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

# Submission No 25

**Name** Raden Dunbar

**Submission made by**

[x]  Older Australian who would like to work

# Submission regarding Older Australians

### **Your experience**

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

[ ]  Yes

[ ]  No

[x]  Not sure

### **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?**

The main barrier, in my opinion, is the traditional thinking of those who assess candidates for jobs, and make decisions about them, are much more inclined to choose candidates who are younger, less qualified, and less experienced than they are. From my own experience in making such choices, I know there is a reluctance to employ candidates who are older, more qualified, and more experienced.

This is explained in the attached submission.

**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**

See above, and also the attached submission.

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

**Incentives:**

From the point of view of an older Australian who would like to work, my incentives are to have a sense of purpose, personal and professional accomplishment, and income.

I think that from the point of view of a potential employer, there are no incentives at all to employ me.

**Disincentives:**

The main disincentive I've faced is the repeated frustration of applying for positions but receiving no replies at all, and no feedback.

### **Solutions**

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

Please see the section in my attached submission that deals with the introduction of new anti-discrimation laws supported by a positive public education campaign about aged discrimination.

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

See above

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

That, for an aging Australian population in which the age for pension and other entitlements is being progressively increased, the Inquiry makes strong recommendations that legislation be enacted that makes age discrimination in recruitment practices illegal.

**‘WILLING TO WORK’ SUBMISSION**

made to the

**Australian Human Rights Commission ‘National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians’.**

**Summary of this submission**

This submission is about eliminating traditional recruitment practices that discriminate against older job applicants. It describes:

* My recent experiences as an aging Australian job-seeker, and my belief that I’m discriminated against because of my age;
* The roots of this belief in my past experiences as a recruiter and interviewer of job applicants, when I also practiced age discrimination;
* My opinion that recruitment practices which deliberately or tacitly discriminate against older job applicants will continue until they are stopped by the force of laws, supported by a strong and positive public education campaign.

**My recent experiences as an aging Australian job-seeker.**

I am an Australian male, aged 69, and tertiary educated with undergraduate and post-graduate degrees and qualifications. For most of my working life I’ve been an educator, and, in that capacity, I started as a high school teacher in Victoria, and ended up as a university academic in NSW. However, I’ve also been employed as an international education consultant, and have worked in that capacity for Australian organisations on many education projects in developing countries.

Until I turned 64, I had no trouble being selected for education positions in Australia, or for assignments abroad. I was always employed, and I enjoyed all the benefits of working – the personal and professional satisfaction, good income, and sense of purpose.

However, ever since I turned 64, I’ve experienced increasing difficulty finding work. This has occurred even though I’m mentally and physically active; don’t look my age; have lost none of my enthusiasm for working; and want to have a sense of purpose again. I feel as if I could easily go on working until I’m well over 80!

My recent difficulties with finding positions have occurred even though I’m making more job applications now than I’ve ever made before. I’ve only applied for positions where my professional background and qualifications have, in my view, closely matched the position descriptions; and I’ve never mentioned my age (although my long CV probably gives it away). However, I’ve still had no success – although I’ve reached the interview stage on a few occasions; most of the numerous applications I’ve made have not even elicited replies. The organisations that have failed to provide me with even rudimentary feedback have included Australian government departments, agencies, and authorities.

I don’t know exactly why I’ve experienced such lack of success, and there’s been no feedback provided to me that can cast light on this mystery. I can’t know why most potential employers didn’t respond at all to my applications; and, if I’ve been interviewed, it’s never been explained afterwards why I wasn’t chosen. I’ve just been left to guess as to why these failures have occurred.

However, given that nothing much else has changed in my life apart from aging, my instinct is that it must be because of my perceived ‘old age’.

**My past experiences as a recruiter and interviewer of job applicants.**

In the past, I’ve worked as a manager and leader in various workplaces in Australia and abroad. If I was involved in recruiting new employees, I usually had to evaluate applicants who were younger than me or less experienced, because the advertised position was one more junior than mine.

However, occasionally an applicant who was older or more experienced than me applied for a subordinate job. My usual instinct was to find reasons to not employ such a person; I know that my colleagues tended to do the same. This reluctance to employ someone older seemed quite normal; and, at the time, there were no employment policies, or even discussions, about age discrimination.

It went without saying that, during recruitments, those who were more senior and experienced naturally chose applicants who were younger and less experienced. It would have seemed unusual, if not foolish, to hire someone much older.

I now believe that, back then, I instinctively avoided hiring applicants who were older and more experienced than me – because of a concern that such people might be ‘difficult to handle’. The presence in my teams of a much older person might disturb existing workplace status-relationships. I now think that, out of self-interest, I didn’t want my own standing to be jeopardised by the presence of a much older, more experienced subordinate.

To help me avoid having to employ that kind of applicant, I had a choice of various traditional excuses for rejecting them. Euphemisms such as ‘over-qualified’, or ‘too senior’, or ‘over-experienced for the position’ could be used. I could also pretend that they would ‘waste the training investment’ in view of their purportedly shorter future working lives.

Because of those past experiences, I assume that I may have now become a victim of the same discriminatory recruitment practices! I now sense that when someone much younger is making a recruitment decision about me, I will invariably suffer the same fate. Instead of being regarded as a potentially useful contributor, I’m probably being seen as a likely threat, or ‘over the hill’!

**My proposal**

I believe that recruitment practices which deliberately or tacitly discriminate against older job applicants will continue until they are stopped by the force of laws and penalties, combined with a strong and positive public education campaign that highlights the economic and social advantages for Australia after discrimination ends.

To genuinely enable active, willing senior workers like me to be re-admitted to the workforce, I propose that significant changes need to occur to the recruitment practices of employers. The most important and concrete changes that I propose are:

1. Because for various well known reasons the entitlement age for the aged pension is being progressively increased by commonwealth legislation, corresponding legislation is also required to eliminate workplace recruitment practices that deliberately or tacitly enable discrimination against older applicants to occur. This change will need to be explained in ways that emphasise the benefits for the Australian economy, for organizations, and for older Australians and their families.

In other words, it is unreasonable to, one the one hand, officially encourage Australians to have longer working lives; yet, on the other, still tolerate hiring practices that make it difficult, if not impossible for older Australians to find work.

When that hoped-for commonwealth legislation comes into effect, appropriate organisations to initially set the example must include commonwealth government departments and agencies. The Australian Public Service Commission needs to show leadership by deliberately mandating recruitment policies that do not discriminate against older applicants, and, instead, provide practical incentives for hiring them. At present the Commission has many policies to discourage discrimination against indigenous and disabled Australians, but does not seem to have any policies to stop discrimination against older Australians applying for positions in commonwealth departments.

1. As part of that new hoped-for approach, recruiters of new employees need to be made aware that
* In the national interest, the time when almost nothing stopped recruiters from being prejudiced against older job applicants is over.
* Recruitment decisions that are based on, or are influenced by discriminatory attitudes towards older job applicants stand in the way of transitioning the Australian economy to one in which all citizens can make productive contributions, irrespective of their age, in an aging population.
* If the qualifications and work experience of an older job applicant match an advertised job description, the age of the applicant must be considered irrelevant when ranking him or her against other applicants, irrespective of the juniority of the position being filled.

I would like to thank the Australian Human Rights Commission for providing this wonderful opportunity for me to make my experiences and views known to the National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians.

Raden Dunbar

7 July 2015