



Mature Age Jobseekers & Work Readiness

An Esher House Academic Literature Review

DOWN AND OUT: PERCEPTION OR REALITY?

No one is surprised by the idea that mature age jobseekers face challenges that younger workers do not. Despite many years of work and life experience, the community perception is that when these workers do look for work, employers are less likely to consider them over their younger peers. But what does the science say? In this review, Esher House takes a look at the key academic literature on mature age employment, to shine a light on the true employment challenges facing these workers. Are their challenges just perception, or reality? How can this information be used to inform new predictive analytic tools and more effective support.

Fact 1: Discrimination is real, but not realised

International research shows discrimination against mature age workers is one of the least acknowledged barriers to workforce participation. This can manifest in both the recruitment and retention of mature age staff. Euphemisms such as being unable to fit in the current team, being overqualified, lacking up to date skills, being inflexible, slow and unwilling to learn, higher salary expectations and concerns about overall health and fitness are often reported.

Fact 2: Discrimination can lead to self-defeat

The fear of age discrimination can be enough for mature jobseekers to self-deselect themselves from the job market completely. Jobseekers often feel very discouraged and think “what’s the point?”, as they feel that they are too old for employers to consider hiring them. In a survey of older job applicants (aged 50+), many reported being treated differently than younger applicants.

Fact 3: Older workers *are* treated differently

A younger worker is more than 40% more likely to be called back for an interview than an older worker, with some professions in particular – like IT - seen as having a more youth-focused culture. It's worth noting age-based rejection can be assumed in cases where feedback has sounded like a 'cop out reason' to protect the employer. Assumptions/irrational beliefs can be exacerbated by media, by reinforcing the reasons why mature age jobseekers are rejected.

SHUNNED BY THE SYSTEM

There are systemic barriers facing older jobseekers that can lead to difficulties finding work. Two of the biggest are the employment services system and institutionalised categorisation.

The employment services problem

Bowman et al. highlights challenges including the young age of many employment service staff (mid-twenties to early thirties), which can lead to unconscious bias and misrecognition of capabilities and experience. There's also the perception from staff that this older cohort are too hard to place, especially when time and resources are tight. Mature age jobseekers have witnessed more success when matched with a case manager who is of a similar age, when they report a feeling of their specific barriers being understood.

"They're disinterested in finding jobs for relatively skilled and experienced jobseekers whereas they have tons of dishwashers and supermarket packers"

"Really only there to help you if you are looking for trade-like work...or have absolutely no idea of how to put a résumé together."

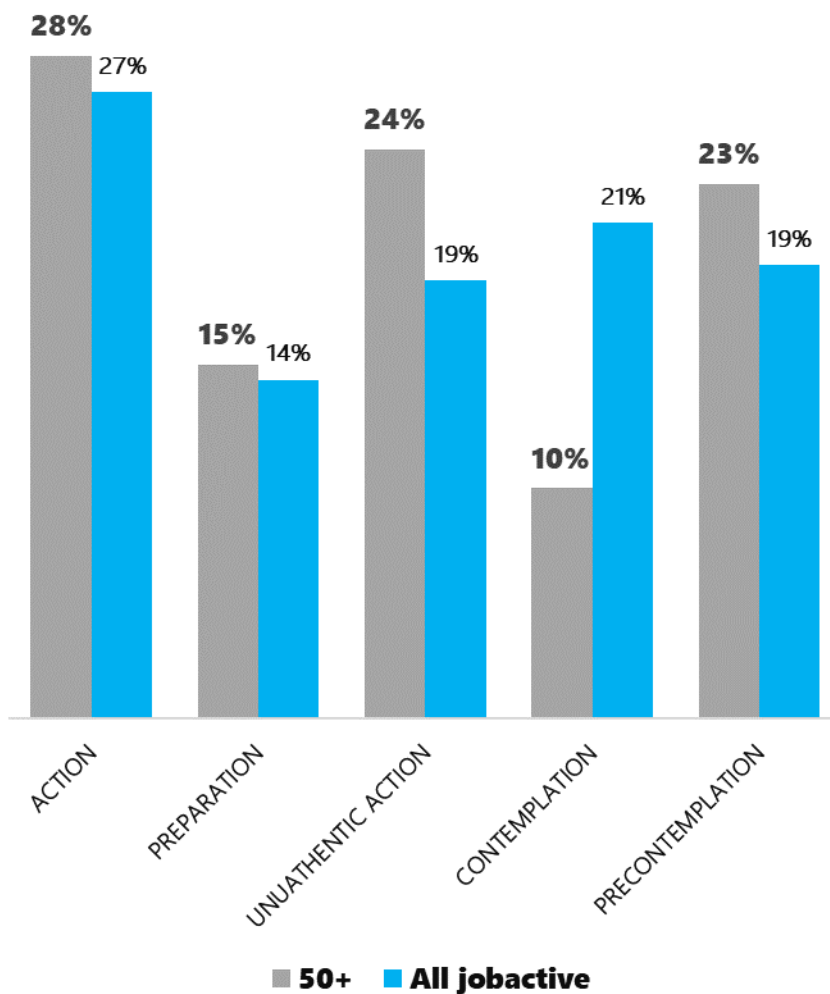
- Survey of mature age jobseekers' perceptions of employment support

Contractual pressures to quickly deliver employment outcomes may also orient employment service providers to steering jobseekers towards relatively low-skilled, low-paid jobs that require little experience or formal training. Such strategies effectively ensure individuals who had once been located within skilled or professional occupations are likely to be resisted by mature-age jobseekers who refuse to be shoehorned into forms of employment different to their expectations and self-perception of who they are as "workers".

The institutional categorisation problem

When adults who are over 55 years of age, unemployed and low-skilled are categorised as 'older' and 'disadvantaged', this may further affect their employment prospects. It is claimed that categorisation can devalue an individual's human and social capital in the eyes of employers - as well as in their own eyes - reducing motivation for further education and training. Labelling can cause people to 'behave in the way expected of them': the expectations we create for others, often become reality (behavioural confirmation).

50+ JOBSEEKERS' READINESS FOR WORK



The Assessment of Work Readiness (AWR) unveils a jobseeker's genuine readiness and commitment to employment. It shows marked differences in 50+ year old jobseekers compared to all jobactive participants.

Most notably, they are much less likely to be in "Contemplation" – knowing that they should work, and intending to eventually get around to trying to re-enter employment.

However, they are more likely to be in "Precontemplation" – in short, they have given up trying to re- enter

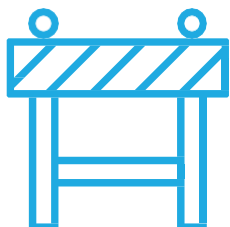
employment, lacking the desire or confidence to do so. Additionally, they are significantly more likely to be in "Unauthentic Action", stating and displaying that they wish to return to work, but not genuine in that commitment.

This data supports other academic research that suggests mature age jobseekers deselect themselves and might find it easier to "hold out" for a pension. However, with extended lifespans and the considerable economic and experience asset of mature age workers, this is a huge loss of talent and a latent drag on economies.

The above data shows a discrete mature age employment programme is justified, as well as a refined AWR set of assessment questions. Psychological capital-building interventions (building mental toughness, self-efficacy and well-being) are likely to deliver the greatest uplifts in employment outcomes.

DEFENDING THE BARRIERS

Barrier 1: Living Arrangements and care-giving

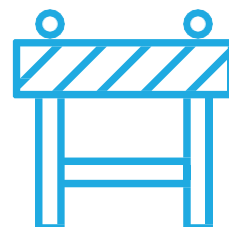


Living arrangements and care-giving responsibilities can significantly impact the ability of mature age jobseekers to secure employment. Older women (45+) are much less likely than men of the same age group to find work, largely due to a large percentage having disrupted their careers or education to focus on child-care commitments. This employment gap, as noted in Parents Next research, can affect self-esteem, self-efficacy and education/skill level.

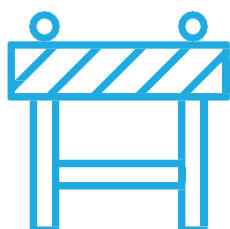
Further, this cohort (both men and women) can also face the challenge of 'balancing' jobseeking/work commitments with caring responsibilities for elderly parents. Many older workers are interested in being able to work fewer hours or fewer days per week or having flexible start and finish times. Work is already hard to secure, but for those needing flexible employers who understand their specific needs, it can be even tougher.

Barrier 2: Outdated skills and knowledge

Studies show mature age jobseekers often possess outdated skills and knowledge or lack skills needed for the present labour market. This can discourage mature age workers from seeking employment, or to simply settle for 'any job' rather than more appropriate work for their interests and skills. In a survey of Australian mature aged jobseekers, participants felt that the employment services system was primarily focused on finding entry-level, low-skilled jobs requiring little experience or training - out of sync with their level of experience and skill set.



While training in new IT skills in particular may be of benefit, mature jobseekers sometimes choose to accept/apply for jobs one or several levels down. Once employed in a lower-level job, the skills from their previous higher-level employment are not fully utilised, leading to skills attrition and poor job retention. Because employers tend to look at their most recent employment, once an individual loses a lower-level job, they have to aim a little lower again.



Barrier 3: Physical Health

Physical health has a major impact on early retirement, job loss, unemployment or difficulties re-entering employment. The probability of

employment for men with poor health is significantly lower than for those who reported their health was in good condition. Further, long-term illness or disability is a major reason reported for not wanting to work, accounting for 68% of males aged 50-54 years and 54% of 55-59 years.

Nonetheless, workers who are in employment and are 55+ are actually less likely to take a sick day and are the least likely cohort to suffer a work-related injury.

Barrier 4: Self-perception

Negative self-perceptions and negative age stereotypes are associated with negative outcomes. Accounts from those coping with joblessness and underemployment reveal a sense of powerlessness/helplessness about the future, with several 'hanging out' for the Age Pension.



Attitudes become reality: Older adults who hold negative attitudes toward their own ageing tend to benefit less from training activities compared to individuals who have a more positive attitude. Intervention programs targeting middle-aged and older adults' negative self-perceptions of ageing hold great potential to change what are mostly negative age stereotypes, and therefore promote successful ageing. Hence age-specific interventions to build psychological capital and optimism will deliver greater returns.

Redundancy = trauma: The mental trauma experienced from being made redundant from long-term 'careers' can be devastating for some. Older workers often don't share the modern acceptance of different careers and carry with them a disproportionate sense of stigma.

This sense of loss and change of routine has a massive impact on an older person's purpose and sense of identity, which in turn affects their physical and psychological wellbeing. For example, high levels of depression are reported in empirical studies by those who experience involuntary exit, with participants in qualitative research reporting feelings of 'anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, and sadness'. The long-term financial effects of prolonged loss of earnings and reduced capacity to save for retirement can lead to 'intense anxiety' among older unemployed workers 'about their ability to manage financially for the rest of their lives'.

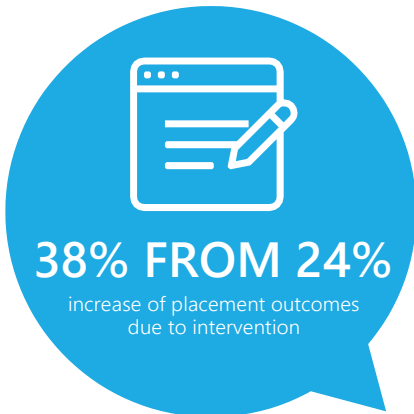
DOWN, NOT OUT

Research shows mature age jobseekers engage in less job search activities, which explains their 11-15% lower chance of re-employment. However, there is hope for situational improvement.

Activation: In terms of job search, activation measures and active support for those aged fifty and over can be effective. This activation could start as



soon as they become unemployed, given the job search behaviour of those aged fifty and above is significantly lower during the first months they are unemployed, and the highest proportion (72.5%) of older unemployed do not find work as a result of their own efforts after jobseeking for three months.



Intervention: There is also hope the right interventions can work. For example, 55+ jobseekers respond particularly well to the Esher House Psychosocial Intervention, which can be a true lifeline to those workers looking for a role. Peer-reviewed data analysis evidences that 55+ general unemployed participants respond remarkably well to a programme of stage-matched one-to-ones and Resilience Workshops. Placement outcomes increase from 24% under employment services as usual to 38% in the treatment group (N = 2,032).

Table 3. Characteristics of Participants Stage-Matched Intervention Treatment vs Treatment as Usual (N = 20,057)

Characteristic	Comparison (N = 12,037)				Treatment (N = 8,020)				Total
	RTW		Not RTW		RTW		Not RTW		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
All	3722	31%	8315	69%	3538	44%	4482	56%	20057
Gender									
Male	2123	33%	4385	67%	2111	46%	2449	54%	11068
Female	1439	29%	3546	71%	1292	41%	1857	59%	8134
Unknown	160	29%	384	71%	135	43%	176	57%	855
Stage of Change									
Action	NA	NA	NA	NA	1560	55%	1281	45%	2841
Preparation	NA	NA	NA	NA	782	45%	951	55%	1733
Unauthentic Action	NA	NA	NA	NA	584	42%	822	58%	1406
Contemplation	NA	NA	NA	NA	377	37%	653	63%	1030
Precontemplation	NA	NA	NA	NA	235	27%	775	77%	1010
Age 55+	268	24%	864	76%	339	38%	561	62%	2032
Aboriginal/Torres St Islander	437	31%	980	69%	600	41%	870	59%	2887
Culturally & Linguistically Diverse	615	31%	1354	69%	193	40%	289	60%	2451
Location (ASCG Class'n)									
Major Cities	1954	30%	4474	70%	680	51%	658	49%	7766
Inner Regional	877	34%	1708	66%	1799	43%	2421	57%	6805
Outer Regional	573	26%	1621	74%	956	46%	1129	54%	4279
Remote	200	44%	257	56%	90	28%	235	72%	782
Very Remote	118	32%	255	68%	13	27%	36	73%	422
Stream (Jobseeker Classification)									
Stream 1 (Limited)	11	7%	145	93%	10	43%	13	57%	179
Stream 1	907	22%	3270	78%	733	39%	1151	61%	6061
Stream 2	1271	41%	1811	59%	1240	52%	1136	48%	5458
Stream 3	723	37%	1242	63%	814	44%	1042	56%	3821
Stream 4	810	30%	1847	70%	741	39%	1140	61%	4538

Note. RTW: returned to work. Not RTW: did not return to work. NA: not assessed. Those in comparison group did not receive PS intervention nor stage-matched coaching.

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FIND OUT MORE ON INTERVENTION & MATURE AGE JOBSEEKERS



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