

## Mature Job Seeker – Beating the Bias (Part 1)

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Australian business is starting to see the light when it comes to their hiring policies for mature aged employees, and the positive impact they can have on the workplace. A brief visit to main street shopping centre and you will begin to see a few more weathered faces at work than you would have seen a few years ago.

However, if you scratch below the surface, you begin to see this trend still has a long way to play out. A few mature job seekers get hired into the senior ranks where experience and maturity are greatly valued, more are being hired at the lower end of the scale into more unskilled roles, however the numbers being hired into the mid tier ranks remains low.

This barbell approach to hiring mature workers at the top and bottom of an organisation reflects an ongoing bias that remains difficult to overcome. A company is a microcosm of society, and in a perfect world employers should (within reason) seek diversity in the workplace and value skill, experience and aptitude, regardless of age, race or gender.

Unfortunately, we live in a far from perfect world. When it comes to mature aged workers they tend to be penalised on two fronts. Often the first to be made redundant in uncertain economic times, this setback is then compounded when they are regularly overlooked for someone younger as they begin searching for a new job.

As a result of these two biases towards mature aged job seekers, once out of work, the journey back can often be long and arduous. This is reflected in RBA statistics which indicate **long-term** unemployment at approximately 40% for those aged 45-64, compared to about 25% for those aged between 25 and 44.

So what are the reasons employers provide for not hiring mature aged workers? Typically, reasons often include being overqualified or over-experienced. Taken at face value being overqualified or experienced might not seem so bad, but when you hear the same reason trotted out time and again, it becomes less palatable.

Openly negative feedback from employers tend to include perceptions that mature aged workers are not as IT savvy, do not possess the latest skills, or are not as flexible as their younger counterparts. While these reasons may hold true in many instances, many of the older jobseekers I speak to, believe these are often used as convenient excuses to exclude them.

Employer feedback that you are not likely to hear include concerns about health (and subsequent cost) or worse insecurity. There are many poor managers in the workplace that may be intimidated by the experience a mature applicant brings to the role. Rather than leveraging the knowledge and experience an older worker can bring to the workplace, they are concerned about the potential competition, and the presence of someone who may know more than they do.

Dealing with many of these preconceived concerns and fears remains an ongoing challenge for the mature aged jobseeker. Perhaps the following facts should be mandatory reading

for hiring managers. These facts debunk many of the concerns and myths that remain in the workplace relating to mature aged workers;

- Mature aged workers can deliver cost savings to employers through increased retention rates. For example, workers over 55 are five times **less** likely to change jobs compared to workers aged 20-24, reducing both recruitment and training costs. *Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) Labour Mobility Survey,*
- Mature workers can deliver an average net benefit of \$1956 per year to their employer compared to other workers due to high retention rates, lower rates of absenteeism, decreased recruitment costs and greater return on investment. *Business, Work and Ageing (2000) Profiting from Maturity: The Social and Economic Costs of Mature Age Unemployment*
- Australians are living longer and are healthier. 2005 ABS survey found the proportion of Australians aged 55-64 reporting their health as 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent' was 75.5% – an increase of four per cent since 1995. *Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) National Health Survey: Summary of Results, 2004-05*
- Mature workers were the least likely group to take days off due to their own illness or as a carer. In the two week period prior to the survey nearly half the number of mature workers had days off compared to workers aged 25-34. *ibid*
- ABS data shows that Australians aged 55-64 are the fastest growing users of information technology. *Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) Year Book Australia,*
- Australian Health Management which examined the daily work habits of 4000 employees found that workers aged 55 years and over performed at their best for approximately seven hours out of an eight-hour day—an achievement that other workers in the study were unable to match. *Australian Health Management (2006), Baby boomers give employers a bang for their buck*

While government has been doing its part to address mature aged unemployment through initiatives like DEEWR Experience+, the introduction of the Age Discrimination Act (2004) and appointment of an Age Discrimination Commissioner, it remains imperative that older jobseekers directly address some of these age bias issues themselves if they are to enhance their prospects for re-employment.

*Continued in 'Mature Job Seeker – Beating the Bias (Part 2)'*