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

# Submission No 111

**Name** Ms Viktoria Rother

**Submission made by**

[x]  Older Australian in unpaid, pro-bono work

[x]  Older Australian looking for work

[x]  Older Australian who would like to find paid work

[Submission regarding Older Australians](#_FORM_1:_Submission)

FORM 1: Submission regarding Older Australians

Your experience

Have you experienced employment discrimination?

[x]  Yes

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

[x]  No

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

After I was coerced into accepting a VR (voluntary redundancy) from the **[redacted–Commonwealth government organisation]**, I felt certain, that as an educated, erstwhile professional 40+ single, child-free woman that I would again, find full-time work. To my despair (and to that of my industrious immigrant parents, who had worked from the moment they arrived in Australia about 50 years ago), I did not. And I have not. It is now 2015, and despite my own industry, I have not worked in an ongoing full-time job since I was dismissed from my job with the Commonwealth.

At first, I challenged every rejection. I contacted employers/agencies about their failure to acknowledge my applications, their failure to invite me for interviews, and their failure to apprise me of the success or otherwise of those rare interviews I was invited to attend. What a waste of time. Rarely was I told the truth: that the positions for which I had applied were given to people younger than I. Preferably those less than 40. Only once did I strike someone in HR who told me the truth: a woman who worked for the **[redacted]**. I’d applied (in desperation) for a position as a volunteer with their headquarters in East Melbourne. During my interview, she informed me frankly that most employers weren’t interested in people my age or older (I was 45 at the time); they preferred to employ those under 40 for paid and pro-bono positions.

Thereafter, I no longer wasted my time seeking feedback about my applications. I applied for positions because I was obliged to, as a recipient of the (paltry) Newstart Allowance.

And I lost hope of ever finding paid work again.

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

[x] Yes

Please tell us more

Continuing from my narrative above: yes, I became so ill (major clinical depression, for which I continue to get treatment and take medication) that I could barely function. Why had my parents emigrated to this barbaric country which devalued education so much that I could not, at 45, find work? I felt ashamed. I felt as though I had failed my parents: they had worked so hard for so long. And now, all I could show them for all of that, were three useless pieces of paper, crowned by the crests of universities…what was I to do? 45. Not old. Not useless. My mind is as sharp as ever; more so, as I now have 25+ years of experience to add to it…

Despite being so ill that I could barely feel, or think, or maintain my household, I tried to continue applying for work, knowing that I would receive no response. (BTW, how bloody rude. If I have contacted you, the least you might do is to acknowledge that I have done so.) But it seems that Australian businesses and employers have no interest in being civil to those of careless enough to have lost our jobs.

Barriers

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

[x] Yes

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

The most significant barrier older Australians (I am now 53) face when trying to find work, or when they’re in a job, is the attitude of EMPLOYERS. Most would prefer to employ someone younger than I. Why??? I’ve worked with younger people. Most are not as valuable to the workforce as they imagine they are. The majority seem to spend most of their time quaffing coffee, alcohol, eating, playing on various social media platforms, playing Solitaire, scanning the web for news, goods, or somewhere to live, or pontificating to others using a decreasing thesaurus of words. I’m reminded of a saying: ‘Empty vessels make the loudest sounds’.

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

[x]  No.

It is impossible for someone in my position (minimal financial resources) to challenge such discrimination legally. To do so, one needs money. If one doesn’t have paid work, one cannot afford to challenge this discrimination. I’ve tried to do so, without success, as the majority of employers deny any such discrimination. They imagine they are being clever and witty by using certain phrases and words which are merely encoded messages meaning “we are looking for people under 45…” The ONLY thing which will change this is a change of attitude. That will be difficult for a young country obsessed with youth and the superiority of youth in the workplace. It means that Australia is culturally and inherently discriminatory as a nation to those it deems old.

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

[x]  Yes

Please tell us more

Please peruse previous response.

And this: the use of cyberspace aka the Internet prevents many competent Australians from participating in our workforce. It is difficult to apply for work when the pre-dominant assumption is that ALL work needs one to have access to email/the Internet/social media. Untrue. I’d like to observe that many jobs in the service industry/customer relations depend upon people who can SPEAK with their fellow humans. I managed to find part-time work at the Prahran Market when I was 46. I worked at a delicatessen, serving customers. Selling them cheeses, mainly. The boss was more interested in employing someone who could speak intelligently to his customers, could learn the names and characteristics of the 100+ cheeses, smallgoods and olives he sold, reckon and calculate change without resorting to a mobile phone, and who appeared 10 minutes before a shift started, and didn’t leave until everything had been put away and the cash secured for the night.

I survived two years. Selling brie and salami to the haute volee of the City of Stonnington. Business, however, was poor; the boss couldn’t maintain a large workforce with his minimal takings each week.

Many jobs advertised seem to need a level of fitness that isn’t possible to maintain, despite one’s diet or exercise regime.

Many employers presume that my mind atrophies in concert with my body. WRONG!

Because I am older, I know how to work smarter, not harder! This was once called experience. But is a quality no longer prized by Australian businesses/corporates.

What are the incentives and disincentives for older Australians?

Incentives:

None. Absolutely none.

Disincentives:

Employers are inherently rude and discriminatory.

Employers don’t reply to one’s application(s).

Workers are supposed to apply for work unsuited to their seniority, whether corporeal or mentally. I was asked recently by **[redacted]** (my job services provider) whether I would consider working in a call centre. Because I ‘spoke well’. No. This is NOT a role for a 53yo women of my education and experience.

HR companies (private and public) are ignorant of the match/mismatch between potential workers/skills and employers.

Centrelink treats all applicants as though they are drug-addicted/single parents/uneducated/living in a suburb of disadvantage/young/illiterate/innumerate/CALD + ignorant/multi-generational welfare recipients. This is demeaning. I’m rarely inclined to co-operate with someone who treats me as though I am a delinquent idiot child. Without using the eyes in his/her head, or the ears attached thereto, to judge whether I am, in fact, such.

Centrelink and job services providers treat one like a child. For instance, during the four days prior to any appointments with my job services provider, I receive an SMS reminding of my appointment time, and threatening me with punitive legislation should I fail to arrive; the day prior to the appointment, the receptionist calls me to remind me of my appointment the next day, and reminds me that I need to attend or the world will implode. And of course, before I leave each appointment, I am given a sheet on which is printed the details of my next appointment. Again, I’m 53. And adult. I don’t need to be reminded three times to keep an appointment. BTW, I didn’t need such reminding when I was 13, or 8 either.

Attitudes of APS employees at Centrelink.

Attitudes of employees at JSPs.

Attitudes of employees one encounters when trying to secure work, such as receptionists, EAs, HR administrators and similar.

Ignorance of qualifications we older Australians have. I wasn’t aware that my B.Sc., B.A. and similar had a use-by date. Since when has this been extant?

The prevailing perspective that one is only authentically CALD/NESB if one looks different/exotic. Why? My first language is NOT English. I wasn’t raised Australian/English. My values/mores/traditions/foods aren’t English/Australian. However, because I look ‘white/Caucasian’, I AM. Again, WRONG!

Good practice

Are there examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians?

[x]  No

Solutions

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

As with including a greater proportion of women on boards, perhaps legislation to enforce that business need to employ a certain percentage of people 45+.

Send the employers to training programs to re-educate them re: the skills and qualifications of people 45+.

Educating the population so that it doesn’t assume that because I am 45+ I am uneducated. Ask me. And ask me WHAT my university qualifications are! And which subjects I read my majors. I was unaware that my ability to reason and think scientifically was an insignificant skill. Or that my knowledge of languages was something to be sneered at. Nor should it be solely so that I may work as an interpreter or translator. How limiting. Having a lexicon of words makes one able to express oneself exactly; give precise instructions, and make oneself understood, and help one to get what one wants and needs in life.

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

Permit pro-bono and volunteer work to be treated as equal to PAID work, so that I don’t need to waste time applying for jobs which are unsuitable just to have 20 on my list for the month so that I continue to get my Newstart Allowance.

If the work is important, then is it WORK, whether unpaid or paid. Not my problem that I work pro-bono in a field and profession which is not yet recognised in Australia as a job (patient advocacy/consumer advisor + representative). I’ve attended in interviews and induction and orientation processes for ALL of my pro-bono roles.

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

1. Pro-bono work to be regarded as IMPORTANT as paid work;
2. Pro-bono work to be counted as working for the purpose of fulfilling my Newstart Allowance legal obligations under Social Security legislation;
3. Major re-education of the entire Australian population vis-à-vis the abilities of people of ALL AGES AND ABILITIES to want to work, hours to be negotiated individually between employers and employees;
4. Older Australians (cannot believe that bosses regard me as such when I am merely 53!) to be valued as much as people under 45 in the paid and unpaid workforce;
5. Stop treating age as a DISABILITY. It isn’t!
6. Re-train employers: most need to be shown and taught that it is NOT right that a 30yo supervises a 50yo, no matter how capable that 30yo is. The younger person doesn’t have the wherewithal emotionally to manage people senior in age to her/him. Or the experience;
7. Re-train younger people: most need to be shown and taught that it is NOT right that they expect to be able to manage people older than themselves. I was a brilliant young thing once. But never would I have assumed that I could supervise someone my parents’ ages. Wait until you are about 40 before assuming that you can manage others. Until then, you are far too young and green. By all means, get the young to teach the old, the old to teach the young whatever new devices, techniques, theories are current now. However, please, allow the young to acquire some town bronze, or polish, before promoting them to wield power over others;
8. Stop educating ‘just for a job’. Stop it. Please. Stop allowing disreputable institutions run by people with no interest or qualifications in teaching or the young (primary, secondary, tertiary) to pretend that they are giving our young people (and not so young people) a chance to find a job if only they complete this certificate/qualification/degree in <insert ridiculous and questionable academic field, such as “justice” or “business administration” or “security” or “communications”>. Even some of our reputable tertiary institutions engage staff whose own intellectual standards are poor, and whose ability to answer (adult) students’ questions is non-existent. [I’m helping a friend who is reading a degree a Swinburne University with her written work. Her tutor’s answer to a fellow student’s question about an essay recently perturbed me. Not only was it poorly phrased and written, I judged the standard of the response to be that of a Year 11 secondary school NESB/CALD student. Not a university teacher of Masters’ or Doctorate standard. Hmmm…] Why is it now necessary to ‘have a degree’ to work as a secretary?
9. Re-train the entire Human Resources sector. Why is one obliged to torture oneself with the delights of ‘addressing the key selection criteria’ before one is graciously granted an interview by an employer? Since when is my ability to do so conflated and/or equal to my ability to do the job advertised? What a waste of time! Are employers no longer able to TALK to prospective employees and judge from this whether I – or any other – will be able to work for them? Further: send the entire sector back to school to learn how to express themselves succinctly. ‘Excellent communication skills’: what are these? EVERYONE presumes to be possessed of ‘excellent communication skills’; the phrase/selection criterion is now meaningless.
10. Review the list of qualifications for which one can receive AUSTUDY or the equivalent. We are constantly exhorted to ‘continue learning throughout our lives for our 5-10 career changes. Yet it is impossible to live and re-train if one has worked in jobs which pay modest wages, and the Commonwealth seems to have chosen some odd university courses to support. I’ve been accepted to read a Master of Environmental Management and Sustainability at the University of Newcastle. When I apprised my job services provider of this, my young case-manager opined that I might be able to get Austudy. Nope! Not on ‘The List’ of approved courses. So, I will be working full-time as a patient advocate, studying full-time, and STILL BE EXPECTED TO APPLY FOR JOBS so that I can get some money to keep the wolf from the door. Oh, and working (unpaid) as a part-time carer for my elderly mother too. Utterly illogical. There’s no acknowledgement by the Commonwealth or State Governments that I might be contributing to the future survival of Australia by reading this particular degree. Both continue to support sunset industries/jobs/professions. Not visionary. Not helpful – for either the individual (me) or the common weal.
11. Re-structure education. One country, one system. Review subjects to be taught. Cease teaching as though we are still in the 1800s. We’re no longer educating workers for the industrial revolution for the post-industrial revolution. I don’t know what the pretentious intellectual term would be for where the human race is now, but we need to educate our young for a world in which work won’t be as it was for the past 200 years. Get with the program, Australia, or you will be left, again, isolated from the rest of civilisation.