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

# Submission No 213

**Name** Matilda S

**Submission made by**

Older Australian who would like to work

# Submission regarding Older Australians / Australians with Disability / Both

### **Your experience**

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

Yes

No

Not sure

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

Yes

No

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

After working in IT in one of Australia’s state capitals, for a number of years, (including several years each in 4 household-name companies/organisations), and having gone through regular performance reviews, and always performed fine, I came to Canberra, where I ended up working as a contractor. (I applied for permanent jobs, but was told I was too experienced for the lower jobs, and for the more senior jobs, my background was not quite the perfect match, (basically they only felt safe recruiting those from within their own organisations).) Thus I ended up as a contractor, with contracts for periods of 3 or 4 months, and you have no way of appealing the fairness of not getting a second contract. In a couple of cases, I had been given incorrect information, or the person supposedly supervising had gone on leave or been moved to another section, and in one department, I was later shocked to find that another group of contractors, whom the partly-absent boss had told me to get all my information from, had felt I was a threat to the hold they had over this particular government department, and had actively given me incomplete information and in some cases actually incorrect information. But of course there was no way to appeal the unfairness of being given no second contract there, as there might have been were I an actual employee, allowed a genuine discussion at a performance review. So of course, I spent more months applying for more contracts, with my skills, which had been in considerable demand when I was working for commercial companies earlier, further rusting away. I did spend 10 years contracting - some contracts worked well, but at the end there genuinely were no more projects in that organisation that year, while in other situations I did not get a second contract because I did not understand everything about that organisation and the task in hand, well enough to really shine during my 4 months there, so they looked for a flasher contractor for the next stage of the project, (often a former employee).

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

Yes

No

**Please tell us more**

I am now 64, and would love to work till age 75 at least. I am in a position now of having an ill relative to care for part time, but I could happily work for an average of 3 days a week, but searching for part-time IT contracts in an environment that was so hostile already is just too daunting. My guess is I could spend many days per year on the search, for maybe a 3-months contract every second year. And unfortunately in all those months I spend out of work, my skills, one very much in demand, just deteriorate further.

### **Barriers**

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

Yes

No

Not sure

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

Some Barriers are:

* Job-roles are changing (some slightly, but if one is unemployed for 5 years, the changes becomes big)
* Rusting skills while not actually working in their usual profession
* Employers want perfect employees – perfect skills, perfect looking, same interests as other staff, even same sporting interests - and we are not perfect.
* Requirement for experience rather than just training. Sure – give extra credit to those with experience, but don’t lock people out if they only have the qualifications but have not had 5 years in the industry.
* Especially in Canberra, young folk wonder why is that old person trying to work – my parents, aunts, etc don’t, (but they had good pension arrangements.) So the young workers and bosses think those of us from commercial backgrounds are somehow weird still wanting work.

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

Yes

No

Not sure

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

Yes

No

Not sure

**Please tell us more**

* Pictures: If you look at Magazines, Recruitment Agency websites, Salary Information, IT Advertising, in fact almost any Advertising, it is full of pictures of people aged under 35. There may be a few black faces, a few Asian faces, perhaps even an occasional 40-year old with hair dyed grey (to show he’s a manager), but definitely no old persons with wrinkles, and especially no elderly women.
* Recruiters: Recruiters have a lot to answer for. Their staff are often young and quite inexperienced even in the field for which they are recruiting, and they will make very superficial judgements about how well applicants match criteria. I have heard several horror stories among folk I know, of recruiters who turned them back because for instance: They had not worked with Brand X mapping package, even though they had worked with Brands A, B, and C, and had written an even more comprehensive mapping package than Brand X themselves, personally, in another job, and could list off almost all of the likely features of Brand X, to the sheer amazement of the Recruiter. But still the Recruiter said, “No, it states Brand X only, and as we have not found users of that in Sydney, we will recruit from overseas.” (It would have taken someone who knew other brands about 4 days to learn the differences, and even when they offered to do that at their own expense, it was refused.) It is very like telling someone they can’t work in a kitchen, because they have used Brand B Microwave cooker instead on Brand C.
* General society suspicion of anyone who does not look like one of your friends: There is a lot of lip-service to the value of “Diversity” in organisations, especially the public service, but there is very little diversity shown in the office, especially around aged. People are still uncomfortable about it.

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

**Incentives:**

* Financial – many of us intended to work until age 80, and are greatly distressed by being unemployed by 60, (and perhaps that was preceded by a decade of being under-employed too). It certainly spoils one’s plans for travel, for improving one’s home, and even for taking up the cultural or sporting interest one may have always wished to start.
* Wanting to be a “Real Person”: Being unemployed (especially before 70), is very embarrassing, and makes it hard to feel like a “Real Person”. People in social circles often actually put weight on your opinion (on all sorts of matters), depending on whether you are a lawyer, a university professor, an accountant, a shop-keeper, a business analyst, or a nothing – (that is, a former whatever who is no longer actually in that profession anymore).

**Disincentives:**

* It is hard to get time to care for elderly relatives, or grand-children.
* Workplaces are like schools of 100 years ago. If some child did learn or think in the same way as others, they were always beaten at school – there were never questions asked about cultural backgrounds, different learning styles, health, having to care for a sick brother etc – they were just beaten, or expelled. Same with older workers now. They are a bit different from “normal” workers. While governments want their money, society does not actually want to let them work.
* Contracting: Where older workers become displaced from permanent jobs, usually through redundancy, with companies closing, merging, off-shoring (say IT), re-structuring, et cetera, and the displaced worker has to move to contracting, this is the worst possible way to consolidate new skills – rather they get thrown into the challenge of learning about new businesses, new corporate structures, new technologies, new standards (or none at all), new cultures, as well as the detail of new procedures, and the details of their new work, often changing every three months, with the struggle to show that you shine at each new role, or you could spend many months of the year applying for new contracts. (It is quite common for contractors in this situation to spend more than 6 months per year out of work.) (However, contractors who have worked for one organisation for many years, and then go contracting for that same organisation, often do very well, as they are on solid ground and can also name their own price.)
* The sheer struggle of being rejected many times, especially by youths who know a lot in one small new piece of technology, but put no value on all the working-life wisdom an older worker can bring to their work.
* There is of course, a lot of enjoyment to be had doing your own thing, though frustration that you are limited financially in some of those choices also.

### **Good practice**

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

Yes

No

Not sure

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

In the days of the Training Incentive, at least one organisation allowed us workers to choose up to a week and a half of training per year on topics useful to the company, and in line with our own career plans. These regular upgrades kept us up with new technology, otherwise we might have dropped to back of pack, (as started to happen when I worked for another, larger company, later, who would never allow us time off even for personally-funded training).

### **Solutions**

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

Please note my comments about:

* Pictures
* Training

in my recommendations below.

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

Please see recommendations below.

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

Recommendations:

(Note: I think this whole question of getting older people back to work, is becoming Urgent, or Australia will waste millions of people-years of productivity it could have had (and very willingly provided at that).)

1. **Reduce Discriminatory Attitudes about Older People Working**
   1. Change attitudes in workplaces, society generally, and at Universities and Schools, by education campaigns.
   2. Legislate for Lots of Pictures of very old (including wrinkly) people, working in all types of work environment.
   3. Pictures of Older Workers should be seen even in Advertisements
   4. It might help if Government put more focus on including Workers of all ages. (For example, to have not just an Aged Care Portfolio, but an “All-ages participation in society” portfolio.
   5. Stop publicly blaming older folk for having saved the little bit that they have. We have a real “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” public conversation. Some people try to be prudent and they are condemned, some people become dependent through no fault of their own, and they are also condemned.
   6. Educate within Organisations about what are Discriminatory Attitudes
   7. Apply penalties, and make headlines, when discrimination is clearly involved
2. **Training is Vital**
   1. Targeted Training for over-50s (or even over-40s) is needed.
   2. Competence-based training, rather than insistence on years of experience. If I can pass the exams why do I need 5 former bosses to recommend me? (Also, some industry bodies require current bosses to verify your skills before you can get their essential tickets, which absolutely stops older folk trying to get back in.)
   3. Society needs to accept that further training is required after Trade Qualifications or University
   4. Training needs to occur as in-service training for workers, and especially for people displaced from jobs, and also as for longer-term unemployed.
   5. Training is particularly urgent for someone newly unemployed before skills rust
   6. It must be available as condensed courses, not needing 3 years University break
   7. Train, Train, Train, first: Use Migration as a last resort
   8. Set up fast-track training organisations for people over 45.
   9. Commandeer folk with new skills to spend some weeks to “train the trainers” to prepare quick courses on the new skills and technology, and ensure theses course designed must than take a certain percentage of older people (both employed and unemployed).
   10. Perhaps require overseas manufacturers to train say 200 people (with 50% in the older age group), (or spend certain percentage of predicted first two years’ earning), before they can sell their new high-tech products in Australia.
3. **“ Cadetships” or Mentoring to Progress Older Workers into new Roles**
4. Positive discrimination is needed toward Mature-Aged Workers. We may require positive discrimination such as requiring especially high-tech companies to hire say 30% of their workers in over-45 age group.
5. Mature aged "Cadetships" or the like, to settle workers into new Roles
6. A Mentor may be a younger person giving guidance, but respect is still required
7. Maybe even some departments being allowed to say, “Older workers preferred here”, and to run a form of segregation, a bit like high schools versus primary schools.
8. **More Jobs are needed all round**
   1. Maybe shorter working week, say 30-hour working week, for everyone, so more workers can share in the benefits of being in the lucky country.
   2. There are always more service-industry areas that could be explored.
9. **Society’s Attitude must expand to include “Ordinary” Folk as Workers**
10. You don’t need to be perfect for the tax man to find you - so why must you be perfect to be allowed to go to work?
11. Shock, horror – with any skill, 49% of the population are below the average
12. Just because people don’t have the most fashionable clothes, or dark hair, film-star smiles, or the latest shiny car, should not mean they must be excluded from a workplace because they “don’t fit in”.
13. Where do we draw the line anyway for people “past their prime”? We are already excluding people over 50; and next some organisation will feel they have an advantage if their sales people are not boring 40-year-olds, but rather stunning 30-year-olds; and the next step will be that tech organisations really prefer no-one over 25. So where does this selection of perfect-employees-only, stop?
14. This need for an attitude change applies to “imperfection” other than age, for instance to many disabilities.
15. Run Advertisements like – “Perhaps the perfect worker isn’t!”
16. **Permanent Jobs, but with Flexibility, would get many back to the work force.**
    1. It is a huge hurdle to have to learn everything about an organisation from scratch every 3 months, if you are a contractor.
    2. If you are looking at your last 15 years of life, you do start seriously valuing your opportunities to see all the grand-kids, or visit Cousin Mary overseas for the last time. But that does not mean you would not like some more money.