



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

COTA Tasmania Submission - December 2015

## **About COTA Tasmania**

COTA Tasmania (Council on the Ageing [Tas] Inc) is a not-for-profit organisation, operating as a peak body for a wide range of organisations and individuals who are committed to encouraging our community to think positively about ageing. This involves promoting and encouraging social inclusion and championing the rights and interests of older Tasmanians.

The vision of COTA Tas is for an inclusive society which values, supports and respects older people.



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## **Willing to Work Inquiry: COTA Tasmania Submission**

### **Introduction**

Overt and hidden ageism in the workplace has been of concern to COTA Tasmania for some time and we applaud the Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Age Discrimination Commissioner for conducting the national inquiry.

Roundtable discussions held in November 2014 in Hobart with the Hon Susan Ryan AO, canvassed issues and potential actions to address workforce ageism. COTA Tas has taken the opportunity to drill down into some of these issues by conducting a series of in depth interviews with mature age workers in recent months. The content of this submission reflects comments made by COTA Tasmania CEO, Sue Leitch, at the *Willing to Work* hearings in Hobart in November 2015.

COTA Tasmania also supports the recommendations in the COTA Australia submission to the *Willing to Work* Inquiry.

### **Methodology**

COTA Tasmania volunteer Nicola Ann Wright has worked with us to develop an interview framework for conducting personal interviews with mature age workers regarding the *Willing to Work* Inquiry. Nicola also conducted the interviews and transcribed the very detailed interview records.

Participants were sought through the COTA network and six in depth interviews were conducted based on a purposive sampling approach. Some participants were unemployed, some underemployed and some were still in the workforce. Interviews were conducted during October and November 2015. Interviews were provided on a confidential basis and confidentiality has been maintained by ensuring that names and identifying characteristics have been omitted from the interview transcriptions. As a result material provided in this submission refers only generically to interview subjects.

COTA recognises the small sample size presents data limitations. However, our aim in conducting the interviews was to focus attention on the lived

experience of mature age workers to highlight the nature and impact of ageism on their lives.

The submission draws heavily on direct quotes from the interviews and we have also included a case study at the back of the submission that presents one participants story in a more complete way.

## **Summary of Findings**

A number of key themes have emerged from the interviews in relation to how ageism is being experienced; the implications for the individuals involved and suggested solutions.

Ageism is apparent in both the public and private sector. While we do not believe there is a silver bullet that will redress workplace ageism, a number of the suggestions in combination could assist in improving the workplace experience for older workers and bring flow on benefits to business, government and the community.

Key issues that emerged from the interviews included:

- Age discrimination is strongly felt by older workers but is frequently hidden by euphemisms, unwritten rules and deliberate omissions
- Underlying ageism means that industry and business restructuring is having a greater impact on mature age workers – little post separation support is offered and assumptions that older workers will move into retirement were common
- Many employment agencies are not well equipped to assist mature age workers
- Age discrimination is linked to high stress and depression that can spiral out of control

Ideas for addressing ageism in the workforce emerging from the interviews included:

- National awareness campaign to challenge ageist attitudes
- Intergenerational transmission of knowledge and intergenerational communication training
- Flexible work conditions
- Training and retraining

- Exit support for older workers leaving employment but not yet ready to retire (retraining/redeployment/networking)

### **Hidden age discrimination**

*“I work in a competitive field, but being younger is one of the competitive advantages” (Participant 1)*

Interview participants consistently expressed concern that they had experienced age discrimination in the workplace, but rarely was this ageism overt. Rather it was concealed by euphemism, subject to interpretation and was incremental in nature. For many it was very frustrating feeling and akin to the rule book being changed while they weren't looking. Yes, you have the experience but no, I don't want to employ you.

*“I've been applying for jobs but I keep hitting the barrier of “you're over-qualified or you wouldn't want to do this, you would be bored.” (Participant 4)*

*“Ah yes, we know that you have the experience but we want someone fresh.”*

*OK that's fine you know fresh thinking, but they appointed a 25 year old with no background and no networks in this area.” (Participant 5)*

*“I was asked for my recommendations about the project but everything that I said or made recommendations about was dismissed. Nup, can't do that....everything I said or recommended was criticised and none of it was substantiated by evidence or proof.” (Participant 1)*

It is clear that our community needs to shine a light on ageism in the workplace to confront both intended and unintended discrimination. Without awareness we cannot take further steps to address the issue.

### **Restructuring, redundancy and retirement**

Industry and workplace restructuring impacts all workers, but the interviews undertaken in Tasmania suggest that the impact can be exacerbated for mature age workers. Many have reached a level of seniority and salary after years in the workforce that makes them a first line target for cost saving and

redundancy. Others have reported an assumption made by employers that they will want to retire if they are in the 50's and a further assumption that superannuation and pensions will provide an adequate safety net.

*"I had a large number of people reporting to me and they moved all of them into another area. Everyone except for me. Then they looked for a short term role for me in anticipation of making me redundant – even though throughout all this it wasn't clear what the new structure would look like. They didn't know how many people they would need but they'd already decided that I wasn't required." (Participant 5)*

*"I was made redundant....I received a payout but no other support on leaving the workforce...they basically said ... thanks for coming, it's been lovely having you here, but you can go away and find your own way. Some people can find their own way but for others there can be difficulties." (Participant 2)*

*"There were positions to go and I was one of the ones that didn't succeed in getting a position. Actually it was even worse than this as they decided not to fill all the positions and advertised externally later." (Participant 1)*

## **Employment agencies**

The majority of interview participants found that employment agencies were not always helpful in finding employment. This could mean that they were not interacting with the most suitable employment agencies; however the experiences across the board were far from positive. Many were just ticking the boxes without offering real assistance in finding work. This suggests that there is a gap in understanding of the needs of mature age workers and an absence of tools to assist mature age workers in the search for work.

*"There was one guy at X employment agency who was really good and he understood where I was coming from but he said straight out that he couldn't find me work and I would need to network." (Participant 4)*

*"I went along to the employment provider for an interview and was told that I was highly employable – which was fantastic to hear. But nothing really happened from their point of view....I wasn't homeless, I wasn't*

*just out of jail or on drugs so it was up to me to find a job myself. So they basically supervised me and I put in 10 job applications a fortnight. I knew they weren't real jobs and we were pretty much just going through the motions.” (Participant 2)*

*“I did sign up with one employment agency and I had one referral from them. That was to work in the Middle East!” (Participant 3)*

### **Age discrimination, stress and depression**

Each of the interview participants expressed the view that their work was a key element of their sense of self and identity. They feel strongly about the importance of making a contribution and drew confidence from their value and high performance in the workplace. Positive feedback from performance reviews was the norm in their past experience.

There was a strong desire to continue to make a contribution in the workplace and that this was just as important to them as the remuneration. All had different circumstances and actively resented being type cast as an older person who could afford to step back from the workforce.

*“This is our lives, we don't retire, we don't stop breathing, living and contributing. .... I am only 52. I have a lot of qualifications and a lot of experience, I am NOT ready to retire ... my psyche, wellbeing – everything – who I am is tied up with my career and what I do. I contribute through my employment.” (Participant 5)*

*“For me career is a very important part of my identity. I associate my ability to achieve outcomes within the workplace or within the community as just such an important part of who I am, and my sense of direction.” (Participant 3)*

Participants in the interview process found their experiences of ageism in the workplace to be stressful in varying degrees. In a number of cases there were clear health implications that impacted on their work performance and on their family life.

*“In a personal sense for me it just undermined my confidence – entirely...Couldn't sleep, couldn't settle, really anxious, really, really anxious. That then flowed on to the family, you know, they felt they*

*were constantly walking on egg shells around me, that I was very volatile, I would cry at the drop of a hat. I was absolutely sobbing! Constantly.”* (Participant 5)

*“As someone who was a highly productive worker, being unemployed... I’m not very good at it! There have been moments where... it all made me feel less worthwhile.”* (Participant 3)

*“I think probably about four months after the event of being made redundant I was a bit, I suppose, depressed or sad or whatever the case maybe, but I probably didn’t identify it as such.”* (Participant 2)

Others had lengthy experiences that eroded their confidence over time and spiralled into significant health problems. These in turn impacted on their performance in the workplace and added another layer of complexity to their ability to continue in or rejoin the workforce.

*“It was fear based on uncertainty like, you know, the financial ramifications of that, because it was so unexpected.....there were feelings of negativity and fierce fear stuff. Am I going to get another job? How is anyone ever going to want to employ me!”* (Participant 1)

Negative experiences while seeking work can sap confidence and motivation to find work.

### **What actions can be taken to address the concerns of older workers?**

There has been a lot written in recent years about the benefits of keeping mature age workers in the workforce and the strategies that make a workplace age-friendly. A growing number of workplaces are adopting approaches such as flexible working conditions, mentoring programs and transition to retirement programs. However, the responses we received at interview highlight the fact that these strategies are far from the norm in many workplaces. This seems to be especially true when financial or re-engineering pressures are experienced in the business. Underlying ageism that may not even be recognised by management can emerge and mature age workers are either experiencing undue pressures or are being forced out of the workforce.

Clearly the provision of ongoing training and retraining opportunities are a key for all employees including mature age workers.



COTA Tasmania believes strongly that if ageism in the workforce is not recognised and addressed in the short to medium term, the skills, knowledge and diversity required to prosper will be significantly diminished in many workplaces.

When asked what an ideal workplace would look like for mature aged workers, the responses were simple.

*“Well I think they would just be basically, accepting of people’s ability to do the job.” (Participant 2)*

*“I think mature age worker friendly employers would have a very inclusive value set and they would understand that you will be 72 sitting at a computer or 22 ...and they would value their team irrespective of age. And the teams would have a mixture of people of different ages working together.” (Participant 3)*

Interview participants strongly supported the notion of the need to raise awareness of the experiences of mature age workers and highlighted the fact that the policy is not always reflected in the practice.

*“It is about awareness, and it’s not just about saying that you can’t discriminate on age, cause that is not on – because having it in legislation and having it in writing doesn’t address the behaviour.” (Participant 5)*

COTA Tasmania strongly supports the notion of a national awareness campaign that continues the good work initiated by the Office of Age Discrimination Commissioner in the Power of Oldness campaign. Profiling of positive examples of age-friendly workplaces can also be a powerful tool and to this end COTA Tasmania is recommending to the Tasmanian Government that the Tasmanian Employer of Choice Awards could recognise best practice in mature age employment.

The concept of high functioning mixed age workforces was canvassed by a number of the interview participants.

*“We need to stop seeing older people in the workplace as a novelty and make it an expected norm that we have work groups that are of mixed*

*ages. And so it means – in the case of some older people – there needs to be training that supports them so they can cope in such an environment. But there also needs to be training and support provided to the teams, for the younger people, so they can understand how to work with mixed ages ...we need more robust solutions being developed at the workplace level, rather than solutions that reflect the life experiences of one particular age group.” (Participant 3)*

COTA Tasmania supports the idea of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and intergenerational communication training as elements of a wider strategy to ensure that workplaces are prepared to integrate increasing number of older workers.

Many mature age workers are currently still in the workforce and the number will only increase as our population ages, the pension age increases and the demand for skilled workers continues to grow.

Improved support systems for mature age workers are also part of the solution and COTA Tasmania supports the concept of career check-ups for people in the 50's. Furthermore, additional support is clearly required for mature age workers leaving employment, facing redundancy or pursuing career changes. The notion of career shifts as we age is likely to be a reality for many who either can no longer continue in their current career or wish to make a career transition.

One of the key job seeking skills identified in the interviews was that of networking and being connected.

*“If there is an expectation that people are going to work until they are 70, they need to be tooled up so that they can do the work they need to.”  
(Participant 3)*

As demonstrated through this submission, workplace ageism is complex, often unrecognised, sometimes concealed and deeply rooted in our culture. Solutions need to focus on behaviour change, involve multiple stakeholders at many levels and set hard targets that can be regularly measured.

## Case Study One:

*The following is taken from an extended interview with a 44 year old worker who has most recently been a manager of a small organisation but has been out of the workforce for a year. The participants name has been withheld for reasons of confidentiality.*

*I made a choice to leave full time employment to pursue a different career path – I wanted something more challenging and I had retrained to undertake different work.*

*I'm interested in passing on stories about the positive things that older and mature age workers bring to workplaces based on our experience and qualifications.*

*I have been out of the workforce for around a year but during this time I have undertaken quite a lot of volunteering work; particularly focused on organisational capacity building and governance. Over the year I have also had a number of conversations with mature workers about the challenges they are experiencing in getting full time work – and their perceptions of discrimination and the fact that I now have to make employment choices that take this into account.*

*For me career is a very important part of my identity. I associate my ability to achieve outcomes in the workplace or within the community as an important part of who I am. I need to be out there doing stuff, and I can't visualise myself as a member of a group traditionally viewed as outlets for older people. I want to be doing something contemporary, in the thick of it and contributing to my community.*

*But the reality is that despite what the government says about the benefits of employing older workers, the moment you get into your 40's, getting a toe in the door for work becomes really challenging.*

*Most of my job seeking effort is based on how I network. It is really essential to network widely. I did sign up with an employment agency and I had one referral from them. That was for work in the Middle East! My impression is that employment agencies are often looking for entry level workers or people who can fill in for organisations who need extra staff to help them over a spike in workload.*

*I've done six interviews in the last year and I have had short term employment from two of them. All the interviews were fine from my perspective but I did hear that I was overqualified a number of times. I think sometimes that mature age workers are also seen as threatening. Our experience and knowledge means that we are able to challenge the usual thinking in an organisation and not all workplaces are comfortable with change.*

*Being unemployed is very challenging for me and I'm not very good at it! There have been moments where I have felt less worthwhile and it has impacted on my confidence. My perception is that there is a preference for folks in their 30's who are seen as brighter, younger and more dynamic – all those sorts of things. But the reality is that people can have fantastic second, third and even fourth careers in their lifetimes if they are valued for their experience, wisdom and innovation.*

*What can we do about it?*

*If there is an expectation that people are going to work until they are 70, they need to be tooled up so that they can do the work they need to do. Workplaces need to be tooled up to work with intergenerational teams and work groups of*

*mixed ages should be the expected norm. Workplaces should adopt a flexible approach to work (work hours and work modes).*

*In the case of some older people there needs to be training to support their work in new environments but there also needs to be training and support provided to the whole team, including the younger people, so we can all understand how to work in a team with mixed age groups. If we are going to crack this nut we have to hit the solution from both directions. We've got to deal with young people and older people learning how to communicate better. We also need to address the language that is used about workplaces and mature age workers. The one thing I fear is being the old person at the desk at the back of the room and everyone is just waiting for me to retire.*

*COTA Tasmania*

*October 2015*