ Interview stage
- ▶ Gaining feedback

### 2.1.1 Job application stage

Many older workers reported that they had unsuccessfully applied for positions. A number of factors led them to believe that age was a factor in not getting past the application stage, including:

- ▶ **The volume of rejections:** Although most people have at some point of their careers been unsuccessful when applying for a job, in this instance age discrimination was inferred through the sheer volume of job applications which participants had made. Some older people kept details of all their job applications and reported having applied for hundreds of jobs a year without securing a single interview.

*“I’ve applied for probably 500 to 700 jobs that I’ve actually got documents for [and] out of that, I’ve probably had 20-25 interviews.”* Manager\_Small-Medium

Participants reported feeling “crushed” and deeply discouraged by their lack of success in finding work, with some losing hope of ever gaining employment again. This experience came as a shock to people who had previously worked for a single employer over a long period; they often felt unprepared to navigate the world of job applications when they had last applied for a job some 20 or 30 years earlier.

It was typically after some time that they started to wonder whether their age was a factor in their inability to find work.

On occasion, they were notified that they had been unsuccessful in the form of an impersonal, “generic” sounding letter or email which did not outline the reason why they were not considered for the role. Some workers and managers would call employers to enquire about the progress of their application, however in most circumstances they were told that the employer would be in touch, only for them to never hear back from the employer again.

In other instances, the applicant was advised that the employer would be in touch, only to never hear back from the employer once their age was known.

*“I applied for a sales position in a well-known hardware store... I was told that I did very well and then they would ring me and make an appointment for a two-on-one interview... When I’ve rung up and asked why, they’ve asked me my name and also my date of birth... They just wanted to make sure that they were giving the information to the right person... They would say ‘We will arrange an appointment for you to come in and you will hear from us in due course’ and I’m still waiting on those phone calls.”*  
Manager\_Small-Medium

- ▶ **Lack of success in jobs where they have expertise:** workers who didn't get an interview for roles where their experience aligned well questioned whether one of the factors was due to their age as they struggled to find any other explanation around their lack of success. It was difficult for workers and managers to reconcile their disappointment in securing a role with the possibility that they may not have had the skillset that an employer was looking for. For example, they would frequently make comments along the lines of having 10-20 plus years' experience, and did not consider that it was possible that the employer only required someone with 2 years' experience.
- ▶ **Evidence of age...** One factor contributing the perception that age discrimination had occurred during recruitment was the requirement by applicants to provide evidence of their age to a prospective employer. Some employers asked for date of birth on application forms, whilst others required documents (such as drivers' licenses and other tickets) which listed the applicant's date of birth.

*"[My date of birth is] on my ID and my license, too, of course, which I supply. And my forklift [ticket]. There's no getting away from the fact that I'm old, as old as I am."*  
Worker\_55-59

*"I never put my birthday on my resume, and of course when you go into a workplace for an interview, you've got to fill in their application form and they require the birthdate obviously, and, it's pretty obvious when you actually go in there that they're not going to hire you. You can tell, it's the feeling you get, that you're not going to get it because they've looked at your age and gone, 'well, we're not going to do that'."* Worker\_60-64

## The outcomes

Most older workers reported that they subsequently took steps to conceal their true age when applying for jobs. Most omitted their date of birth, and with many others only including their most recent employment history to give the impression they were younger than their full employment history might suggest. A few older workers reported being told by recruitment agents that they were being disadvantaged when including such information.

*"I had no luck of getting an interview, even for jobs I was qualified completely for. I couldn't get an interview. I couldn't even get a response from those jobs. And I went into one of the employment agencies, and I was talking to the gentleman who was looking after my case, and I said, 'Look, I can't believe I can't even get an interview for any of these jobs.' And he said, 'Well, I'll tell you frankly, right now'. He basically said, 'You need to take your age off your resume'. He said, in his words, 'Your application is being binned by HR as soon as they see your age'."* Worker\_55-59



## 2.1.2 Interview stage

When older workers did manage to secure job interviews, age discrimination was assumed to have occurred when they sensed that the panel wished to hire a younger person, and/or when they subsequently learned that a younger person had been appointed to the role. Typically, the age discrimination was evidenced in a number of ways:

- ▶ **The language used by the interviewers...** Older workers reported that they could generally ‘sense’ when interview panels wanted to hire somebody younger than them. This could be through subtle cues, such as; lack of eye-contact, appearing uninterested in the older worker, tone of voice, or inferred through the language used and comments made by panels. For example, some stated that they were looking to hire people who were “fresh”, had “fresh ideas”, were “agile and innovative”, and/or people who possessed a high level of physical fitness to help them deal with the demands of the role.
- ▶ **The lines of questioning...** Sometimes interview panels (particularly those in which all panel members were considerably younger than those they were interviewing) asked workers about irrelevant aspects of their personal lives. A few reported being asked by interview panels about whether they ever took part in fun runs and triathlons. The workers assumed that these questions were designed to gauge their level of physical fitness, despite the roles being office based with no inherent requirement for applicants to have a high level of fitness. One worker reported being asked if he ever frequented a local wine bar which he knew to attract a younger clientele.
- ▶ Older workers took these terms and lines of enquiry to be euphemisms to suggest youth and to minimise the chance of the employer being accused of engaging in age related discrimination.

*“[At an interview with a young panel] they were talking about that they do lunchtime sport, and how they’re involved in this and that and the other. They were looking for fit, keen, sort of athletic type people... Once you get over a certain age you’re not as athletic anymore, you can’t keep up with Olympic 100 metre runners. You don’t see many 50 year olds taking on triathlons and winning... They [also] wanted someone who was a keen, fit, athletic person that therefore they could know that they could keep the work pressure up on.” Worker*

*“People say ‘It’s a very solid CV’. ‘What does that mean?’. ‘It means you’ve done all the work’. ‘Right, so you’re going to put me on the shortlist?’. ‘Oh, we can’t really do that because the employer’s looking for someone with’ - they didn’t say younger thinking – ‘fresher ideas’.” Manager\_ Medium-Large*

- ▶ **Connection and engagement with the interviewers...** One worker described an incident in which he applied for a public sector administration role, was interviewed in a group and then individually. He stated that the walls in the office were “paper thin” meaning he could overhear other candidates being interviewed. He contrasted his experience as an older worker with a younger interview panel who seemed bored and disinterested in him with the dynamics when a much younger [and attractive] woman was interviewed by the same panel:

*“The walls were paper thin, so you could hear everything that was going on... So I go in to the interview and they look up from the desk and there’s this bored expression on their face. And they go through the routine until they’ve gone through the questions they need to ask me, and pretty much made up their mind already... Anyhow, I sat outside in the waiting area, and the next young lady goes in and she’s an instant hit. There was laughter. She was greeted warmly. I thought that had to do with the panel... The interview went for quite some time and they were asking quite detailed questions... It was very deflating to me, as particularly as amongst all the candidates, she was the youngest.” Worker\_50-54*

Conversely, during telephone interviews the aspect of age could be taken out of the equation, until applicants were directly asked. In this scenario, it was noted that a telephone interview could appear to be going well until they were asked to disclose their age. At this point, they noted that the “mood” changed, that the person conducting the interview became “cooler” and that the shortly afterwards, the interview was terminated.

- ▶ **Learning of the successful candidate...** Several older workers also reported being interviewed, and subsequently learning that the position had been awarded to a less experienced candidate. In the case of internal recruitment, workers and managers often knew the successful applicant and believed discrimination had occurred when the role was given to someone with less experience. Public sector workers could sometimes learn the identity of the successful applicant when names and registration numbers were published. This data could also enable them to make an assumption about the applicant’s age.

*“I went to a number of interviews—look, I did dozens and dozens of applications. When you do go to an interview, part of the system is for you to receive an email if you’ve been unsuccessful. And in that email it indicates who the successful applicant is. Now it’s not a hard job to cut and paste that into the [Education Department] website and you find when they’re first registered. So six out of the seven [successful applicants for] those interviews had been graduate teachers.” Worker\_55-59*

*“It was about two or three days before the actual end of the term, [the Principal] came and actually told me that, ‘No, we won’t be able to renew your contract. In fact, I’ve got this young female teacher on contract over at [name of school], which is on the other side of Brisbane. She’s coming over, and I was wondering whether you would mind just showing her the ropes and all that sort of stuff.’” Worker\_60-64*

In other cases, older workers remarked that the role had been given to a person whom they characterised as being the “boss’ favourite” and/or someone who was being “groomed” or “fast-tracked” by management, and who happened to be younger.

- ▶ **Explicit Verbal Discrimination...** Some were either told that they were “too old” for the role and/or that the employer or interview panel was looking for someone who was “younger” than the interviewee. Typically, these experiences had occurred some ten or twenty years earlier, at a time when they assumed there was less awareness of discrimination legislation. Nevertheless, some workers and managers stated that they had experienced direct discrimination during recruitment in more recent times.

*“I applied for a job for a driver to drive people from a nursing home to whatever activities, and I was blatantly told, ‘No, you’re too old’... That really hurt me at the time... I was [only] 55? 54?” Worker\_60-64*

*“Well one of the instances was [company name] shoe shops where they were just looking for people for Christmas time... Once they found out I was over 50? ‘Oh, we’re really looking for the young ones’. They wanted them to work long hours for little money, that’s the impression I was getting.” Manager\_Small-Medium*

A small number of older workers reported that they experienced verbal discrimination when advised by management not to pursue internal promotions, or that they would not be considered for any such roles on account of their age. These types of disclosures were invariably made “off the record” to ensure that the employer did not provide any evidence which could be used as part of an age discrimination allegation.

*“A couple of positions or promotions came up. I was told not to apply by middle management... [They said I was] too old... They actually said that. I said, ‘because this is a conversation, it can be easily denied that you said that’. And they said, ‘yes, and that’s why we’re saying it that way’.” Manager\_Medium-Large*

## The outcomes

The covert nature of the discrimination for many meant that they didn't feel they could take action.

In many instances, older workers generally felt that whilst their age had been a factor in the recruitment decision, it wasn't always the sole factor contributing to their lack of success. For some, it could have been attributed to a lack of cultural fit, while others recognised that younger workers would have attracted a considerably lower salary and could understand why an employer operating on a tight budget would favour the cheaper worker over their more experienced and hence costlier counterpart.

*"Teachers who start on a salary of about \$64,000, so \$30,000 less than what I would be paid at the top of the scale... Schools really are on a tight budget, every school is. And if they're given the option of employing a graduate and employing an experienced teacher, their attitude is basically—I've done interviews myself—their attitude is 'well look, this person might not do quite the same job, but...'"* Worker\_55-59

This sentiment was echoed by some older workers, who despite their own discrimination experiences had previously been in roles where they had been responsible for making employment decisions. Some commented that they had worked in workplaces in which there had been an "unwritten rule" around not hiring people above a certain age (usually 50 and over). In these cases, employers preferred younger workers because they were cheaper to employ, and to a lesser extent, because it was assumed that they would have more up to date knowledge than older workers.

*"[Management said] 'we want you to run the company, and you'll need to recruit people' and they just said 'you're not to employ people over 50', basically. Said 'we want young people, from out of university, we don't want to have to pay these oldies', and that was, that was for about 12 years I suppose... They believed that by employing younger people, they... were getting blokes with the latest technology, straight out of university... And they didn't have to pay them. It was all about money."* Manager\_ Small-Medium

When explicitly told they were too old, some job seekers attempted to persuade their interviewers that they had the skills and experience to perform the role *despite* their age. These attempts were generally unsuccessful, with employers unwilling to revise their decision.

### 2.1.3 Gaining feedback

When workers and managers learned that they had been unsuccessful in gaining a position during the recruitment stage, many contacted the employer to seek feedback. The nature of the feedback often led them to the conclusion that their age had been a factor in the decision:

- ▶ **Generic or no feedback at all...** Most calls to employers often went unreturned, or were limited to “generic” sounding feedback such as “the standard of applications was of a very high calibre and unfortunately you did not score as highly on our selection criteria as the successful applicant”. Some workers and managers eventually gave up seeking feedback because they had lost faith that they would receive any constructive – and truthful – responses. Whilst this didn’t explicitly point towards age discrimination, it was often coupled with a realisation that the successful applicant was less skilled, less experienced, or the position hadn’t been filled at all.

*“[Feedback on why I had been unsuccessful for these positions] was never overtly stated, but it was kind of covert. It was always couched in such terms as you know ‘oh we had a lot of applicants’ or ‘we’ve already got somebody doing the job temporarily for the last 18 months’ or ‘you’re overqualified’ and these sort of backward compliments.”*  
Worker\_65+

*“The first time [I applied for an internal position] I didn’t get any feedback whatsoever. The second time was... last year... [The manager told me] ‘we were just inundated with applications’. But then the job was re-advertised, just a matter of weeks later.”*  
Worker\_55-59

**Unbelievable reasons:** *The “official” reasons cited did not always ring true to older workers. For example, in one case, a forklift driver with some 20 years’ experience was told that he was unsuccessful applying for a forklift driving role in a timber yard because he “lacked experience”. “There was a job that came up [at the timberyard], and I applied for it while I was working there as a casual... I asked the supervisor who was my supervisor in the factory. And I asked him why is it even though I’m working here... I’ve been unsuccessful. And he said ... ‘I will warn you. Look around. You’re the oldest bloke here’... [I then spoke to the HR manager] who was very young, [and she] said that the reason why I didn’t get the job was because I didn’t have much experience on the forklift with handling wood... I mean, handling wood. I mean, I got my forklift license... in 1993.”* Worker\_55-59

Another reason provided to older workers was that they “did not fit the workplace culture”, which they immediately took to mean they were “too old”.

*“I’ve been told at other jobs I went for that I don’t fit the culture... [They didn’t explain what they mean] but it means age, I knew it meant age.”* Worker\_50-54

- ▶ **Off the record feedback...** A few people who had experienced explicit discrimination during the recruitment process reported that subsequent to the interview they were advised that they would not be offered the role, as the “manager”, who was separate from the recruitment process, didn’t wish to hire older workers. These disclosures were generally made “off the record”, and so individuals felt that there was no evidence upon which they could make an allegation of age related employment discrimination. These experiences left them with the impression that the person who had interviewed them had had their hands tied, and the decision had fallen with others in the management team.

*"[I was interviewed for a casual childcare position]... And the woman who I knew came to me later and she said they're happy with the way I work but her boss told her, 'look we don't employ older people'. And I just went 'what? You know that's illegal to say that'. She was telling me off the records so clearly I couldn't do anything about it... She seemed to imply that it was an energy thing; I wouldn't be able to keep up [with the children]."* Worker\_55-59

## The outcomes

Essentially, older workers were often left dissatisfied with the quality and accuracy of response from employers.

### 2.1.4 Discrimination by other parties

Interestingly, discrimination during the recruitment process was not confined to the employer-employee dynamic. A few job seekers who were using government-funded employment services reported that they had experienced age discrimination at the hands of their employment service provider, the very person whose role was to support them to find a job. Some of these employment service providers had stated outright that job seekers were "too old" to be considered for certain positions. Some were denied opportunities to undertake training to enhance their employment prospects on the grounds that they too were either "too old" or would be at "retirement age" by the time they completed the training, with the inference that any such training would be a waste of time and money for both parties.

*"My employment provider told me that I was getting old and in that bracket of people that would find it very difficult to get work... She was applying for jobs for me at that time and she was selecting the jobs and whenever I liked the job that she said, 'Well you can apply for it, but you're probably too old for that job' and then again when I asked to get retrained, I was told that I was too old to be retrained [because] I'd be close to retirement age and you would never get a job in that field."* Manager\_ Small-Medium

Discrimination from employment service providers came as significant blow to people, as they expected a much greater level of support, and were discouraged by their providers' lack of faith in their ability to gain employment.

One manager who was interviewed for an overseas-based role believed that the person interviewing him was able to directly discriminate against him as he could not use Australian legislation to mount a case of age discrimination.

*"[I was interviewed] for a position as a power engineer—charge engineer—in a power station in Hong Kong... The [manager] had come over from Hong Kong... and he actually told me, he said... 'Look, you've got all the qualifications I need, but I'm sorry but I think you're getting a bit too old'."* Manager\_Medium-Large

## 2.2 Pigeon-holing... becoming stuck or constrained in their role



In the workplace, a more subtle form of age discrimination involved older workers effectively “stalling” in their careers and becoming “stuck” or “pigeon-holed”. They noted that management no longer encouraged them to further their careers, and felt overlooked for development and promotional opportunities. They generally felt that they had climbed the corporate ladder as far as it would take them, had reached their “use by date”, and that they had effectively been “put to pasture” by management until they decided to retire.

*“I’ve been a part of [the organisation] for 14, 15 years now, so I know a lot of the guys that have been around for a while—some of them have moved up into team management positions or higher, so I’ve known them for years. We’re similar ages, and you can see their careers are grinding to a halt too, they’re not getting encouragement to go any higher, they’re often not necessarily acting in higher positions when there’s leave.” Worker\_60-64*

*“I think as you get older they stop asking you to do things, they stop asking you to learn anything new. It’s all of that...in some cases I believe there’s an assumption that you’re just waiting for your retirement”. Worker\_60-69*

- ▶ **Becoming invisible...** Some older workers felt that upon reaching a certain age they had become “invisible” in the workplace, and found that colleagues were less interested in their advice or opinions. They found these behaviours by their colleagues somewhat hurtful and generally disrespectful, and at times it undermined their confidence in their own skills and abilities.

*“I’m in the fire brigade... I’ve [been there] about 13 years up now... There are two of us who are in our 70s, and it’s a younger brigade and they will just keep talking as though you’re not there... [They] don’t even want to acknowledge you so you... just sit.” Worker\_65+*

- ▶ **Cultural stereotypes...** Although this was a source of frustration for older workers, they recognised this form of discrimination as being relatively subtle and did not feel that they had been personally targeted for unfair treatment on account of their age. Rather, they believed that forms of discrimination stemmed from others holding negative stereotypes of older workers, namely that older people were “no longer adaptable”, “couldn’t cope with change”, or “couldn’t use technology”. Furthermore, they did not feel that the intent of others in the workplace was to treat them less favourably due to their age to the point where they would leave the organisation.
- ▶ **Industry constraints...** However it is worth noting that in some instances, whilst older workers may have perceived that their careers had stalled, there may have been other reasons which might have explained why age had become a barrier. For example, in some industries employers could express concern from an OH&S perspective, over workers’ ability to perform roles which involved manual handling, such as packing, warehousing and retail. However, there were instances with older workers in manual orientated roles where decisions on reduction in shifts or change of job duties were perceived to be driven by age considerations alone.
  - One worker believed that they had been subject to age discrimination when their shifts were reduced because those of younger employees hadn’t. Another suspected age discrimination when their employer expressed concern about their fitness to undertake the role.

*“The job I was in, in 2011, I would’ve been the oldest worker in that company and there were a lot of remarks about my age... [by] the owner, or the part owner of the business. It was a retail business but they sold furniture and I assembled the furniture for them... There was one remark there that I can remember, is that, ‘Oh he’s old, we don’t want him to have a heart attack’ talking to one of the younger employees of the company.”*

Manager\_Small-Medium

This highlights the complexities involved in balancing an employer’s obligation to provide a safe working environment in the context of an ageing workforce and making assumptions about workers’ capabilities based on chronological age.

## Outcomes

Older workers generally felt that they had few options to challenge these comments and behaviours. This was partly because these incidents were relatively minor, and challenging the organisation would make them look “petty”; at other times they felt constrained because there was a general lack of evidence to substantiate any claims of age related discrimination.

## 2.3 'Structural'...being targeted for redundancy or restructure



Structural forms of age discrimination occurred when organisations underwent change. This ranged from whole of organisation restructures down to specific teams or work units. Older workers generally acknowledged that the driving force behind the restructure was an agenda to reduce staff numbers with a view to cutting costs.

How workers reacted to restructuring appeared to depend on whether:

- ▶ There were multiple or **companywide redundancies**
- ▶ Personal targeting of redundancies.

**Companywide redundancies:** Whilst organisational change can create significant stress and uncertainty among the entire workforce, in this discrimination scenario the older workers perceived that they had been unfairly targeted for redundancies due to their age. Although sometimes workers and managers felt that they had been individually and personally targeted, in these circumstances, it appeared more common that whole groups of older people had been targeted.

**Personal targeting:** Other workers could feel that they had been personally targeted by management due to their age, particularly when they were the sole person to be made redundant in an organisation following a restructure. This situation was exacerbated when workers had a poor relationship with their own manager, in particular when their manager was younger than them.

*“The job that I was doing was upgraded and I was temporarily working as a higher grade and it was opened to internal employees first to go, and the assumption was that everybody who was actually acting in the job would get their jobs, because there had been no criticism of any of our performances. And everybody else got their job—the younger people—at this stage... There was another older person ... she was younger than me though, but... she was studying law at the time. She was put on the eligibility list; she didn't actually get the job, but she at least made it onto the eligibility list. I did not even make it onto the eligibility list.” Worker\_50-54*

In these situations, workers felt that whilst their age was a factor in the decision, it was not the sole reason why they had been targeted. Often they felt that personality dynamics also played a role. They felt that they were being “nitpicked” over relatively minor issues, which were subsequently used as the catalyst for making them redundant.

*“And the next thing we know there's a new director, and in less than a week of [being in] the position [he started]... putting me under a tremendous amount of pressure over absolutely tiny, trivial things that he could dream up, I couldn't believe it... Anyway, it was fairly clear that he wanted to push me out... One of the staff had complained that she had a spider on her window, on the outside of her building... I said 'what would you have me do? The spider will be gone by the time I get there'... and she said 'oh it frightens me.' And I said 'well I'm sorry but it's outside the building.' And I basically fobbed her off ... but [the director] said 'oh that's not service-oriented enough... Within about four weeks... he said to me 'look [name] would you consider retiring?' 'On what basis?' And he said 'oh well we could offer you a redundancy package if you're interested?' And I thought how can he offer me a redundancy, because he's going to have to replace me? To cut a long story short, he did, and I did accept a very significant redundancy package. [I think he wanted me to go] because I was too old.”*

Manager\_Medium-Large



In some instances, however, older workers were cognisant that they had been targeted less because of their age and more because they represented a cost burden to the organisation on account of their longevity within the organisation. In other cases, some felt that performance management issues were the driver behind redundancy decisions rather than age per se.

*“The manager actually said to me, the management have told her to find a way of getting rid of us so [she] didn’t have to give [us] long service leave... So I left, and then I found out what had been going on by the other girls, cos we’d ring in and saying, [the manager’s] laughing and joking about the fact that she’s got rid of you’.” Worker\_55-59*

*“I don’t necessarily think that [redundancies are] completely related to age. I think there are a lot of older people who aren’t very rigorous and disciplined as well.” Worker\_60-64*

It is important to note, however, that some workers acknowledged that they had inadvertently benefited from this form of discrimination, with several negotiating “generous” redundancy packages which set them up for retirement.

*“Even though he said, “you all,” it was me [he was targeting]. The girl from HR offered me, off the record, a redundancy package. [She said] “Off the record, you know, let me see what I can do.” I’m like, “No. I need my job.” [then I thought] “Okay, well, then...”” Worker\_55-59*

During the period of restructuring, workers and managers generally felt powerless, as though they were unable to “stop the juggernaut” or change the situation in any way. Instead, they tended to keep a low profile so as to avoid drawing attention to themselves until the restructure was finalised. Some took the opportunity to reposition themselves within the organisation.

## 2.4 'Cultural'... Subject to discriminatory culture or management practices



These instances of cultural and management style discrimination tended to be more overt and ongoing. They also tended to have a more pronounced negative impact on older workers. These experiences could include a range of negative encounters which felt personal, could continue over an extended period of time and produced the most detrimental outcomes for the worker.

It included the following scenarios:

- ▶ **Deliberate lack of opportunities...** not being provided with the same opportunities as younger colleagues
- ▶ **Relationship tensions...** when managed by a younger manager
- ▶ **Lack of support...** with issue resolution from management
- ▶ **Bullying and harassment**
- ▶ **Derogatory language and name calling.**

**Deliberate lack of opportunities...** Several older workers believed that they had been the subject of age discrimination because they were routinely denied opportunities that were provided to their younger colleagues. This often felt very personal and targeted to the individual (as opposed to those who were pigeon holed as a result of random stereotyping because of their age). These included being denied:

- ▶ Training and professional development opportunities
- ▶ Promotional opportunities
- ▶ The opportunity to undertake stimulating work

*"You get to the point where you can't be bothered with this nonsense, no matter how hard you try, you've got the skills, you've got the knowledge, but you're being pushed aside. I'm more up to date because I've done my degree rather than did hospital-based training. I still feel as though I can contribute quite well to the care ... I'm quite ... I like the challenge of learning new things and stuff like that but I don't get the opportunity because they don't give it to me and that's where I think the age discrimination comes into it."* Worker\_55-59

*"I work in the Dandenong office ... opportunities comes up but (they) never comes to me. The guy there just gives it (to) somebody who's about 44 now but he regularly gives it to her, higher duties, rather than offering it to me even though I've asked. ... He blames somebody else, he blames our supervisor further up you see..... When you look at skill sets, my skills set is a little bit different but comparable if not better in a number of other areas. ... I feel that my card has been stamped."* Manager\_Small-Medium

**Relationship tensions...** Several older workers reported having fraught relationships with their younger managers, whom they felt treated them with a general lack of respect and did not value their experience. Some stated that their manager made assumptions about their abilities based on their age, for example, that they couldn't use computers properly.

*"It was the way [my manager] spoke to me, like I was a child... She just wouldn't accept any advice, but it was also... if something went wrong with the computer, she automatically assumed that I didn't know how to use it."* Worker\_50-54

Some older workers reported there being a "cultural divide" of sorts between themselves and their younger manager. For example, some felt that their manager spoke a different language to themselves, using lots of corporate buzzwords which lacked substance.

*"It's a bit like bingo [where]... you used to tick off all the funky words... [He's got the jargon!]... There's a lot of that type of stuff going on in the managing, but there's not a lot of thought."* Worker\_60-64

Others noted an apparent difference in how their manager treated staff depending on their age – friendly and chatty with younger workers but condescending towards older workers. Some reported being micromanaged, with their manager correcting and rewriting their work (sometimes changing it back to what the older worker had written originally).

*"It was particularly the older ones [she treated unfairly], the younger ones she'd be more friendly to but definitely that the older ones who had experience and who had capability to do things, we just weren't allowed to exercise that. We just felt basically infantilised."* Worker\_50-54

They often attributed their manager's manner to their general lack of people management experience, particularly when it came to managing people different to themselves. Relationship tensions with younger managers were often made all the more difficult for them to navigate when their manager lacked the interpersonal skills and maturity to deal with workplace issues.

*"My first supervisor I had for a year was in her 30s and she was tough, but fair, and I was learning stuff. Then it was this 25 year old who had never managed anybody, who was a law graduate, who wasn't a good manager for a start, hadn't had any experience, nobody actually mentored her."* Worker\_50-54

**Lack of support...** those who had difficult relationships with their younger manager reported that they had little confidence that these situations would be addressed adequately when they felt unsupported by management. These situations were compounded when their manager was the "boss' favourite", and when there was a view that the younger manager could "do no wrong".

*"This person was seen as the 'Golden Girl' by the CEO. The CEO would get her to do things that actually weren't part of her role... she was very good at talking up what she had done previously, making [herself sound] fantastic."* Worker\_50-54

**Bullying and harassment...** Several workers stated that they had experienced sustained, systematic bullying and harassment, often at the hands of management. The most common form of bullying involved social exclusion, however some workers and managers also experienced verbal abuse (such as dressing someone down in public) and excessive criticism (or “nit-picking”) of their work and performance. Bullying behaviours often escalated to the point where workers and managers felt, on reflection, they had been placed in situations where they have been set up to fail.

*“I was with [name of employer] for three years. Then they had some management changes, and my managing director left... [and] they got a new manager [who hired] one, two, three [of his] friends... From day two... all of a sudden, nobody spoke to me anymore. All of a sudden, I was ignored. It was like I was invisible... Whenever I went and got coffee, the minute I stood up, you know, they watched me. I'd go and get coffee, I'd come back and they'd all three be huddled, you know, just having their little world of secrets. By the time I'd walked back down the corridor to my desk, they'd all disperse and go back. And I saw that four or five times a day...”* Worker\_55-59

In these circumstances, being older seemed to be the key factor on which the worker was being singled out, or put down. The workers perceived that the intent was to demean, belittle and humiliate them until they left the organisation. These behaviours took place over weeks, months, and sometimes years until the worker could tolerate the behaviour no more and either took sick leave, submitted a workers’ compensation claim, and/or resigned.

Often, the bullying played out as a form of social exclusion, with “cliques” established and the older workforce excluded from social events such as parties. Older workers often felt that management turned a “blind eye” to poor behaviour by their colleagues.

*“The first time [I was bullied] was basically my first year out as a registered nurse. I was on my first rotation was in a neurological surgical unit... There were four of us as new grads in the ward... and they were very clique-y groups... They were in their 20s and 30s and I just didn't fit into their groups, so they used to set me up to fail at times.”*  
Worker\_55-59

**Derogatory language and name calling...** Whilst less common, a few older workers reported that management used derogatory language when referring to older workers as a collective.

*“It's not uncommon for our Managing Director to use the term, 'old farts' [about older workers].”* Manager\_Small-Medium

In contrast, name calling was generally not directed to the workers but tended to be stated to others. In one case, an older worker learned that some of the staff referred to her as “the old dog”.

*“The [fitness] industry is generally designed around 18-35 year olds... One of the personal trainers, a private contractor, approached me and said, 'I do feel uncomfortable saying this, but you should really be aware that some of the staff refer to you as the old dog'.”* Worker\_65+

## 2.5 Actions taken to address discrimination

Often, workers felt unable to take any action with regards to discrimination, unless it was obvious and overt.

For those who did try to resolve the issues, they tended to only take more formal courses of action after exhausting internal actions such as speaking to their manager and/or HR. The main actions taken by workers to address instances of age discrimination were:

- ▶ Took no action
- ▶ Discussed with manager
- ▶ Made a formal complaint to an external organisation
- ▶ Engaged the union and/or a workplace lawyer
- ▶ Spoke to a health professional
- ▶ Sought support from family, friends and colleagues

**Took no action...** the decision to take action involved weighing up the potential benefits versus the risk to their reputation and credibility if their complaint was dismissed. The main barrier to taking action was the often nebulous nature of discrimination and the associated difficulty with “proving” that discrimination had indeed taken place. Many workers elected to take no action as they felt these risks were too great, and as they wished to avoid potentially being saddled with a “trouble-maker” label.

In addition, workers and managers often had little confidence in their manager’s capacity to respond in a fair and supportive manner, particularly when they knew that their manager had a close relationship with the person who had treated them in a discriminatory way. Several reported that they were deterred from taking action after witnessing how the organisation dealt with complaints made by other staff. In some cases, they felt that staff that had experienced discrimination (or other forms of unfair treatment) ended up being doubly traumatised – not believed, blamed for causing the situation and subsequently regarded with wariness.

*“[Proving age discrimination is like proving] nepotism. We’ve had a bit of nepotism happen here as well, and someone went and appealed that and they didn’t overturn it. They upheld the original decision. We all thought that was fairly blatant. So I don’t feel that any of [the formal organisations that allowed a worker to appeal a decision] could help.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

**Discuss with manager...** several workers attempted to engage their manager in discussions of discrimination. They had mixed experiences – some found their manager supportive and willing to investigate the matter whilst others had the opposite experience.

Older workers who had positive experiences reported that they felt their manager understood their point of view, took immediate action, and made the party who had treated them in a discriminatory fashion aware that their behaviour was unacceptable.

*“[My manager addressed the situation and it was resolved.] The person who [called me “the old dog”] was supposed to be in a leadership position. I was somewhat surprised at her attitude... And she was somewhat contrite, I suppose. But she mellowed... She accepted eventually that it was a mistake and I had a right to draw attention to it, not that we ever discussed it.”* Worker\_65+

However some workers reported more frustrating experiences. They felt that their manager was disinterested in hearing their side of the story and in taking any follow up action.

*“Upper management are really ... when I had brief discussions with them about it, they weren't interested. They didn't care.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

**Make a formal complaint to employer/HR...** Some older workers were motivated to make a formal complaint within their organisation when they felt that their maltreatment was serious and that there was sufficient evidence to support their allegations.

Whilst few older workers took this course of action, those who did reported having unsatisfactory experiences which compounded their already high level of emotional distress. They generally felt that investigations undertaken by HR or senior management at their organisation were not conducted in a fair and transparent manner, and/or that HR automatically took the employer's side. Some remarked that parties who would have supported them were deliberately excluded from the process. As a consequence, the investigation did not fully consider all evidence, leading to their complaint being dismissed.

*“I made a written complaint [about workplace bullying]... so it was all formalised. It was then taken up to the next level and then it went all the way up to the director of nursing for the hospital [where it was]... swept under the carpet... The end result was that there was no formal changes to how these people [behaved], there was no reprimand, there were no outcomes to stop that sort of behaviour... I felt that their policy on bullying was a just a joke... In the end, I felt a little bit unsupported, not by my coordinators but by the hospital and the system itself.”* Worker\_55-59

*“[I gave HR] a 30 page document of dates, what went on [when I was bullied]... They had 30 days to investigate. They investigated it, they never spoke to anybody in my team.... And, yeah, [HR] came up with nobody had done anything wrong. And I said, ‘You've got to be kidding me. You've got to be kidding me. The whole world knows’... [I was sent home]... and went to my doctor's, got a certificate and I've been on Work Care ever since.”* Worker\_55-59

**Engage the union and/or a workplace lawyer...** A few older workers reported seeking assistance from their union, and on occasion asked for the union's representative to intervene on their behalf. One worker had engaged a workplace lawyer, and was in the process of suing her employer for pain and suffering related to prolonged workplace bullying. This was an atypical course of action, and one people would only consider in extreme circumstances when all other formal options had been exhausted.

**Speak to a health professional...** Some older workers sought support from a health professional, such as a general practitioner or a counsellor. A small number accessed their employer's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and felt that the support helped them to make sense of their discrimination experiences.

Of interest, when one worker subsequently took action, the EAP (in this instance) would not allow their report to be used in the claim although the EAP had confirmed with the worker that they were experiencing discrimination and bullying.

*“I went to counselling through the EAP program, twice, they cannot help me more than they say a damn word of what I just said. I was not told that, [employer] said go and get all this help cos [employer] are doing the “right thing”. Their counsellors told me I was being discriminated against, the counsellors told me I was being harassed... yeah they said contact Human Services or Worksafe or whatever but now that I'm actually going forward they will say nothing cos they're actually employed by [employer].”* Workers\_50-60

**Seek support from family, friends and colleagues...** Most workers reported that they sought emotional and social support from family and friends, and where appropriate, colleagues. These individuals were sought out to provide empathy, validate their concerns, provide guidance on how to manage incidents and generally reaffirm that they had someone on their side.

## 2.6 Age discrimination legislation awareness

Most older workers had some awareness or at least assumed that there were laws around age discrimination but they were not clear on the extent of these laws. However, they were clear that at least overt reference to age in questioning, or as a stated rationale for making decisions was illegal.

It was also apparent that no one had a clear or definitive understanding of their rights under these laws. Most assumed they would require 'hard evidence' to prove a claim. In many instances, workers felt this would result in their word against the perpetrators which would place them in a very difficult position.

*"I was told... "Nobody over 40 now gets to the interview stage and I can tell you as someone who works in the HR section of a (company), we're not even interested in looking at anybody's resume. Yes we accept them as it's the internet but we don't bother with them but you have to (accept them) because that's the law." She actually told me this, it's pretty dramatic isn't it?" Worker\_50-60*

*"I mean there's discrimination laws and they just have to remind people. But I don't know how you could make it easier to remind people to complain about it or ... You know people who complain about people complain, and they usually get labelled. It's easier to just walk away and do something else." Manage\_Medium-Large*

*"While we do our best as an organization to match all of that because we can appreciate what they're (older workers) bringing to the table, there comes a cutting point where when you're somebody who's looking to come into a company, and while you have certain rights and you should speak up and back yourself, there's a point where this is a business that needs to be run" Manager\_Medium-Large*

*"Well the thing is there are some organisations that really are predicated on youth, and you really see it in some of the advertisement. I would like to see some of that banned actually...it is supposed to be illegal but they all do it – 'we want fun, young, energetic people'. Well what does that say to you? They get around it by saying we're a young, fun, energetic company, but I did actually see an ad recently that said they actually wanted a young person, and I felt like ringing them up and saying do you know that's illegal?" Worker\_60-69*

# Section 3: Impacts





## 3.0 Impacts

**Surprise, surprise:** For many workers, age discrimination was something that came as a surprise, rather than something that they expected as part of the ageing process. Many hadn't thought of themselves as "old" – they saw their workplace status as experienced and capable, and they were confident in their abilities to carry out their role with ease. Many felt their contribution to the workforce was something that would also continue for a number of years. As a result, age discrimination, whether a significant incident or a throw away comment by a colleague, would often come as a surprise, and suddenly bring into focus their age and their role within the workforce. Ultimately, this meant they had to decide whether to reconcile their personal view of their age, with that of others.

The implications of age discrimination can range from a minor irritation to having far reaching consequences on a worker's emotional state, professional and financial status and personal life. The impacts are often dependent on a number of factors (*as already discussed*):

- ▶ **The scale of the incident...** Whether the incident was significant or minor could dictate the impact of the discrimination. Minor incidents could often result in temporary irritation, or amusement, but tended not to have longer term impacts on the worker, or their role within the workplace.
- ▶ **A one off or constant occurrence...** Prolonged exposure to age discrimination could have much stronger implications for the worker, their satisfaction within the workplace, their relationships with others and their sense of future within the organisation, in comparison to those who experienced discrimination as an isolated incident.
- ▶ **Feeling of stability within the workplace...** Some workers were relatively confident in their position, and trusted their organisation to support them if faced with any form of discrimination. Their feelings of stability could be borne through longevity within the organisation or their experience in the sector more generally, a sense that management respected them and their abilities, and their sense of alignment with the organisational values. When these factors were missing, the worker could easily develop a sense of disconnection from the broader organisation making it more challenging to cope with discrimination.
- ▶ **Personal resilience...** An individual's level of personal resilience also had an impact on how they were impacted by, and responded to, age discrimination. Some appeared to contextualise and manage the discrimination with minimal consequences to them, or their working world. However, others experiencing a similar issue could be more readily derailed by the experience.
- ▶ **What is at stake...** those with responsibilities, such as a mortgage, or family to support were also impacted more significantly, particularly if they were worried about the security of their current role, or if they were unable to find employment because of their age. Their responsibilities, not surprisingly, placed greater stresses on them (and potentially their family) and had the potential to have much broader reaching consequences.

The implications of age discrimination could be broadly divided into four key areas:

- ▶ **Financial...** Typically a result of being out of work (extended or temporary), or through taking on lower level positions than they had been in the past, for some age discrimination had resulted in financial implications
- ▶ **Personal...** Age discrimination could have a broader impact on the personal lives of workers, for example, on their lives at home, their family or friends.
- ▶ **Working life...** Inevitably, the impact of age discrimination could be felt within the work place, impacting relationships with colleagues, superiors, their sense of job security, and their general sense of satisfaction in the workplace

- ▶ **Emotional...** The result of age discrimination could also be seen emotionally to varying degrees. This could be demonstrated in mild irritation or amusement towards the issue, to much more pronounced consequences such as anxiety and depression.

### 3.1 Financial Impacts

If the job seeker was unemployed or underemployed, the consequences could be far reaching as they faced significant financial challenges in comparison to when they were in the workforce.

The implications could vary depending on their financial commitments. As a result, the financial impact could be felt short term and longer term:

- ▶ **Readjustment of day to day lives...** Having to rethink how they spent their money and adjusting their lifestyle according to a lower budget. This could be as simple as careful budgeting of the weekly shop, to having to make more significant financial decisions, such as changing the schools of their children.
- ▶ **Selling the family home...** For some, they were considering or had already sold off the family home in order to manage financially, seeing their age as more of a longer term barrier to employment. As a result, they felt that they had to consider significant lifestyle and financial changes to allow them to survive without the prospect of a regular income longer term.
- ▶ **Early access to superannuation...** Taking early (temporary in some cases) retirement was one way of ensuring they still had the means to live for the longer term.

*“My standard of living is far less than it used to be... with Centrelink, I have to live on \$660 a fortnight, which is very difficult. Other than that standard of living, I guess, I can’t go out to relieve any stress. I guess life has become more stressful.” Manager\_Small-Medium*

### 3.2 Personal impact

Unquestionably, financial burden could place a great strain on the broader family unit, with partners sometimes having to work extra or for longer, or children uprooted from their school in a bid to downsize their life. Ultimately, the prospect of longer term unemployment could place greater stress on the workers and their lifestyle.

*“The reality is, I’m on my own, my mother will die, my sister is married, she has no reason to financially support me, I’m on my own... I have to rely on myself, which means I have to start thinking laterally, outside the box with a different hat and I need to think, this wasn’t working when I was doing this and doing that. I’ve got to work until I’m 70.” Worker\_50-60*

*“I don’t have a superannuation scheme that’s going to cope for a long period ... for the rest of my retirement life until I die because I just don’t have that money.” Worker\_55-59*

*“It’s difficult. It’s really hard when you keep apply, apply, apply. The young kids go through the same situation where you never hear back from anybody. You’ve just got to be resilient and keep going I suppose...Especially now that, if you’re 50 and you are unemployed ... how do those people feel, knowing that they’re never going to get a job again? It’s not pleasant.” Worker\_55-59*

### 3.3 Impact to working life

Age discrimination undoubtedly could impact the working environment in a number of ways:

- ▶ **Diminishing relationships with superiors...** If the older workers' superiors were younger (though not always), they would begin to question whether they were older or experienced enough to be in their role if they were the perpetrators of age discrimination, or they hadn't responded effectively to the issues the workers had faced. In addition, if the worker felt that the management was actively biased towards a younger workforce (or appeared to favour particular younger workers), this often called into question the managers management skills and ultimately affected how the worker engaged with their manager.
- ▶ **Diminishing relationships with colleagues...** For some older workers, their relationship with colleagues was brought into question if they felt a strong age divide within the organisation. For some, it was simply their different lifestage and interests that prevented them from connecting with their peers, and they accepted this as simply a part of working with a diverse cohort. However, in the more extreme circumstances, their inability to connect made them distrustful of their younger counterparts as they felt they were actively conspiring against them (highlighted through perceptions of whispering, gossiping, about their work skills/abilities).
- ▶ **Feeling under-appreciated...** For some, age discrimination left them feeling underappreciated. This was particularly apparent when they felt that their personal work practices were brought into question by younger or newer team members who carried out tasks differently or appeared to criticise the worker for being slow or inefficient where they themselves felt they were being thorough and detailed.
- ▶ **Inability to learn or progress...** For some, there was a sense that they were no longer able to move up the ranks, and that they wouldn't be considered for promotions. This led to them feeling stuck or trapped in their position, ultimately resulting in disengagement from the organisation and feeling that they didn't have a future.
- ▶ With regards to internal promotions, there was often a sense that the older worker knew the competition pool and were able to assess their chances of success more easily from an earlier stage. Failing to get the position came as a shock and made them question the decision behind the successful applicant, particularly if they felt that they had more appropriate experience. This in turn led them to question the decision making and motivations of the management team, as well as their own future within the organisation. This could result in diminished motivation levels (i.e. carrying out their roles, but only to a basic level), disconnect from the organisation, and from their management team.
- ▶ **Disconnect with company values/culture...** Organisations with a younger workforce, or a focus on hiring younger staff could result in the older workers feeling that they no longer aligned with the future direction of the organisation. This could ultimately result in disconnect from the organisation as a whole, or feeling undervalued or in the more extreme circumstances, surplus to requirements.
- ▶ **Instability and worry about job security...** Often, they felt heightened gratitude to being able to remain in the workforce, and were acutely conscious of safeguarding their position in the longer term. This could result in older workers trying to modify their behaviour in the workplace in a bid to "fly under the radar". They wanted to avoid confrontation or standing out for fear that this may highlight to management that they were a difficult or demanding worker. They felt that if they simply got on with their job and worked hard, they would be able to continue on in their roles for longer:
  - As they faced the issue of age discrimination within their current role, this also led them to worry about how this would impact their chances of finding work elsewhere, should they need to move on, making them even more determined to "cling on" to their current employment, doing whatever they needed to remain in the role
  - Ultimately, this led them to feel that their employment prospects were limited, and they no longer had the choice they once had...

*“I’d like to think that age discrimination is not a big issue, but like I said to you, I’m becoming more and more aware of it and I find myself being protective of my own position as a result of it.”* Manager\_Small-Medium

- ▶ **Forced adaptation...** Ultimately, the covert nature of age discrimination meant that workers felt they were powerless to change or improve their situation. Because they couldn’t prove discrimination, or respond, left workers feeling that they had to change or modify their own behaviours in order to have a future within the workforce. This could mean a simple adjustment to new ways of working and engaging to align with a new culture or to actively reduce their profile by not speaking up and being less interactive in order to be seen to conform.

### 3.4 Emotional impact

In many cases, workers highlighted that they didn’t let the experience of discrimination affect them emotionally, suggesting that the issue wasn’t significant enough to worry about. However, in the most severe circumstances, where age discrimination may have been part of a more complex scenario, the emotional response could be quite extreme, playing out as (self-diagnosed) depression.

In the most extreme circumstances, age discrimination for some workers resulted in them feeling:

- ▶ **Undervalued...** As they combated the notion that they no longer felt they had a future within the organisation, they questioned their own abilities and how others regarded their skills (particularly in relation to a younger skillset). They often felt that their own skills were perceived as outdated, and no longer valued in the working environment...
  - For example, an aged-care nurse who believed that his approach to work was thorough but found his work practices were regularly questioned by younger members of the team and the management. Essentially, what he believed to be diligence was interpreted as slow and inefficient i.e. he was taking too long to get through the workload
- ▶ **Pressured to continue to perform...** This placed extra pressure on individuals to try and perform above and beyond their current duties to find ways to prove that they were still relevant, hardworking and could have a future within the workforce.
- ▶ **Unmotivated...** Not feeling valued could leave them feeling unmotivated, particularly if they felt that they were unlikely to be able to progress or that they had a future within the organisation.
- ▶ **Disconnected:** Often, if there was a distinctive age gap between themselves and their colleagues, the workers could feel socially isolated in the workplace. This could result in them facing difficulties fitting in and unable to effectively connect with colleagues and the organisation more broadly.
- ▶ **Depressed...** Although not always formally diagnosed, some found that they were left with feelings of depression or anxiety as a result of age discrimination.
- ▶ **Powerless...** Those un- or under- employed perceived to be as a result of age (rightly or wrongly), could result in them feeling powerless and unable to respond or take action. This was primarily because they couldn’t prove that their age was the barrier to them finding satisfactory employment.
- ▶ **Hopeless...** The longer they were out of work, the more likely they were to lose hope that future job applications would be successful or that they would be able to work at a similar level to where they had been in the past.
- ▶ **Disengaged...** Ultimately, for some, this resulted in complete disengagement from the workforce, and doubt that they would ever work again.

*“It really knocks your confidence about because you look at a job and think well yeah I could do that work but they’re not going to take me so I’m not even going to bother.”*  
 Manager\_Medium-Large

*"I'm certainly not as confident as I used to be and not as happy. I guess it's all very hard to put into words, you know...I guess I used to go out a lot more often. I guess I was a lot happier, a lot healthier."* Manager\_Small-Medium

*"I know it's been said that women have to prove themselves twice as hard as men. Older adults, it's even more so. And you really are under pressure to perform."*  
Worker\_65+

Ultimately the impacts of age discrimination diminished the individual at both a personal and professional level, and had direct bearing on their current and future productivity, as many ultimately started to question their longevity in the workplace.

# Section 4:

# Age discrimination

# barriers



## 4.0 Age discrimination barriers

The barriers to older workers within the workforce and the recruitment process were apparent at both an organisational and individual level. However, the barriers were not always as a result of the actions or sentiments of others. Arguably, there were incidences where older workers manifested negative social stereotypes and therefore helped to establish or reinforce barriers themselves.

### 4.1 The organisation

- ▶ **Cost to business...** An overarching rationale and key barrier mentioned by both managers and workers alike was the higher cost to business of employing older workers over their younger counterparts. This was largely attributed to the cost of higher wages as a result of experience gained that had subsequently been devalued by the company, for example:
  - The skills and experience acquired by an older worker becoming redundant, e.g. through changes in technology
  - The skill set was no longer considered to appropriately reflect the wage being paid and therefore was no longer providing sufficient value to the firm
  - Experience was seen as a secondary benefit over other attributes that were more readily met by younger employees such as 'energy'. In these instances, employers would rather pay less on the assumption that the younger worker could develop skills relatively quickly.

The 'higher cost' of older workers was also influenced by a belief that older workers were more likely to know their rights and able to argue for higher wages or wage increases.

This higher cost to business resulted in older workers...

- **Being the target...** Of restructures and redundancies, i.e. the most likely to lose their job and/or be given the option of a payout
- **Being excluded from consideration...** Especially in lower skilled jobs where experience was not considered essential or valued.

Where a business appeared to have made a decision to reduce the cost of staffing, resulting in a 'targeting' of older workers, then it was interpreted by workers to be primarily an age based decision that was rationalised by a devaluing of their experience.

*"One of the other reasons why they make older people redundant is so they can hire younger people because they attract lower salaries. A lot lower. If you're up in the top range of your industry then guess what? Your days are numbered."* Workers\_60-69

*"A lot of effort is spent with the young. And it might be the financial returns from a business sense that if you've got somebody who's obviously talented and young and you throw a bit of money at them just to bring them up. You get a bit more bang for your buck than having somebody who's been working in the biz for a fair while but could probably do with a little bit of recent best practice."* Manager\_Medium-Large

*"[Retail staff] just tell me if they're having trouble with the younger ones and their boss says they don't really want the older ones because they're too old. I say 'we're not dead yet, we've had experience'. I've had 35 years' worth of work experience and I know what works and what doesn't. You'll get a 17 year old come in with 'I know what to do' whereas I can say 'No that's not going to work because I've been through what you've been through'. But they seem to want to hire the younger ones, maybe it's cheaper money."* Manager\_Small-Medium

When considering this perspective, it is important to note that cost reduction is inherent in business practice. As such, value to business, performance versus cost of labour are key factors under constant scrutiny.

- ▶ **Stereotype thinking...** Both managers and workers were cognisant that stereotypes of older workers influence management thinking and organisational cultures. These were largely considered to be reflective of stereotypes in the broader community and therefore deeply ingrained and difficult to change.

Many of the stereotypes appeared to be based on a traditional work/life stage model discussed earlier whereby, once reaching the age of 50, it is assumed the worker will focus on transitioning out of employment. Additionally, they seem to be equally influenced by a 'deficit only' view of ageing that suggests ageing only results in the diminishing of the individual.

There were a number of negative stereotypes that were translated to the workplace. These included that the older worker 'suffers' from:

- **A lack of 'hunger'...** Once reaching a 'certain age' or life stage, the older worker no longer aspires to progress their career. Priorities were assumed to shift away from employment as the worker; becomes more conscious of spending time with family and generally seeking a greater life quality, potentially as a result of greater financial freedom. This 'lack of hunger' is also assumed to manifest in how older workers approach new positions with an assumption that they will be less inclined to start a job and invest the energy to learn new skills and adapt quickly.

*"An older person doesn't need as much money I guess, so they might feel that they may not hang around for very long."* Manager\_Small-Medium

- **Diminishing energy...** Another expression of the 'decline' in the older worker is the assumption that their 'energy' dissipates as a result of deterioration in motivation or physiological change. The consequences of this are assumed to be lower productivity and overall enthusiasm in the workplace. This 'youthful exuberance attributed to younger workers' was questioned by some older workers as simply being a reflection of a more uninhibited expression of youth compared to the more measured behaviour of the older worker.

*"Older people just don't work as hard as young people."* Manager\_Medium-Large

- **Inflexibility...** This was commonly expressed as older workers not being open-minded and having a preference toward 'tried and tested' practices as well as being defensive about change. This was also expressed as older workers being 'more difficult or argumentative' to deal with. This was particularly apparent in situations where an organisation was undergoing cultural or management change.

*"The perception that they are going to get tired and they are not going to bend, and that they don't understand."* Manager\_Small-Medium

*"They can't adapt to a different environment, and therefore they sometimes get a bit crotchety and can be a bit, you know, dogmatic or outspoken or, you know, disruptive."* Manager\_Medium-Large

*"The main barriers are the perception that they're not flexible, that they're slower...that they'll be perhaps more difficult because they feel stronger about themselves. It's also got to do with this perception of energy levels-that young people are bubbling and have lots of energy and therefore can do job better."* Worker\_50-54

- **Stale thinking...** Older workers were also categorised as not being capable of contributing 'fresh' ideas or thinking to the business, again diminishing their perceived value to the future of the organisation.
- **Technically incompetent...** A general belief that older workers struggled with new technology, were unable or unwilling to work with new technologies; systems or practices, or simply knew less about technology than their younger peers.



*“It was the system fault – it wasn’t my fault – and it really annoyed me, being spoken to by this particular person. Not all young people are like this, but in particular being spoken to like I was a child...like you don’t know anything.” Worker\_50-69*

- ▶ Beyond the stereotypes that were associated with social beliefs, there was another factor raised in the Government employment context:
  - **Leave focused...** Essentially, there was a connection with older workers being more inclined to take time off work for illness as they neared retirement age. This was perceived to be a key rationale used to support the culling of older workers across Government departments – either through restructure and redundancy and/or restricted job progress opportunities.

*“Can I add that age discrimination is quite deliberate in my organisation, because our minister stood up and spoken about the amount of days people have off... All of a sudden he’s (my manager) gone ‘bring in the new young people and let’s get rid of the old people...” Manager\_Medium-Large*

*“So what’s happening is that people who are older, they’re reaching their retirement age so they’ve got their benefits and they know that’s coming up so they start taking more time off because they’ve built up years’ worth of sick leave...which is a structural issue around annual leave.” Manager\_Medium-Large*

*“We’ve got a load of people on the cusp of retirement, so those people tend to take more time off. There’s a huge focus on absenteeism, so a lot of people are at the point in their careers where they’re going to be leaving, and they’ve built up an enormous amount of sick leave and they take a few days off here, take a few weeks off there before they retire. They’re kind of trying to nip it in the bud, so they’re bringing in a lot of younger people.” Manager\_Medium-Large*

Whether it was one stereotype or a combination of several that were relied upon as a rationale, generally they were considered to be valid and easily substantiated perspectives that influenced decision making in relation to older worker job suitability.

- ▶ **Organisational culture...** Some businesses and sectors were considered to adopt or embrace a ‘youth focused’ culture. Essentially, this was a culture where younger workers:
  - were considered to offer the greatest value to the organisation
  - offered the appropriate image of the organisation
  - demonstrated intuitive understanding of the evolving digital world.

In these environments, older workers could find it difficult to integrate and be accepted by colleagues.

*“There’s this perception across the business that employing younger people is where they want to go, you know, they’re more new to the IT cycle and doing things... That’s one of the reasons why I’m doing this Master of Commerce and I’m doing Business Information Systems because I’ve got to have a piece of paper that says something, but I’ve also got to show that I’m relevant.” Worker\_50-69*

*For whatever reason, employers will employ a younger person... Sometimes the 50 year old is often seen as being too experienced, which is crazy, because they want a job. They’re desperate. They’ll be a very good worker.” Manager\_Medium-Large*

- ▶ **Management disposition...** Beyond the organisational culture and sometimes independent of this, the disposition of the individual manager could present a significant barrier to older workers. This was most apparent when the manager was younger than the employee. Of note, this was about the relative age difference and could still present a problem when the manager was 40+ years. However, it was more apparent when the manager was younger than this and had limited management experience or poor people management skills.

The following attitudinal barriers were more readily attributed to younger managers:

- **Reluctance to engage...** Inability and/ or unwillingness of younger managers to engage with older workers (i.e. considering them different and difficult to relate to – professionally and socially)
- **Threatened...** Young managers feeling threatened by the experience or confidence of an older worker
- **Negative bias...** The young manager tending to only see potential difficulty rather than opportunity and value when they considered a older employee
- **Seeking familiar...** A desire to be surrounded by ‘their own kind’

*“I’ve had older people who wanted to do things the way they’ve always done it and aren’t open to new ideas, versus the young person coming in and telling us we should be doing something in a certain way, when we don’t want to. They get frustrated because they think the old farts in the corner aren’t listening to them, but we might be 10 steps ahead of them.” Manager\_Medium-Large*

- ▶ Older managers (40+) were noted as seeking:
  - **Optimistic team...** The upbeat, positive energy and enthusiasm of a younger team
  - **Easy control...** A preference for the ease with which a younger team could be 'moulded'
 

*"He was quite honest with me and said that he likes to surround himself with people who he feels he would like to emulate. So he likes being surrounded by younger people because he said it invigorated him and I found that a bit strange because he would've been my age then and he was hiring 30 year olds intentionally based on their age; lack of experience wasn't a criteria."* Manager\_Small-Medium
  
- ▶ **Colleagues...** Could also play an influential role in exacerbating the cultural or attitudinal barriers toward older colleagues within the culture of the organisation through:
  - **Workplace avoidance...** Older workers noted that once they were 'singled out' others became conscious of this and would start to avoid them in the workplace. Essentially reinforcing the growing sense of being a 'persona non grata'
  - **Social exclusion...** Excluding older workers from social activities in the office and outside was viewed by some as yet another means of isolating the older worker as they became detached from the broader culture of the company
  - **Derogatory comments...** Side comments that highlighted age or referenced some of the social stereotypes
  - **Patronising...** Not recognising the experience of the older worker and by virtue of this, denigrating their value
  
- ▶ **Organisational structures...** It was noted by managers and HR professionals that sometimes businesses are simply not conscious of the bias against older workers that becomes established within the business. This can be a result of policies and practices that result in age discrimination. However, from a workers perspective, any instance of perceived age discrimination was not a result of 'unknown' bias by the organisation.

*"I don't think companies look at older people and what their values are, and if there's something in the workplace that can be changed to accommodate them or make the role more suitable"* Manager\_ Medium-Large

*"I've attended meetings for the last 5 years with HR, and I think their policies are brilliant and I think everything they say is absolutely brilliant and I totally support them, but I don't think they put it into practice."* Worker\_50-60

Alternatively, there was mention by managers that some legislative structures or conditions of Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBA's) can also make it difficult for an organisation to accommodate the needs of older workers e.g. EBA conditions that do not allow for reduced hours or flexible working. Equally, there was mention that superannuation conditions are not conducive to assisting transitioning practices in a business. Neither of these points was further detailed.

*"I think some organisations can really pivot and help to create what fits the person they have in front of them, and some organizations don't have the agility or want to do it, but based on how the market has to compete in Australia and globally, they really don't have that business flexibility to do so...Having said that, we have some constraints from a business perspective in our superannuation structure for our ageing population. Part of that superannuation structure goes into how we contract our employees in what we do or don't have to pay, and where do things cut off and stop and start and finish? So I think there's endemically a structure to the way we look at what's happening..."I think it's attitudes and flexibility of employment...it might be different for people in different businesses or age groups. I think that's what needs to be changed over a period of time"* Manager\_ Medium-Large

## 4.2 The worker

Older workers also acknowledged that they themselves could contribute to age discrimination. These barriers were noted by both workers and managers:

- ▶ **Manifesting stereotypes...** This was most apparent through workers 'confessing' that they could be outspoken or share an opinion – in the belief that this was their way of being honest and engaged. However finding themselves in an environment that no longer tolerated this form of feedback.

*“People who are in their middle life experiences as a professional tend to have a more set understanding of how things work and that’s when you can end up butting heads with people...you get a bit self-opinionated, and you think your life experiences mean you know everything and you tend to stand your ground a bit longer.”* Manager\_Small-Medium

- ▶ **Lifestage constraints...** Some mentioned that the lifestage challenges would place greater pressure on them as they tried to manage ageing parents and teenagers, resulting in an increased need for work flexibility. It also meant they had more to juggle when trying to embrace greater responsibilities.

*“I think that was a contributing factor to my redundancy. My mother was living in Adelaide and became ill and although my brother was there to do most of the looking after her, there were times when I had to go over there and so I took time off, and they managed without m. They decided they could manage full-time without me.”* Worker\_60-69

- ▶ **Desire to slow down/change in focus...** Some noted that there was a desire to slow down and lessen the focus on career development and progress. Alternatively, they could struggle with the physical demands of their work.

*“You’re pretty good until you turn fifty, and after fifty that’s when you really start to feel the aches and pains, and you start to slow up a lot quicker.”* Manager\_Small-Medium

- ▶ **Appearing difficult to deal with...** One manager highlighted that the older workers in a section of their organisation deliberately acted up, and made it clear that they didn’t want to be at work.

## 4.3 Barriers in recruitment

Barriers encountered by older workers were equally apparent in the recruitment process and/or attitudes toward recruitment of new staff:

- ▶ **Future business mindset...** A commonly expressed consideration amongst managers when hiring staff was the likelihood of the prospective employee being appropriate for the ‘future of the business’. The assumption was that a younger employee would be more suitable for longer term business prosperity. This ‘future’ mindset was further compounded by a ‘rule of thumb’/well known practice, noted by HR managers of larger organisations, of hiring employees on the basis that they are capable of progressing two levels. Again, this practice worked against the older worker.

*“You don’t want someone for 6 months; you want them for 6 years, for instance.”*

Manager\_Small-Medium

*“I would consider the longevity, if I’m going to take someone on with that particular firm or experience I’d be looking at their age. I’m not going to train someone if they’re going to retire on me or something like that so I would consider looking at someone at least getting ten years’ work out of them.”* Manager\_Small-Medium

- ▶ **Recruitment risk...** One manager stated that she had been advised not to employ staff over 40 years of age. This mindset was considered by HR managers to be somewhat unique and more pronounced in Australia than Asia or Europe. In these organisations, HR managers felt somewhat constrained in their ability to challenge the status quo due to the perceived risk of employing a staff member who presents a challenge to convention and then may not deliver to the business.

The risk associated with hiring new staff was noted by both managers and HR managers in particular. They highlighted that making a poor choice in personnel was not considered to reflect well on them, and making several poor choices was considered a genuine risk to their professional standing and career. Consequently, there was a reluctance to take unnecessary chances on staff. HR managers who wanted to challenge this more conservative mindset which acted as a barrier to older workers, needed to be:

- **Patient...** Had to take small steps to instill change
- **Strategic...** Needing to ensure that the appropriate stakeholders were on board
- **Cooperative...** Sometimes, simply complying to the organisational culture in relation to age.

- ▶ **Worker perspective...** Workers were aware that they could also find the recruitment process difficult. This was especially apparent for those who had not had to apply for a position for a number of years, in some cases this could be up to 10 to 20 years. For these workers, they felt acutely ‘out of touch’ with the process, the types of tools and assessments used and the general disposition that is required in today’s market:

- **Process barriers...** Having to use online systems or undergo tests that they hadn’t been exposed to
- **Presentation...** Older workers were aware that they required training in how to engage with the job market again, to learn the new rules and understand how to present themselves in the most compelling and competitive manner.
- **Forced age disclosure...** In a bid to increase their chance of gaining an interview, older workers would adapt their CV’s to minimise reference to their age and years of experience. However, there were instances where recruiters would ask for copies of documents – forklift tickets, drivers license etc. which would then highlight the workers age. This was noted as the point at which they were excluded from the recruitment process.
- **Diminishing confidence...** A key barrier for older workers but not necessarily unique to this cohort was the lack of feedback from prospective employers as to why they were unsuccessful in the recruitment process. This lack of feedback lead the worker to assume there was an age

based barrier which could establish a diminished sense of confidence and belief in their relevance and value in the workforce.

*“There’s a point in your life, probably in your early 50s, where if you are...made redundant, you’ve got some serious problems. There’s still enough time left for you to have a second half, you know, another 10-15 years’ worth of work. And the expectation for many organisations is that you would come in and want to function at a certain level. And if you don’t meet that expectation, it’d be lower, you know, things would be more limited.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

*“I guess when they see [on] my resume that I haven’t worked, haven’t been able to get work for the last – really since 2011 – I guess that is probably a huge factor...I’ve taken out everything that may indicate that I’m over 50. But I still think it’s discrimination in both areas I think, age and disability.”* Manager\_Small-Medium

# Section 5: Solutions



## 5.0 Solutions

The requirement for education was a common solution proposed by workers and managers. In some cases, it was considered the only solution as many recognised that discriminatory attitudes were a reflection of broader community sentiment. Consequently, the opportunity to genuinely and substantially eradicate age discrimination was considered a significant undertaking and one that may well take a number of years. There was mention that it was akin to changing peoples' attitudes toward smoking or wearing seatbelts.

That said, it was not considered to be an impossible task but one that would require a mix of solutions at a social, organisational, recruitment and individual level.

Although education and training were considered fundamental to inspire change, a range of other initiatives were felt to be of value to help change behaviours amongst all parties and help expedite action by the organisations.

### 5.1 Social awareness and education

Communications campaigns were considered a key mechanism to change the social narrative around ageing more broadly and older workers in particular. This included:

- ▶ **Opening the discussion...** A range of media activities to start a conversation on the topic of ageing. The aim would be to challenge common myths, provide depth and insight into the area and cut through some of the shallow or sensationalist reporting of media.
- ▶ **Communications campaign...** A comprehensive and substantial advertising campaign developed by the government to raise the profile of older citizens in the community. This campaign would 'reframe' the social positioning of older citizens - showcase how older citizens contribute to the community and the diversity within the older age group.
- ▶ **Social initiatives...** Instigate more grass roots initiatives that allow for greater integration of older members of the community with younger age groups to break down barriers towards understanding e.g. engaging older people with children and younger people through primary and secondary school programs.
- ▶ **Business community...** A communications program targeting organisations to highlight the benefit of older workers in the workplace.
- ▶ **The intent...** Of the above initiatives is to change the social narrative around older age, move away from the deficit based assumptions around older age and present a more varied, realistic and positive image of ageing:

*"I think there is a need for some inter-generational education, because if you think about it and go back when women were only secretaries or you had to really fight for your job, and I've never been discriminated against because of gender which is kind of weird, but maybe it's the same sort of thing with age – people have to learn different work relationships."* Manager\_Medium-Large

*"Maybe businesses could have a sticker somewhere at their business, like the heart foundation tick, that says 'we are an organisation that...' right? 'And we have met the government criteria of being fully inclusive'...maybe that's a bit of an incentive?"*  
Manager\_Medium-Large



*“I think there is a possibility over time of changing the discrimination, and I think you’ve seen it work on some of the health issues and with getting more women into the workforce and being more accepting of gay people in the workplace.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

## 5.2 Training

Education in the form of tailored training was also considered a key means of addressing age discrimination for managers, recruitment specialists and workers.

- ▶ **Managers/ HR managers and recruitment specialists training...** were all seen to benefit from similar training that would focus on;
  - **Contribution...** Understanding the value and benefit of employing older workers through building awareness of how they can integrate into organisations (i.e. mixed age teams, mentoring roles)
  - **Personal bias...** Being made aware of stereotype thinking, and how this can manifest in behaviours and language to fuel an environment of discrimination
  - **Interpersonal skills...** Learning how to engage with line managers who are older than themselves – to constructively manage conflict, and build positive team engagement across age groups
  - **Management accountability...** To ensure training is a catalyst for positive change, the introduction of 360 feedback protocols (whereby staff have the opportunity to comment on management feedback) was thought to be a practical mechanism to allow a ‘voice’ for older workers to raise issues and a mechanism to highlight potential age bias
- ▶ **Worker based training...** A variety of training initiatives were recommended for employees by both workers and managers. Underpinning these solutions was recognition that the employment market is dynamic and one that now often requires a constant rejuvenation of skills in order for workers to retain relevance and value.
  - **Career planning...** It was apparent amongst many older workers who found themselves stymied at work or having to change jobs that little thought had been given to career planning for this latter stage in their career. The idea of changing sectors or redefining their image tended to be a response to circumstances rather than a proactive approach to their career management. Introducing mechanisms or a mindset around career reviews at key junctures including based on age (e.g. 40) would help older workers assess their circumstances, prepare for potential change and actively seek solutions to increase their longevity in the workforce.
  - **Recruitment skills...** A clear need expressed by workers was for training on how to undertake the job seeking process. Workers were aware that systems and interviewing styles had changed and they required assistance in knowing how to navigate this new environment and succeed. Training could include the fundamentals of how to prepare a CV through to how to manage the interview. In relation to the latter, workers required assistance in how to manage an interview scenario where they were older than the interviewer.
  - For example, one resourceful manager reported that he learned how to bypass the “gatekeeper”. He was pursuing an executive leadership role in a niche area (electrical engineering) and was able to identify the employer from the minimal details provided in the recruitment organisation advertisement. He then contacted the employer directly and expressed his interest in the position. He reported that the employer admired his initiative, gave him an interview and ended up giving him a job.
  - **Skills development...** Workers recognised that in some instances it was necessary for them to find a new sector to move into. In order to achieve this, there could be a requirement for formal education and skill development. Providing ‘older age’ subsidies was seen as a practical means to facilitate workers to refresh or create new skills.

*“As long as the workforce is prepared to assist in reskilling either as a permanent they reskill them or if they’re a private person – a private contractor – they encourage them to be reskilled with some support.”* Worker\_55-59

*“I think if they employed more young people to give the older people the chance to become educators or something like that. Maybe a bonus system where if they kept the older people on under a training scheme, and every older person they kept on they got a younger person to train. So it’s more of an enticement. And give the younger ones better training.” Worker\_60-64*

*“I think they should be looking more at training the young ones, and perhaps using the older people as educators. My job is hard enough. It’s very physically demanding and at the moment I can do it because I haven’t got any health issues. But some people do develop health issues as they get older and they shouldn’t be punished because of that. They mightn’t be sick enough to go off on a pension, but they needn’t be made to feel inferior because they can’t keep up with it. There should be something else for them.” Worker\_60-64*

### 5.3 Dedicated support systems

A key challenge for workers was not having easy and readily identifiable access to objective support i.e. support that had their best interests at heart whilst working and also in the job seeking process.

Suggested solutions included:

- ▶ **An advice line...** A confidential and worker focused service to provide guidance on their rights and also how to constructively assess their situation and manage a response

Advice that could be provided through the organisation via Human Resources was not considered to be objective and tended to place the organisational needs first. There was also the underlying fear of risk to job security if internal action was taken. Workers wanted to feel empowered to speak up and identify what they considered to be age discrimination but could be at a loss of who they could speak with.

- ▶ **Dedicated recruitment services for the older workers...** Essentially recruitment support tailored to older workers’ market in particular. This was seen as a practical measure to mitigate the age discrimination encountered within the recruitment sector as this service would:

- Understand their needs and challenges
- Recognise the benefits of maturity and the value they would contribute
- Provide practical advice and guidance
- Genuinely work to their benefit

*“That’s what I’m saying about the self-awareness and the self-learning agility-we need to teach our older people, a bit more about what they’re asking for and maybe how to ask for it in a better way, or how to look at re-packaging themselves.” Manager\_ Medium-Large*

*“Whether you’re 25 or 65, I need someone who’s going to fulfil the needs of my business, and if you’re not going to show that energy or that drive, and you walk in expecting things...it’s like how do we re-shape the workforce to understand the level they want to work in to get them in the right headspace to grab those jobs.” Manager\_Medium-Large*

## 5.4 Drivers of change

Both workers and managers felt that for change to occur it was necessary for organisations to be encouraged to activate inclusive behaviours and sentiment in relation to older workers. There was recognition that the business case of an organisation would dictate the appetite to embrace older workers and therefore may require extra incentive. Options explored included a mix of initiatives to inspire change versus others that would enforce change:

### ► Inspiring change:

- **Incentive schemes...** Noted as being a possible option to inspire organisations to consider hiring older workers. However, it was recognised as an approach that has already been tried and was not without its challenges. A key concern was the possibility of organisations exploiting the scheme i.e. taking on the employers for a period of time, receiving the incentive and then the job being terminated.
- **Organisation recognition...** Workers suggested that organisations that demonstrated positive behaviours could be afforded recognition or accreditation.
- **Instilling values...** To establish a series of core values that worked to create a positive organisational culture and set of behaviours in relation to older workers.
- **Management driven...** To inspire senior executives and managers to drive the change throughout the organisation. Senior executive endorsement was considered to be essential for any genuine change to occur within an organisation.
- **Mentoring...** To take a more lateral view of the role of older workers and consider options such as mentoring roles. Although this was strongly encouraged by workers, managers were less enthused as again, the business case would be more difficult to support.
- **Transition practices...** To encourage greater flexibility in the workplace to facilitate transition to retirement such as; flexible working hours and reduced days per week to increase overall workplace longevity. There was an indication that whilst flexible working options are considered by organisations they were not a commonplace solution for the older worker of 50+.

*“Well I think they ought to have some older people on the interview panels who can relate to older people. They should basically just not look at an age on an application and just say oh well they’re no good.”* Worker\_65+

*“This is the other thing, the government creates some policies...which are meant to help except there’s no enforcement, and there is no follow-up, no accountability. So those things never work. They’re great for scams and abuse, and that is why they’ve been part of the problem. They have another scheme if you want to re-train, because they say if you want to do lifelong learning you’ve got to re-train...and yep we’re all happy to do that but our savings only last so long, then you’ve got to start thinking well is this a reasonable thing to be doing?”* Worker\_60-69

### ► Enforcing change... the intention of initiatives to enforce change was to inspire a faster response by organisations. There were only a couple of suggestions in this regard:

- **Quotas...** These were discussed as a potential option and received mixed reviews amongst workers and managers in particular. For some, quotas were considered a necessary step to ensure older worker representation. However, the practical application also raised concerns about the negative impact on business in terms of diminished skills as individuals may not be recruited on merit.
- **Penalties...** Some mentioned establishing a penalty for organisations that do not employ older workers or actively discriminate against them. A penalty was thought to be a tangible way to ensure organisations take note of the importance of the issue.

*“So there probably should be quotas of people over a certain age that work in every business. And I can still remember, years ago, and I’m not sure if it’s still the same in retail, we used to have to have a percentage of juniors to seniors, there was a ratio”*  
Worker\_55-59

*“I think there could be a body that’s set up, like a union or an OH&S rep who you can go to. Maybe you can go to your OH&S rep, I don’t know. They’ve probably not been trained in that area. So maybe if you’ve got an organization or a body, or a central number you could call and they could give you advice. But honestly I don’t know how you’re going to tackle this. It’s a big problem. I think it’s like the iceberg, it’s all a bit murky and under the radar.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

*“I think the government needs to look at how it’s treating the ageing population in its totality, and if they start becoming more effective in how they handle a variety of things around our ageing population I think that will help the groundswell in business to move along with that...if we start pushing the fact that this is a great group of people that built this country and we support them more.”* Manager\_Medium-Large

# Section 6: Conclusions



## 6.0 Conclusions

Age discrimination can generally come as a surprise to older workers even though, stereotype thinking in relation to older people is considered prevalent in both the community and the workplace.

Older workers are a 'mixed bag' representing much of the variance apparent among the broader working community. Some were more motivated than others, some were highly resilient whilst others appeared less so, and there were those who embraced a 'slowing down' they attributed to age whilst others simply refused to be defined by age. However, all older workers that have experienced age discrimination are, to some extent, having to contend with a limited view and perspective on what being older means at a physical, intellectual and emotional level.

The era of overt and blatant age discrimination does appear to be largely over. Most employers and workers are aware that making age an obvious barrier to employment, promotion and access to other workplace opportunities is now illegal. Today's expression of age discrimination can occur in various guises but was most commonly experienced in a subtle and indirect fashion either at recruitment and / or during the course of employment. The often nebulous nature of the experience can leave many older workers feeling uncertain about their ability to take action due to a lack of 'hard evidence'.

Despite the variability of the experience, the impacts can be profound and affect the individual at a personal, social and professional level. The negative impact can diminish an individual's confidence and perceived capacity in workplace participation by stymieing further progression and at worst, preventing continued engagement.

For age discrimination to be addressed it is apparent that a comprehensive solution is necessary; a solution that involves the engagement of all parties; community, organisational, recruiters and workers.

A fundamental requirement is the necessity to shift the stereotypes and misconceptions around older workers, their capacity and capability. To inspire a more positive understanding and appreciation of the older worker, one that challenges the deficit based perspective of ageing that views chronological age as the only measure of note.

Education is not just required to challenge attitudes but also to reconsider the demands of the current work environment. Tenure and experience are no longer a guarantee of longevity. In this context, there is an increasing need for more proactive latter stage, career and transition planning amongst older workers and organisations that employ this cohort.

The shift in community attitude is unlikely to yield positive impact without significant investment. To motivate change, in a relatively timely fashion, a clear focus is required on organisations, including recruitment and management practices. Although incentives or penalties can be employed to encourage corporate compliance, for genuine progress, it has to be recognised that business are unlikely to pursue activities that are in conflict with the broader organisational goals. Older workers need to be viewed as fit for purpose and able to effectively contribute to the needs of the organisation. In some instances, this may not be feasible, in others it may be a matter of more flexible work practices or new ways of working that recognise different life stages, in others it may require a change of attitude.

Although some progress may well have been achieved in that overt age discrimination is less prevalent, the current challenge is to shine a light on the subtle behaviour and bias that result in age discrimination. To continue to challenge that organisational decision making is based on actual capability and potential rather than an assumed diminished state.

## APPENDIX 1: Research materials

# Recruitment screener

## Recruitment Specifications

Client: Australian Human Rights Commission Study no. 25397

Date: 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015 Version: 1

Hello, my name is (... ..) and I'm calling from EY Sweeney, an independent national social research company.

We are currently conducting an important study with workers who have been treated less favourably than others, as a result of their age, or attitudes towards their age and HR/Managers who make decisions around staff. The research will help better understand experiences and to develop strategies to better address these issues in the future.

We understand that you participated in a telephone survey in 2014 with Roy Morgan research on behalf of the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and agreed to participate in follow up research. Could I confirm that this is the case:

YES

**NO – Thank and close**

We are looking for people who are willing to participate in a confidential face to face interview about your experiences. You would receive \$80 in return for your time and an additional \$40 for completion of a small activity prior to the interview. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to take part.

**Recruiter Note:** If respondent would like more information:

EY Sweeney is an independent research company and not affiliated with the Australian Government or its departments. This means that the information that you share through the interview will be treated in confidence. The AHRC will receive copies of the transcripts and recording, but will be de-identified first to ensure your anonymity and will only be passed on with your approval. Our researchers are bound by the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour to maintain your anonymity throughout the process.

Would you be willing to take part in a paid interview to discuss your experiences?

**NO – Thank and close**

**YES – CONTINUE**

That's great. We're looking to speak to a range of people for this research. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions about you and your circumstances so that I can see if you are eligible to take part in this research?

S1	Record gender (Confirm if necessary)	Check quotas	Male	1
	<b>Recruiter: check quotas</b>	Check quotas	Female	2
S2	Could you please confirm your age as...?  <b>Recruiter to check sample &amp; quotas</b> <b>Do not read out</b>	Check quotas	50-54 years	1
		Check quotas	55-59 years	2
		Check quotas	60-64 years	3
		Check quotas	65+ years	4



<p>S3</p> <p>At any time in the last two years (since 2013), have you;</p> <p><b>Multiple choice</b> <b>Recruiter: mix</b></p>		<p>Worked for a wage or salary _____ 1</p> <p>Been self-employed _____ 2</p> <p>Actively looked for paid work _____ 3</p> <p>None of these _____ 4</p>
<p>S4</p> <p>Could you confirm your current employment status:</p> <p><b>Include a mix / single response</b></p>		<p>Full time (35 hours per week) _____ 1</p> <p>Part time _____ 2</p> <p>Casual _____ 3</p> <p>Contacted _____ 4</p> <p>Retired _____ 5</p> <p>Looking for work _____ 6</p> <p>Other _____ 7</p>
<p>S5</p> <p>Which one of the following statements best describes your <b>current or previous</b> role in your organization?</p> <p><b>Recruiter: Check Quotas / monitor</b></p>		<p><b>HR/Manager</b> I am the sole decision maker with regards to hiring and managing staff _____ 1</p> <p><b>HR/Manager</b> I make decisions in conjunction with other members of the business with regards to hiring and managing staff _____ 2</p> <p><b>Worker</b> I have no involvement in decisions regarding the management or hiring of new staff _____ 3</p>
<p>S6</p> <p>In the last two years, and since turning 50, have you at any time been treated less favourably than other people in a similar situation in your workplace because of your age or because of assumptions made about older people?</p>		<p>Check quotas Yes _____ 1</p> <p>Check quotas No _____ 2</p>
<p>S7</p> <p>In the last two years, and since turning 50, have you been treated less favourably than other people in a similar situation because of your age or assumptions made about older people when applying for a job, promotion or looking at other development opportunities?</p>		<p>Check quotas Yes _____ 1</p> <p>Check quotas No _____ 2</p>
<p>S8</p> <p>Are you aware of others in the workplace who have experienced less favourable treatment on the basis of their age or perceptions about their age?</p> <p><b>Recruiter note: across the sample, ensure some participants have witnessed unfair treatment</b></p>		<p>Check quotas Yes _____ 1</p> <p>Check quotas No _____ 2</p>

**SCREENER NOTE:**

**HR/Managers:** include a mix of those who have personally experienced discrimination (S6/7=1), witnessed discrimination (S8=1).

**Workers:** Must either experienced discrimination in the workplace (S6=1) OR when applying for a job or promotion or other development opportunities (S7=1) OR have whitnessed others being treated less favourably (S8=1) – INCLUDE A MIX OF EXPERIENCES

<b>ASK IF CODE 3 AT S3, OR CODE 6 AT S4</b>		<u>Check quotas</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>1</u>
S9	And, during the last two years, would you have liked to have been in <b>regular</b> paid employment at times when you haven't been?	<u>Continue</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>2</u>
<b>ASK IF CODE 1 AT S9</b>		<u>Health reasons</u>		<u>1</u>
S10a	Thinking about the reasons why you haven't been in employment over the past two years, what is the main reason you have not been in the workforce?	<u>Outdated skills</u>		<u>2</u>
		<u>Family reasons</u>		<u>3</u>
		<u>Concern about age discrimination</u>		<u>4</u>
		<u>Retirement</u>		<u>5</u>
	<b>Ensure some Code 1 – please monitor</b>	<u>Lack of employment opportunities</u>		<u>6</u>
		<u>Other (specify)</u>		<u>7</u>
<b>ASK IF CODE 3 AT S3, OR CODE 6 AT S4</b>		<u>Less than 6 months ago</u>		<u>1</u>
S10b	When was the last time you were in paid employment?	<u>6-12 months ago</u>		<u>2</u>
		<u>12-24 months ago</u>		<u>3</u>
	<b>Recruit a mix</b>	<u>Longer than 24 months ago</u>		<u>4</u>
S11	Do you identify as:	<u>Aboriginal</u>		<u>1</u>
		<u>Torres Strait Islander</u>		<u>2</u>
	<b>Monitor quotas</b>	<u>Australian South Sea Islander</u>		<u>3</u>
		<u>Other (State)</u>		<u>4</u>
		<u>None of the above</u>		<u>5</u>
S12	Do you identify as being from a non-English speaking background?	<b><u>YES – Confirm:</u></b>		
		<u>Italian</u>		<u>1</u>
		<u>Greek</u>		<u>2</u>
	<b>Monitor quotas</b>	<u>Cantonese</u>		<u>3</u>
		<u>Mandarin</u>		<u>4</u>
		<u>Arabic</u>		<u>5</u>
		<u>Vietnamese</u>		<u>6</u>
		<u>Other (Specify)</u>		<u>7</u>
		<b><u>NO – ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND</u></b>		<u>8</u>
S12	Have you ever been diagnosed with a disability or condition that impairs or limits your physical movements, senses	<u>Yes</u>		<u>1</u>
		<u>No</u>		<u>2</u>

or activities?

Aim to include some who identify as having a disability

**ASK IF S5=1 OR 2 (HR/Managers Only)**

S13	How many people are employed by your business?	Terminate	I am a sole trader	1
		Continue	2 – 10 employees	2
		Continue	10 – 20 employees	3
		Continue	20-25 employees	4
		Continue	25-100 employees	5
		Continue	100+ employees	6
<b>Note to recruiter: check quotas</b>				
<b>SME: 2-25 employees</b>				
<b>Medium/Large: 25+ employees</b>				

**ASK ALL**

S14	Can you confirm that you live in...?	Victoria - Melbourne	1
		Victoria – Regional	2
		NSW – Sydney	3
		NSW – Regional	4
		QLD – Brisbane	5
		QLD – Regional	6
		SA – Adelaide	7
		SA – Regional	8
		TAS	9
		WA – Perth	10
		WA – Regional	11
		Other (specify)	12
<b>NOTE TO RECRUITER: CONFIRM USING SAMPLE</b>			
<b>Recruiter: check quotas</b>			

S15	<b>If currently working:</b> Which of the following industries does your organisation fall into?	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	01
		Mining	02
		Manufacturing	03
		Utilities	04
		Construction	05
		Wholesale trade	06
		Retail trade	07
		Accommodation and food services	08
		Transport, postal, warehousing	09
		Information, media, telecommunications	10
		Financial and insurance services	11
		Rental, hiring and real estate services	12
		Professional, scientific and technical services	13
		Administrative and support services	14
		Public administration and safety	15
		Education and training	16
<b>If not currently working:</b> what industry sector was the last organisation your worked for?			
<b>Note to recruiter: recruit a mix</b>			

		<u>Health care and social assistance</u>	<u>17</u>
		<u>Arts and recreational services</u>	<u>18</u>
		<u>Other</u>	<u>19</u>
S16	What is the highest level of education you have obtained	<u>Less than Year 10 (haven't completed)</u>	<u>1</u>
		<u>Year 10-11 (haven't completed)</u>	<u>2</u>
	<b>Select one only</b>	<u>Completed secondary (have completed)</u>	<u>3</u>
		<u>Vocational education (have completed)</u>	<u>4</u>
	<b>Recruit a mix</b>	<u>Tertiary (have completed)</u>	<u>5</u>
		<u>Other</u>	<u>6</u>
		<u>Prefer not to say</u>	<u>7</u>

### INELIGIBLE RESPONDENTS

Unfortunately you are not eligible to take part in this research as our quotas for workers in your situation have already been filled. Thank you for taking the time to discuss this research with me just now.

### ELIGIBLE RESPONDENTS

Congratulations! You are eligible to take part in this research.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in an interview – it will be really helpful to hear about your experiences.

Interviews will be conducted by an experienced researcher at a time and place that is convenient to you and will last around an hour.

**Workers Only:** Before the interview, we would like to ask you to complete a short written activity. The activity will help you to start thinking about what we will be talking about during the interview, as well as help us to understand a bit more about you. You will receive information about the activity closer to the date of your interview.

**Managers/HR...** Before the interview, please take 10-15 minutes to jot down the details of your experience of older age discrimination

#### [If respondent would like more information about the interview or EY Sweeney]

EY Sweeney is an independent research company. We are **not affiliated** with the Australian Government, or the Australian Human Rights Commission. Our researchers are bound by Codes of Professional Behaviour to make sure your involvement is completely anonymous.

#### [If respondent agrees to participate]

S17	Thank you for helping us with this research. Could I please confirm that you are still happy to participate?	<u>Yes</u>	<u>1</u>
		<u>No (thank and close)</u>	<u>2</u>
S18	Thank you. It is standard practice for interviews to be recorded to help researchers so they can focus on the discussion with you, rather than taking notes during the interview	<u>Yes - EY Sweeney can audio record your interview, for use by researchers for analysis purposes</u>	<u>1</u>
	<b>Can I confirm if it would be okay for your interview to be recorded ?</b>	<u>No</u>	<u>2</u>

If you don't want the interview to be recorded you can just let the interviewers know. It won't affect you participating in the interview.

Just in case you change your mind, the researcher will ask you again at the time of your interview whether or not you consent to having your interview audio-recorded.

**End of Interview (if eligible and willing to take part):**

Thank you, I just need to collect your contact information so that we can send you confirmation and details of your interview and the activity we talked about earlier.

I would like to confirm that you are in no way obligated to participate, and should you decide at any point before the interview that you do not wish to participate, please let us know, by calling 1800 00 47 47, leaving your name and phone number.

<b>Off-site venue details (IF REQUIRED):</b>	
Relevant project	
Date of recruitment:	[insert]
Respondent's name:	[insert]
Phone number:	[insert home/business] [insert mobile – <b>REQUIRED</b> ]
Address:	[insert]
Email address:	[insert]

WORKERS Individual depth interview structure					Group structure
Target market		Metro (3 locations)	Non Metro (2 locations)	Total depths	
50-54	Male	2	2	4 depths	1 group
	Female	2	2	4 depths	
55-59	Male	2	2	4 depths	1 group
	Female	2	2	4 depths	
60-64	Male	2	2	4 depths	1 group
	Female	2	2	4 depths	
65+	Male	2	2	4 depths	1 group
	Female	2	2	4 depths	
<b>Total</b>		<b>16 depths</b>	<b>16 depths</b>	<b>32 depths</b>	<b>4 groups</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>32 depths and 4 groups</b>			

MANAGERS Individual depth interview structure				Group structure
Target market	Metro	Non Metro	Total depths	
Small/ Medium	6	4	10	2 group
Medium / Large	6	4	10	2 group
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>20 depths</b>	<b>4 groups</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>20 depths and 4 groups</b>		

# Australian Human Rights Commission

## **AGE DISCRIMINATION**

Discussion guide - **WORKERS/ MANAGER DEPTHS**

EY Sweeney contacts: Jen Hodges, Jo Kirkhope, Ros  
Lording

REF NO. 25397 • VERSION 4

## The RESEARCH objective

- ▶ Explore the experience and impact of age related, employment discrimination amongst older Australians

The specific objectives are...

Experiences and impacts of age discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To identify who experiences employment-related age discrimination</li> <li>▶ To explore the nature of the employment-related age discrimination experience</li> <li>▶ To reveal the impacts of such discrimination, especially in terms of participation in the workforce</li> <li>▶ To examine the extent to which age discrimination contributes to people being employed, unemployed or underemployed</li> </ul>
Reducing and mitigating age discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To understand age-related barriers to obtaining employment or in the workplace and potential solutions to overcome these barriers</li> <li>▶ To explore perceptions of the effectiveness of existing laws and regulatory mechanisms in reducing age discrimination</li> <li>▶ To understand the employee and employer perspective on what may be implemented to reduce or mitigate age discrimination</li> </ul>
Good practice and policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To compile examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability</li> </ul>



## Discussion overview

The following discussion guide provides an overview of the areas that will be covered in this study. It is not intended to be a prescriptive list of questions. The sessions will be free-flowing and the moderator will pursue issues/reactions/thoughts as they arise, while ensuring all of the key areas are covered off.

It is imperative that moderators ensure the well-being of participants at all time. If respondents are appearing challenged or distressed, moderators will:

- ▶ Re-phrase questions to ensure heightened sensitivity, avoiding words that have been identified as triggering a negative emotional reaction
- ▶ Stop the interview and arrange suitable support if necessary and as per the needs/preferences of the participant, for example, a friend or family member
- ▶ Take a short break to allow the participant to settle and regain their composure

At the completion of every interview, all participants will be provided with an information sheet containing information on the availability of different support services. This information sheet will be provided within the context that “it is often good to know there is someone to talk to about things”.

The broad flow of the interviews can be summarised as follows...

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>10 minutes</b>
<b>2. Personal Experience</b>	<b>25 minutes</b>
<b>3. Impact of the discrimination</b>	<b>10 minutes</b>
<b>4. Reflecting on the experience</b>	<b>10 minutes</b>
<b>5. Solutions</b>	<b>5 minutes</b>

## Discussion guide

<p><b>1. Introduction</b></p> <p>OBJ: Build rapport with participant, outline the purpose of the research and confirm confidentiality and industry protocols</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Topic... understand your experience with discrimination as a result of age, and the challenges you faced in order to get insight into how people are best supported in these circumstances</li> <li>▶ Viewing and recording... mention that the interview will be recorded only with the consent of the participant</li> <li>▶ Confidentiality and industry code of conduct</li> <li>▶ Agreement to pass on the recordings</li> <li>▶ Respondent introduction: ask respondent to talk through a little about themselves, their employment experience, and their current situation.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– family status</li> <li>– industry</li> <li>– work skills</li> <li>– past employment experience</li> <li>– current work status</li> <li>– preferred work status (i.e. where they would like to be currently in their employment)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(10 mins)</p>
<p><b>2. Personal Experience</b></p> <p>OBJ: Understand the experience of age discrimination from the workers perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Moderator to determine circumstances around which the respondent was treated unfairly:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Was it in the workplace/when applying for a job or promotion?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ Talk us through the time(s) when you feel you/others have been treated less favourably than others as a result of your/their age (moderator note: if the incident was small, explore more about why they felt this was age discrimination, and what difference it made to them. Even if this was small).             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What happened? (Note, understand how significant this was to them)</li> <li>– When did this happen (note - understand whether it was on-going, or one-off)</li> <li>– Who was involved? How did this impact your response?</li> <li>– <b>If they were working for the organization:</b> How would you describe the culture of the organization at the time? Were there any social dynamics at play?</li> <li>– <b>If they were applying for work:</b> What did it make you feel about working there? How did it impact your perceptions of the organization?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(25 mins)</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did you know it was age discrimination? What were the factors that demonstrated this?</li> <li>- What were the implications of this? What made this notable (moderator, understand whether the smaller incidents had other implications)</li> <li>- Were any other factors apparent? Do you feel that there was any other discrimination involved? (gender, race, disability, etc.)</li> <li>- At the time, what did you do? How did you respond? (probe: talked to HR, make a formal complaint - to whom?) - How effective was this action? Did anything change as a result?</li> <li>- Did you feel like you needed to respond? Why/why not?</li> <li>- Did you feel you were able to respond? Why/why not? (note: if the incident was small, why didn't the feel they should respond? Why did they think it was discrimination)</li> <li>- What happened afterwards? How was it dealt with (if at all)?</li> <li>- <b>Managers:</b> do you think that the organization is well placed to respond to this type of discrimination? Why/why not?</li> <li>- <b>Probe...</b> the broader sector / industry dynamics around mature age e.g. expected retirement ages, typical worker profile, sector culture</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Why do you think it happened to you?</li> <li>▶ Have you seen it happen to others?</li> <li>▶ What do you think was the basis of the discrimination?</li> <li>▶ How did this make you feel about the organisation? The person/people involved?</li> </ul>	
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<h3>3. The impact of discrimination</h3> <p>OBJ: To understand how age discrimination impacts on workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ How have you felt in general since this happened? What impact has it had on you? (if a smaller incident, understand whether there have been any smaller repercussions)</li> <li>▶ What has your life been like since? How has your life been impacted:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personally - outside of work?</li> <li>- Professionally?</li> <li>- Financially?</li> <li>- Emotionally?</li> <li>- Socially?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ What actions did you take to respond the impacts? (i.e. sought professional help?)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Managers:</b> What actions did the organization take to respond? – probe the formal and informal processes</li> <li>- What support did you need at this time (i.e. support from family/friends, a workplace lawyer?)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(10 mins)</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To what extent they were able to access the support you needed to recover from this event(s)</li> <li>- <b>If none:</b> why didn't you think it wasn't worth responding to?</li> <li>▶ How do you think this experience has changed you?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If it hasn't – why hasn't it made much of a difference for you? Why hasn't it had an ongoing impact?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ How has this made you feel about your future employment?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What has changed for you since this experience?</li> <li>- Has it made you feel any more/less inclined to continue to work? Why/why not?</li> <li>- If the working environment was different – would this change how you feel about going back to work? Why/why not?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
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<p><b>4. Reflecting on the experience</b></p> <p>OBJ: To understand whether anything could be done to prevent in the future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ In your opinion, why does age related discrimination happen?</li> <li>▶ <b>Managers:</b> what do you see as the benefits of having older people as part of the workforce? (i.e. experience, wisdom, maturity, etc)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What would your organization / sector see as the benefits of mature age workers</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ What are the challenges? Why wouldn't an organization hire/promote older workers?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do the benefits overcome some of the challenges with hiring older workers? Why/why not?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ Are you aware of any existing laws/regulations in place to prevent this type of discrimination?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How well do you feel existing laws and regulations address age related discrimination?</li> <li>- What about for the smaller incidents – does there need to be laws to protect people from these situations?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ What are the major barriers that older people face with regards to participation in the workforce?</li> <li>▶ Thinking about your personal experience, what do you think could be done to prevent this type of discrimination happening?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What could you have done differently?</li> <li>- What could your employer have done differently?</li> <li>- Could anyone else have played a role?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(10 mins)</p>
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## 5. Solutions

(5 mins)

OBJ: Briefly touch on potential solutions to improve practices

- ▶ Thinking about your own experiences, what needs to change to address age discrimination?
  - In the workplace?
  - In society?
  - More broadly?
  - What should governments do to address this issue?
- ▶ What could have changed to prevent your experience? Anything that you could have done?

THANK AND CLOSE

# Australian Human Rights Commission

## **AGE DISCRIMINATION**

Discussion guide - **WORKERS/ MANAGER GROUPS**

EY Sweeney contacts: Jo Kirkhope, Jen Hodges, Ros  
Lording

REF NO. 25397 • VERSION 4

## The RESEARCH objective

- ▶ Explore the experience and impact of age related, employment discrimination amongst older Australians

The specific objectives are...

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The broad flow of the interviews can be summarised as follows...

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>10 minutes</b>
<b>2. Age discrimination</b>	<b>20 minutes</b>
<b>3. Exploring the solutions</b>	<b>40 minutes</b>
<b>4. Barrier breaking</b>	<b>15 minutes</b>
<b>5. The future</b>	<b>5 minutes</b>



## Discussion guide

<p><b>1. Introduction</b></p> <p>OBJ: Build rapport with participant, outline the purpose of the research and confirm confidentiality and industry protocols</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Topic... to work together to understand how the challenge of age based discrimination can be addressed in the workplace. Moderator to iterate that we want the session to be solutions focused, meaning we can think as creatively and laterally as possible.</li> <li>▶ Viewing and recording... mention that the interview will be recorded only with the consent of the participants</li> <li>▶ Confidentiality and industry code of conduct</li> <li>▶ Agreement to pass on the recordings</li> <li>▶ Respondent introduction: ask respondent to talk through a little about themselves, their employment experience, and their current situation.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Workers...family status, current work status</li> <li>– Managers... role, current work status</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(10 mins)</p>
<p><b>2. Age discrimination</b></p> <p>OBJ: Explore why age discrimination happens</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Firstly, what does age discrimination mean to you?</li> <li>▶ <b>Group exercise:</b> let's brainstorm all the different scenarios of age discrimination occurs, thinking about your own experiences, when you have witnessed others facing these challenges, what are the types of age discrimination             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What's the situation</li> <li>– Who is involved?</li> <li>– What makes this age based discrimination?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ Moderator to understand a range of different scenarios when age discrimination can happen. Ensure a range of more to less extreme scenarios (limited employment/training opportunities, outdated skills, not fitting into workplace culture, moving to casual hours, made to retire, redundancy, etc.)</li> <li>▶ What are the most typical scenarios:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What is the act/behavior that makes this discrimination?... .and not about performance, or personality ?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ Thinking about these examples ...             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How does age discrimination impact on <i>other workers</i>? (positive/negative)</li> <li>– How does age discrimination impact on the <i>older worker</i>? (positive/negative)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(20 mins)</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How does age discrimination impact the organisation? (positive/negative)</li> <li>– How does it impact the society overall</li> <li>▶ Thinking about the various situations we have just discussed, why do you feel age based discrimination occurs?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What fuels it / keeps it going</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ How prevalent do you believe it is             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Think about it from a managers/HR perspective as well as a workers perspective</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<p><b>3. Exploring the solutions</b></p> <p>OBJ: Understand any potential solutions to prevent workplace age discrimination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Thinking about all the scenarios we have just discussed, what are the <b>key challenges</b> that have to be overcome to prevent age based discrimination in the workplace? e.g. Attitudes (at what level), understanding, processes, opportunity</li> <li>▶ Imagine a working world without age based discrimination – what would that look like at an overall level?</li> <li>▶ Do you feel this is achievable / why, why not</li> <li>▶ What needs to happen to get to this point / how can we stop age based discrimination in the workplace             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Probe.... Social change, workplace culture, workplace processes, management attitude, employee attitude</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><i>Quick exercise (10 mins)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Break into groups – each group to look at one of the ideas listed below / and or some raised above – discuss and think of some solutions / answer the questions</li> </ul> <p><b>Ideas (Hand outs)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Debunking the stereotypes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What are the key stereotypes we have to challenge and change</li> <li>– What are some ways to challenge these (i.e. education, regulation etc).</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ <b>Speaking up ...</b> people may not speak up or make a complaint because they are afraid of the repercussions             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How can we make people feel more comfortable about speaking up</li> <li>– How can organisations play a role</li> <li>– How can workers play a role</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(40 mins)</p> <p>Pens and paper</p> <p>Scenario handouts</p>

- ▶ **Management capability**... managers generally need more education, information and training to support the successful recruitment and management of older employees
  - What are the key issues to be addressed in training
  - How is the training best delivered
  - Are there actions outside of training that could encourage appropriate management practices
  
- ▶ **Mature age mentoring**... older workers can bring a lot of experience and skills to the workplace
  - How could mature age mentoring be encouraged
  - How could this be made to be of value to organisations
  
- ▶ **Employer led transition to retirement**... often workers have to move from working full time to no work.
  - What workplace initiatives could be used to help transition workers into retirement
  - What flexible working arrangements could be of value

Discuss as a group

- ▶ **Recruitment of mature age employees**... a range of actions can be taken to encourage recruitment of mature age employees
  - Quotas for older staff
  - incentive schemes for businesses
  - fast-tracking recruitment for older where if the older person qualifies they are guaranteed an interview (recruitAbility)
  - Challenging assumptions for 'step down' positions in order to gain longevity
  - Discuss the appeal of each
  - Discuss the pros/cons of each
- ▶ Looking at all the options we have discussed, which of these are **most compelling** – why

### **Responsibility**

- ▶ Thinking about initiatives for age discrimination – who's role is it
  - Who is responsible for driving/leading this change?
  - What role does the older worker play in overcoming this challenge?
  - What role does the manager/leadership team play?
  - What role do other colleagues play?
  - What role does the organization as a whole play?
  - Does anyone else have a role? Who? (i.e. government, recruitment agencies, educators?) – What can other people do?

<p><b>4. Barrier breaking</b></p> <p>OBJ: Explore how to break down the barriers to change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Thinking about what we have just talked about – how likely do you think it is that change can happen? Why/why not? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What are the biggest hurdles to overcome? Why?</li> <li>– What do you think prevents these from being addressed? Why?</li> <li>– What are the most important issues to be addressed? Why?</li> <li>– What would be an easy solution? Why?</li> <li>– If nothing happens, and age-based discrimination continues to be an issue, what impact do you feel this will have on future employment/future workers? Why?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(15 mins)</p>
<p><b>5. The future</b></p> <p>OBJ: Briefly touch on potential solutions to improve practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Thinking about the discussion this evening, how do you think workplaces should be addressing age discrimination in the workplace? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What should change to prevent this from happening in the future?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>(5 mins)</p>

THANK AND CLOSE

## APPENDIX 2: Case studies

## Boys' club

**Gender:** Female

**Age:** 57

**Industry:** Accounting

**Employment status:** Unemployed

**Location:** Melbourne, VIC

Susan is 57, married with three children and one grandchild. Before her recent experience of age related workplace bullying, Susan had worked her whole life as a bookkeeper.

The company that Susan last worked for experienced a change in management around late 2013. The number of male leadership increased with a number of new male managers having been hired. Susan described one of the new male managers as 'a bit of a ladies man'. It thus did not surprise her, when the company started recruiting young, attractive female staff to support the new management.

The workplace transformed into what Susan described as a 'boys club' in which male leadership decided about inclusion and exclusion. Susan described a number of occasions in which she had been excluded from team activities both by leadership and colleagues. She was excluded from meetings, coffees or lunches. Colleagues would disappear in meeting rooms to talk to avoid conversing in front of Susan. She explained how people observed her and ensured that she did not know what was going on. Susan re-called an incident when she got up to get a coffee, came back to the office and everyone had left. Soon later everyone walked back into the office together from a meeting. She checked her calendar but could not find an invitation.

Susan related numerous instances in which she believes management had set her up to fail. For example, she reported that management sent a letter out to all suppliers advising them of a change to practice, but failed to either inform Susan that the policy had been revised and that a letter bearing her signature had been sent to all suppliers. When suppliers contacted her to ask about the change, she was chastised for failing to stay up to date with the company's policies. She felt that instances like this had been designed to bully and belittle her to the point where she would leave the company.

The ways leadership and colleagues treated her made Susan feel isolated and excluded from the workplace culture. She tried to understand why she had been targeted for workplace bullying after having worked in the same company for several years, with previously good relationships with colleagues and the previous management. She reasoned her less favourable treatment resulted from the change in management, as the main manager liked 'young pretty women'. Susan believed that she did not fulfil the criteria of youth and beauty and therefore got treated differently.

Susan reported her experiences to HR a few months after the bullying commenced. She reports that HR offered to facilitate a conciliation session in which Susan could "learn all the reasons why management don't like you". She declined to participate in conciliation as she did not believe it would be conducted in a fair and impartial manner, as she believed that HR had sided with management. HR's investigation came to the conclusion that Susan has been mismanaged yet not mistreated. She felt humiliated and helpless, and believed she had exhausted all options to resolve the current situation.

Susan's experience of workplace bullying had a profound impact on her mental, physical and financial health. She developed severe depression, including periods where she had suicidal thoughts. She experienced a major loss of confidence, paranoia, low energy and motivation, and loss of pleasure in life. Since the incident occurred she has excluded herself from social situations. Susan sought assistance through her employer's Employee Assistance Program, which she credited her with helping her understand her experiences in the context of workplace bullying. She subsequently submitted a WorkCover claim for anxiety and depression, and has not returned to work. She is currently in the process of suing her employer for pain and suffering related to the bullying. Susan and her family are currently experiencing severe financial hardship as the loss of her salary has left them unable to pay the mortgage on their house, which they are therefore in the process of renovating to sell.

## Youthful workplace culture marginalising older staff

**Gender:** Male

**Age:** 66

**Industry:** Health and social care

**Employment status:** Retired

**Location:** Melbourne, VIC

Daniel lived in Tasmania until he moved to Victoria after his marriage ended. Prior to moving to Victoria, he had a range of jobs and diverse skills, from science where he worked on fish farms to the creative arts. His passion was in dance, and he subsequently invested all his time and energy into his own dance studio business, which he was particularly proud of.

When he got to Melbourne he faced difficulties finding work in his field. After deciding he wanted to pursue his science career, he applied at local fish farms and laboratories, but was unable to secure any positions in this field. He consequently decided to work as a personal carer having managed to find employment in this space. He started as an agency employed personal carer, before moving into full-time position in a high care disability facility.

The work in the nursing home was hard but he found it rewarding for a number of years. However, when the management changed, his satisfaction with work also changed. His new manager was much younger than Daniel (around 25 years), and he felt that the new management favoured younger workers. This played out in the number of shifts he was given in comparison to his younger counterparts, who he felt were offered as many as they wanted.

Daniel not only personally experienced discrimination, but he acknowledged that there were others in the organisation who were facing similar issues. He had a confidante, who was also older, who shared Daniel's experiences. He advised Daniel to ignore the mistreatment, to just do his job and go home. However, Daniel witnessed others experiencing blatant discrimination and he felt it was difficult to ignore. For instance, another mature aged worker in the facility, a lady a bit older than Daniel, who he felt was very smart and switched on, was discriminated against through management making statements such as "why do they have women in here who have got dementia working for us". Other staff members would talk negatively behind her back and even secretly record her conversations.

Daniel also felt this discrimination personally. Younger staff members examined his ability to work efficiently; they questioned his ability to complete certain tasks such as lifting. He was aware that such inquiries did not necessarily refer to his age, yet they made him feel as if they were; he said "Nobody ever said 'you're old', but it's how it's implied."

As indicated in Daniel's last discrimination experience, the discrimination he and his colleagues experienced did not only come from management. Their younger colleagues also treated them as inferior. In Daniel's workplace, he felt that mature aged workers did not gain the same respect as younger workers; they did not get treated as equals. Consequently, after an incidence at work in November, Daniel decided to leave work, prematurely. He retired at the age of 65.

Before Daniel left his workplace he was tempted to report the age discrimination that occurred in this work environment, but he felt disempowered and doubted his ability to facilitate change. He said "I thought about it and I've got time on my hands and I can do it, but I thought, what can I achieve?"

## Open age-discrimination

**Gender:** Male  
**Age:** 63  
**Industry:** Education  
**Employment status:**  
 Employed  
**Location:** Brisbane, QLD

Patrick was an enthusiastic, passionate and confident man, who had a strong work history. Patrick started his career as a registered teacher before he decided to become a pilot later in his life. As positions in aviation started to become scarce, he decided to return to the teaching profession.

Patrick had been a confident and highly respected teacher, who did not doubt his ability to find a teaching position fairly quickly. He felt that his resume was of a high standard, and compared to other teachers he knew he was confident in any applications he submitted for teaching positions because not only did he have strong teaching experience, but he had broader experience that he could bring into the classroom (something he concurred that his younger counterparts didn't have).

In trying to secure a teaching role, Patrick applied for a number of positions. He found that when he was unsuccessful in securing a position, others who he knew of (and who he didn't feel were as good a teacher as he was) got offered positions. He did not get invited to interviews in remote locations where teachers are generally less likely to go particularly teachers as highly rated as Patrick.

Confused and disappointed, he decided to contact the Minister of Education to complain. The phone call he had with a representative from the ministerial office, who was a young woman, was eye opening for Patrick. The representative openly confessed that Patrick's age was working against him. He recalled the girl saying that his application for remote schools had been rejected as he is getting to the age in which he is more dependent on medical assistance which is less available in remote locations. Patrick felt insulted, and he did not think he could be categorized as "old". He asked the young girl to put what she had said into writing, but she denied.

Unhappy with the overt age discrimination he experienced, Patrick managed to persist and secure a position as a short term teacher in remote Queensland, which allowed him to enter the system. Eventually, this resulted in a permanent position in this school. The move to regional Queensland involved a separation from his wife, who was working as a clinical nurse in an age care facility at the time. Moving to regional Queensland would have meant giving up her career, hence they decided to hold up a long-distance relationship over a few years until Patrick decided to return home. Patrick had to resign from his position to be able to return to his wife, which meant it would be difficult getting back into the teaching position, at a later stage in life.

Patrick described the age discrimination he had experienced as making him angry. He was shocked about the ways he had been treated and the overt discrimination he received from people in power. He managed to continue to find work as a casual relief teacher, driven primarily by his love of the job.



## Psychological and physical discrimination by younger managers

**Gender:** Male  
**Age:** 55  
**Industry:** Aged care  
**Employment status:** Unemployed  
**Location:** Regional, QLD  
**Other:** Sufferer from chronic disease

Tim sacrificed his career to raise his child as a single dad. Tim's ex-wife suffered from severe postnatal depression when she was pregnant. Her pain resulted in a number of suicide attempts. Worried about his daughter, Tim decided to leave his ex-wife to raise his daughter on his own.

Limited in the type of work he was able to do as a single dad, Tim volunteered at his daughter's school which turned into a permanent maintenance position. After working at the school for a few years, a retirement village opened up near where he lived and Tim started maintaining the complex. He had a strong work ethic and tried to fulfil all needs expressed by residents. Despite some property owners being harsh at times, they seemed to value Tim's attitude and the work he conducted and he felt that he really was a valued employee. His efforts were reciprocated through generous gifts at Christmas time. However, Tim felt his younger manager didn't like that he was valued by the residents, and he recalled a number of incidences when he felt mistreated by his younger manager. On one occasion, Tim's manager asked him to spread 25 cubic metres of garden mulch under strenuous conditions of Queensland's summer heat. Another incident saw Tim making some repairs in a shed. He left the shed door open and someone stole one of his tools out of his toolbox. Soon after he got reprimanded by management, the tool reappeared; this left Tim thinking that the incident had been staged as a way of trying to get him out.

Tim collected some photographic evidence of the unfair treatment he was experiencing. However, he never took action. He feared that if he would speak up against his management team he might lose his job. As a single income household, this would have had severe implications for him and his daughter. He therefore decided to continue working despite the workplace discrimination he was experiencing. Only when he was diagnosed with severe osteoporosis at the age of 55, he finally decided to leave.

Tim argued that age discrimination was difficult to prove. In his experience, discrimination tended to be subtle, which made it difficult for him to relay the extent of emotional harm he experienced as it had built up over a period of time and via a number of smaller incidents. Tim used the metaphor of birth to illustrate the way the psychological tricks he experienced impacted on his well-being. He compared his discrimination experience to having a baby: while men assume they understand the pain and emotional strain women go through at birth, they will never be able to share the experience and hence a complete understanding of the physical and emotional complexity it involves. Likewise, he feared, no one that hasn't gone through a similar form of discrimination experience will be able to comprehend the implications age discrimination has on the victim.

## Rejection for customer facing role

**Gender:** Female  
**Age:** 55-59  
**Industry:** Hospitality  
**Employment status:** Employed  
**Location:** Regional, QLD

When Simone decided to move interstate, she did so for a change of lifestyle, and to get a fresh start after the break down of her marriage. She had worked as a teacher all her life, and although she wanted a change in career, she was also considering alternative roles when she made the 'sea-change'. Trained as a teacher and professional writer, Simone was articulate and well-presented. She is in her late 50s and presents as much more youthful than her chronological years.

After struggling for some time to find work, she eventually took up a room service position in a hotel. She intended to work in this role temporarily until she found something more in-line with her previous experiences. However, her plan did not fall into action. Simone found herself in the house-keeping role for a couple of years struggling to find alternative employment. On a couple of occasions, she had applied for a receptionist position. The role Simone was interested in involved responding to phone calls and customer inquiries at the front desk. She felt confident that she would be a great fit for the role, as she was articulate and knew the hotel well. The position was advertised on three different occasions, and each time Simone applied.

While she was still waiting for a response to her third application at the time of this interview, her first two applications were unsuccessful. Simone did not get any feedback for her first application; her second attempt resulted in a conversation with the division manager who told her that the timing was inconvenient. The manager explained that holiday season had just begun which did not allow for any opportunities for her to be trained up. Hence, they were looking for someone with previous front-desk experience. However, the position remained vacant. Considering that no one with adequate experience could be found, she questioned why she wasn't given the opportunity to be trained. Simone got the impression that her age restricted her from access to the role. She realised that besides a couple of ladies in their 40s all reception staff were much younger. She felt that a youthful appearance seemed to be one of the selection criteria for the role. Because she had been in the housekeeping role for some time, Simone felt pigeon-holed into the position.

Simone felt sad and unappreciated. She knew that her personality and knowledge of the hotel would have been a valuable contribution to the front desk. Simone felt excluded and deprived of an opportunity to show what she was capable of doing. She felt intimidated and betrayed, as the internal opportunities advertised by the hotel vanished from her sight yet remained vacant. This highlighted to her that the hotel management did not value someone who did not fit the aesthetic mould required for the receptionist role. However, as nobody explicitly said that age was a defining factor for the role, she had no evidence to support what she perceived as mistreatment. She felt powerless and stuck in her housekeeping role.

## Financial implications for a father of four

**Gender:** Male  
**Age:** 58  
**Industry:** Dairy  
**Employment status:** Employed  
**Location:** Regional, SA

Jason has always enjoyed working and looking after his family. He is married to his wife Susan, and a proud father of two daughters and two sons.

After almost 35 years in the dairy industry servicing dairy farms across the country and working as a territory manager, Jason was made redundant at the age of 56. The redundancy came as a shock to Jason, as he had never imagined that he would be out of work; he had a strong history within the workforce and he enjoyed working. Only shortly after he had lost his job, he went to Centrelink to look for new employment. He was optimistic that he would find work quickly, as he had never faced any problems finding work in the past.

Jason registered with a job agency assuming that his experience and qualifications would soon provide him with new opportunities. He was conscious about the limited opportunities available in the dairy sector and therefore applied for jobs in a range of different fields. However, he struggled to get a response, which over time, became more and more worrying. It was difficult for him to get people to return his calls let alone to invite him for an interview and he didn't understand what the problem was.

Frustrated by the reaction he was getting, Jason contacted his job services provider to ask for feedback. His case manager was a loose acquaintance and wanted to help. He suggested that Jason should take his age of his resume, stating this as the reason why he was finding it hard to get to interview stage of an application. Jason was told "Your application is being binned by HR as soon as they see your age" and although he was thankful for the feedback from the case manager, he was also frustrated by the discrimination he was experiencing.

The difficulties Jason experienced in finding employment had profound implications for himself and his family. He felt frustrated, isolated and undervalued. He also feared for the well-being of his family. As the bread winner of the family, he felt responsible for looking after his wife and their four children. Losing his job created tremendous stress and pressures for Jason. The allowance Centrelink gave him didn't adequately cover his living expenses and school fees for his children. On top of the already tight financial situation, one of Jason's children was very sick and needed multiple operations. To be able to keep his house, meet basic needs and to pay for his child's medical bills, Jason decided to retire to allow him to access his superannuation. The financial pressures Jason and his family experienced caused him to use up one third of his superannuation in less than 18 months. This has subsequently meant he has to work for longer before he can realistically retire with any financial certainty.

Today, Jason found work through a friend. Whilst his salary is much lower than previously, his job allows him to keep his house, support his family and to re-build the money he has lost from his superannuation fund.

## Applying for jobs at 60+

**Gender:** Female  
**Age:** 64  
**Industry:** Retail  
**Employment status:** Unemployed  
**Location:** Regional, QLD  
**Other:** Physically limited due to knee replacement, does not drive

Rose had been working in a local supermarket for 25 years before it went bankrupt. Rose found herself unemployed in her early 60s, and because the business went bankrupt, also missed out on 28 weeks of pay, 2 years of superannuation and her long service leave. Rose was suffering from a knee injury which only allowed her to work three days a week. She also did not drive, which restricted her from applying for positions without access to public transport.

Conscious about her limitations, Rose applied for a number of different positions. She did not shy away from any type of employment including working at a local hardware store or washing restaurant dishes. All of her applications have been unsuccessful. Some employers made assumptions that, because Rose had been working for the same employer for 25 years she would be set in her ways. Others questioned her ability to be part of a team; without giving Rose an opportunity to show them otherwise, they called her a 'leader' not a 'team player'. Most did not even provide her with feedback which Rose found very disrespectful in itself. Despite some businesses advertising as being supportive of older staff, Rose's application process made her realise that employers do not want to hire people of her age. If they do hire older workers, she believed that they still limit their older employers to people in their 40s and 50s.

Rose was frustrated and discouraged. Work was an important component of her life that gave self-worth and an opportunity to get in contact with people. The lack of work she is currently experiencing makes her feel limited in her ability to be a productive citizen. Unlike some people believe, Rose commented, older people like her would like to work and will give most things a go. Indeed, not being able to work and having to stay at home, she believes, makes older citizens feel trapped in their home with limited activities to do.

Financially, Rose is slowly using up her savings. She is receiving support from the government; however, she had to access her savings for some repayments on her house. So far she has not touched her superannuation and Rose is hoping that she can find work before it comes to this point.

## Recruitment discrimination

**Gender:** Male  
**Age:** 54  
**Industry:** Transport  
**Employment status:** Employed  
**Location:** Sydney, NSW  
**Other:** Physically limited due to shoulder injury

Greg is married and lives with his wife and 2 teenage daughters in Sydney. He has worked in a wide range of roles. He began his career working in IT as a systems program developer, and set up a training college in Indonesia when demand for customised IT systems declined. Greg also managed a book shop before commencing work as a bus driver 8 years ago. He enjoys work, but is currently on WorkCover due to a workplace shoulder injury. Greg does not expect that he will be able to return to his employment as a bus driver, and is therefore looking for less physically demanding office work.

Greg has experienced several instances of discrimination during his search for employment since injuring his shoulder. While he did not face difficulties securing interviews, Greg struggled to be successful gaining a job. On several occasions, he has been interviewed by younger aged panels, and believes that these panels have perceived his age and appearance as a hurdle to him fitting into the workplace culture. His most common experience is being unsuccessful for a position on the grounds that he had “less experience” than the successful applicant.

On one occasion, Greg was interviewed for an administrative role with a government department. The recruitment process comprised a group interview, followed by an individual interview. Greg’s interview was conducted by a number of people in their 30s, whom he felt showed little interest in him as a potential employee. He felt that they looked disinterested, and as if they had already made up their minds. The panel talked about social activities they liked doing after work, such as frequenting “hip wine bars”, which left Greg under the impression that they wanted to indirectly flag to him the youthful work environment into which he would need to be able to adapt. After he had completed his interview, Greg overheard the interview had with the next candidate – a “young, attractive woman in her 20s - from the waiting area. In contrast to his own experience, he observed that the dialogue was enthusiastic and engaged, they laughed a lot and it seemed as if the panel generally showed far more interest in this candidate than Greg.

The hurdles Greg has faced due to his age, has caused him to lose confidence in himself and his ability to find work. Besides a need to downplay his abilities to be perceived as easy to manage, he feels as if he has to second guess each interview panel about their ulterior motive. Greg knows that he is a capable and competent worker yet he feels despondent and discouraged by the recruitment procedures this involves.

## Recruitment discrimination

**Gender:** Female

**Age:** 61

**Industry:** Community Services

**Employment status:** Unemployed

**Location:** Brisbane, QLD

Veronique is French and immigrated to Australia more than two decades ago. Veronique is a trained anthropologist and English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, whose career has spanned work in Europe, Africa, North America and the South Pacific, as well as Australia. She has one adult daughter, and divorced around eight years earlier. Her divorce provided the catalyst for her seeking ongoing employment due to the little superannuation she had accumulated until that point.

Veronique has experienced several instances of age discrimination in recruitment, as well as one incident in the workplace where she believed that negative stereotypes about older workers were used to discontinue her employment.

Veronique began working as an ESL teacher in a local college where she recalled the first of several age related discrimination experiences. The college had frequent changes to the timetable to reflect fluctuating enrolments. The lack of continuity of teachers was a source of frustration among both students and teachers. Veronique was verbally abused by a foreign student over the frequent changes of teachers. When Veronique complained to the college about the abuse she experienced due to these changes, instead of supporting her complaint, her employer accused her of being unable to adapt: "You're not adaptable anymore. I thought you were more adaptable". Her employment was subsequently discontinued, she believes due to assumptions made about her inability to adapt to change due to her age.

Veronique also experienced several instances of age discrimination, where she was told she'd be contacted to make a time for her to come in and meet the employer, only for her to never hear back from them. On another occasion she was told she'd been unsuccessful for a role due to the travel distance; she attributed this to the employer not wishing to hire an older worker. However, she found the discrimination she faced during the recruitment for a job as an anthropologist most discouraging. Veronique had applied for a position as an anthropologist working with the French Polynesian community in Brisbane. She felt confident as her personal and professional background was supportive of her application. However, she felt she was subject to age discrimination during the recruitment process. The younger manager on the interview panel asked her about her physical ability and understanding of youth rather than asking questions about her general understanding of the cultural context and the different challenges the French Polynesian community are facing.

She was unsuccessful in this application, which she believed was due to the manager on the panel placing undue emphasis on the relative age gap between her and the young people with whom the role would involve working rather than the experience she brought to the position. She felt that the panel viewed her as being 'old-fashioned' and out of touch with today's youth. This made Veronique angry, as her anthropology training emphasised understanding issues through the broader socio-cultural lens, including the relationships the community's youth have with their Elders.

This experience made her worry that she would not find any work. She became depressed and started to socially isolate herself. Veronique has now been unemployed for nearly five years. This has been financially draining. She is currently in the process of selling her house as she cannot afford the mortgage anymore.

## Age discrimination during organisational changes

**Gender:** Male  
**Age:** 57  
**Industry:** Education  
**Employment status:** Employed  
**Location:** Regional, VIC

Stewart has been a secondary English teacher for 35 years. He is married with three children and three grandchildren. Stewart has invested heavily in his education, holding three degrees including a Masters of Educational Leadership. He presents as thoughtful, friendly and with a passion for education, qualities which have made him a valued and respected member of the school community.

Stewart reported he had initially enjoyed a positive relationship with the school principal, and had at times felt that he was viewed as “the golden boy”. This relationship, however, cooled a couple of years ago, when he was unsuccessful applying for a couple of senior leadership positions at the school. He then reported that their relationship deteriorated, and felt that she began to “nitpick” him over seemingly trivial events.

The first instance which signaled a change in his relationship with the principal occurred when she made a number of changes to the time table. As a result, Stewart's class grew in size and the class dynamic changed. The changes alerted parental concerns, for which the principal held Stewart liable. As a consequence, his class was allocated to a younger teacher and Stewart was left teaching year 9 students instead. Not long after this incident, Stewart applied for an internal position looking after the school leadership. With his Master's degree and a history in engaging students in leadership at the school, Stewart was confident that he would be the right candidate. Stewart felt overlooked and disappointed when a younger, less experienced teacher ended up getting the role. While he wondered why he did not get the position, he respected the principal's decision. He reasoned that she wanted the best for the school community.

However, he continued to feel that the principal was treating him less fairly than others. A final incident changed Stewart's perspective. He had been unsuccessful applying for a second leadership position at the school. The following day, he was teaching his year 9 class when half of the class had forgotten to bring the material he had asked them to bring. When he sent the students to get the equipment out of their lockers, his principal came and started to lecture him that this was inappropriate, all within earshot of his class. This experience was the final straw to Stewart, who felt that the principal was determined to make his life as difficult as she could until he became fed up and left. He subsequently resigned from his position.

Stewart spent the next ten months unemployed doing casual jobs to get by. He felt unappreciated and mistreated, which resulted in depression.

Reflecting on his experiences at the secondary school, Stewart believes that his age played a part in his being treated less favourably than other staff, but did not reflect the full story. He believes that recruitment decisions, in which experienced teachers were overlooked for positions that went to less experienced teachers who commanded smaller salaries reflected the budget pressures facing schools and the need for them to keep salary costs down. He also believed that the principal favoured less experienced teachers because they were more likely to do as they were told, and to not challenge the principal. He felt that the principal found more junior teachers less challenging than more experienced teachers who would speak up when they had concerns about something.

Today, Stewart has left the state school system and is thriving in a teaching position at an independent school. He believes that the independent system is more welcoming of experienced teachers. Stewart is enjoying his work again and is looking forward to the coming years in the teaching profession.

## Structural barriers stalling older worker's careers

**Gender:** Male

**Age:** 60s

**Industry:** Government health

**Employment status:** Employed

**Location:** Metro, NSW

Andrew has been working in the IT section of the health sector for 15 years. He has three children with his wife Sandra all of which live out of home. Both Andrew and his wife work for the same employer and, despite some disagreements in regard to management, both are fairly happy in their workplace and plan to stay there until they retire. However, Andrew's career has stalled recently.

Andrew has been working in the technical team of the business for a while and despite management positions becoming available, he is unable to get them. In fact, rather than giving experienced internal staff the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to successfully manage a team, manager positions are left vacant or filled by external contractors. This is happening to Andrew and his colleagues of similar ages.

Most of the managers brought in as contractors are very young and lack context specific knowledge. For example, Andrew's new manager is 30 years younger than Andrew and his manager is even younger.

Andrew linked the employment of inexperienced young managers rather than promoting employees with experience and contextual knowledge to a structural problem that discriminates against the loyalty of mature aged workers. He said that in the private sector, interviewers would select candidates based on the experiences they show, whereas people in the government sector base their employment decision on the interview process. Such procedures discriminate against older workers who have worked in the same workplace for a long period of time and therefore did not get exposure to interviews. They do not tend to use the jargon often expected by interviewers nor do they have developed their interview skills. What they do have, however, is company experience and loyalty, yet Andrew was under the impression that, this does not seem to count.

Andrew acknowledged the fact that he has developed his own ways of doing certain tasks and that he can be quite confronting. For example, he does not shy away from addressing aspects that are going wrong and need improvement. Even if this involves directly confronting his managers, criticizing current practices or writing detailed instructions about how problems should be solved. Andrew's direct nature can be confronting and some people disagree with his behaviours. In addition, Andrew struggles to adapt to some changes that are occurring.

While the fact that he stalled in his career is certainly impacted by structural barriers discriminating against older workers, Andrew's inability to gain a management position is further informed by his personality and communication style. Indeed, Andrew pointed out that it is hard to distinguish personality based decisions from mature age discrimination.



## Discrimination of older worker by younger worker

**Gender:** Female

**Age:** 54

**Industry:** Government court

**Employment status:** Employed

**Location:** Metro, NSW

Tammy worked as a court reporter between the 1980s and 1990s before she got married and had three children. She has two girls and one boy all between 16 and 22 years of age. When her marriage broke up Tammy re-entered the workforce at the age of 45.

When Tammy returned to work, she started working in the sound section of the court, which was characterised by a mature workforce. Most employees were older than Tammy and the job she was doing was less recognised than her previous role as a court reporter. Tammy felt under-challenged but decided to keep the position to work herself up towards a more challenging role. She tried a number of positions including being a Review Officer for government decisions.

Tammy was excited about the position as she pictured it as an opportunity to learn about compliance; which she did but only for a short period of time until she got presented with a new boss. Her new 25-year-old newly graduated manager generally lacked workplace-related knowledge and management experience in particular. Tammy felt patronised by the way her manager spoke to her and disrespected for her experience. Her manager did not listen to any suggestions Tammy made and continued to question her ability to navigate technology. Most offensive, however, was her habit of correcting or re-doing the work Tammy had completed. Instead of providing valuable instructions, she focused on criticising Tammy's performance. However, when Tammy asked for approval to attend training, she would not be allowed to go.

One day, some roles within Tammy's workplace, including her own, were upgraded. It was assumed that the people already in those positions would gain a higher status. Tammy applied for her position, yet she did not get it. Everyone else kept their job, only Tammy and another mature-aged worker lost their roles.

The discrimination Tammy experienced through her younger manager made Tammy feel uncomfortable. She felt disrespected and devalued due to her older appearance. To avoid having to endure a similar experience again she worked on her intellectual and physical representation. Tammy decided to lose weight. She was convinced that if she presented her body in a healthy and youthful manner people would perceive her as younger and therefore value her work more highly. She further believed that her manager felt threatened by her experience. Yet, as she did not have a degree to prove her knowledge she did not have any evidence to support her claims. Consequently, Tammy decided to go back to study to do her Masters.

Tammy now works for a different employer. She feels included in the team and respected for her experience.

## Too old to be a gym instructor

**Gender:** Female  
**Age:** 65  
**Industry:** Fitness  
**Employment status:** retired  
**Location:** Metro, VIC

Helen has been working in different careers across a number of different countries. She worked in Australia, the UK and Japan as a nurse, English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and fitness instructor. After spending 12 years living and working in Japan, Helen returned to Australia and started looking for work. She realised the amount of highly qualified people teaching ESL and hence decided to look for different work.

Trained as a fitness instructor she applied for a position at a gym. Following a phone conversation with the manager, Helen got invited to an interview. Instead of the manager two women greeted her upon her arrival. The tone of their voices and the way they looked at her made Helen feel unpleasant. When she realised that the two women conduct the interview, she felt even more uncomfortable. Both women spoke to her aggressively. They questioned Helen's abilities and disregarded her proof of qualifications.

Based on the way they treated her during the interview, Helen was not surprised that she never heard from them again. She realised that she wanted to work in an industry that was basically designed around 18 to 35 year olds. Most people exercising in gyms are around that age group and so are most trainers.

Eventually, Helen managed to find work in a gym working with older adults. However, she continued to experience mature aged discrimination. For example, people would come in for program assessments or personal training sessions which they would cancel when they saw Helen. But not only customers would hold age against her. Helen was most disappointed by the discrimination she faced by her colleagues. For instance, two of Helen's colleagues called her 'the old dog' behind her back. Hurt by the way her colleagues disrespected her, she raised the issue with her manager who addressed and resolved the problem with the people involved.

Later in the year, Helen approached her manager to inform her that she was getting tired. As a result of this conversation, Helen soon found herself working only five instead of 22 hours a week. She was only doing group fitness classes, which she caused her to find less and less pleasure in her work. She decided to retire soon after.

Despite the humiliation she felt and her disagreement with their behaviour, Helen acknowledged that it is up to the customer to decide who they would like as their trainer. However, she did not understand why her colleagues would discriminate against her age, which made Helen feel isolated and worthless.

## Age discrimination leading to positive experiences of transitioning out of work

**Gender:** Female  
**Age:** 65  
**Industry:** Fitness  
**Employment status:** retired  
**Location:** Metro, VIC

Jenny is in her late 60s and is happily married with two kids, one grandchild and two more grandkids on the way. Despite spending time with her grandkids and travelling with her husband, Jenny still works as a First Year Academic Advisor on a casual basis. Before starting this role she worked in university management and teaching.

During her time at a regional university campus a few years ago, Jenny got allocated a new manager which first impacted on her health and later on her employment status. Her new manager was a dominant male figure a few years younger than Jenny who had previously been reported to HR regarding inappropriate interactions with other staff.

Jenny's discrimination began when her and her new boss's opinions about a suspected merge of their campus with a TAFE facility collided. Her boss did not value her outspoken rejection, which resulted in an escalation of their differences. Immediately after her first review interview, Jenny had to be taken to hospital. She was diagnosed with stress based amnesia. Jenny cannot recall any details of what happened during the interview, however, she mistrusted her boss and left the door open which resulted in another staff member overhearing her saying that she did not want to retire. Jenny suspected that her boss wanted her to retire so that she could be replaced with a person that is better malleable, preferably a younger woman. He was known for his interest in younger women. However, Jenny was aware that despite her boss's preference for younger women, her boss's wish for her to retire did not have to be based on age. While he was also known to be sexist, most prominently, they just did not get along.

After this incident, Jenny had to reduce the amount of stress in her life, which included cutting back at work. She got put on a pre-retirement contract which she disliked, as she did not like the idea of retirement. She was uncomfortable with having no set structure in her life or feeling like a 'nobody'. Therefore, once her pre-retirement contract ended, she decided to continue working. Her role as a First year Academic Advisor allows Jenny to directly engage with students. Her ability to guide students in their academic choices makes her feel valuable and her ability to decide how much work she is willing to work further benefits her personal life. Staying in the workplace on a self-determined level is helping her to transition out of work. The occasional stress associated with casual employment such as ensuring that employment continues and delivering short pieces of work in dense time periods reminds her about how stressful work can be and how lucky she is to be able to have the best of both worlds: continuous income and recognition as well as work flexibility.

## Inter-generational differences in normative behavior

**Gender:** Female  
**Age:** 70  
**Industry:** Real estate  
**Employment status:** employed  
**Location:** Regional, QLD

At the age of 70, Sharon is the number one real estate agent in her region. She wins up to 98 percent of the appraisals she goes for and is well respected by her peers. Sharon loves working and knows that she is good at what she does. She is happily married to a husband that enjoys playing golf and taking care of the household while Sharon is at work.

Sharon is a contracted real estate agent who works in an office of 14. While her younger colleagues respect her for her knowledge and achievements, she witnessed an older colleague being treated unfairly. Her colleague is a little bit older than her and only works on a part-time basis. Some people in the office dismiss her because of her age, which makes her colleague upset. For example, she would be allocated a rental property to manage which other people would take off her. This causes her to fear that she wouldn't have any work left. Like Sharon, her older colleague enjoys coming into work; she values the social interactions her job offers and she further needs the money to pay her bills.

The colleagues taking work of Sharon do not necessarily understand the impact their actions have on the older woman. Rather this seems to be an inter-generational problem in which the younger generation just looks at their needs without considering other people's perspectives.

Sharon was mortified by the idea that something like that could happen to her, yet, she perceived herself as a stronger personality that would stand up and confront the bullies directly. For people that do not have the same strength as Sharon or people who are caught in workplace scenarios in which speaking up could negatively impact on their well-being and future opportunities, Sharon suggested support from the government. For example, one thing Sharon proposed was having an ombudsman to which people feeling bullied at their workplace could go to explain their situation and seek advice.

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