



COVER SHEET

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Career aspirations of older workers: An Australian study
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Abstract

Global challenges associated with the ageing workforce include lower levels of education and negative attitudes of older workers towards learning and covert age discrimination in the workplace. This report discusses initial findings from a survey of older workers employed in regional areas in Australia. The older workers surveyed were predominantly blue collar with low levels of formal education. Contrary to the stereotypical views, there were few attitude differences between older (>40 years) and younger workers (≤ 40 years). However, gender, education level and job type had a greater impact on attitudes in the older workers when compared to their younger colleagues.

Introduction

Current global economic, social and technological conditions demand a high intellectual capital in the form of continuous education and skill upgrade from workers (Ozanne, 2001). Older workers are particularly vulnerable to the new work climate because of lower levels of formal schooling and opportunities to participate in new areas of the labour market to a lesser extent than younger workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2004). However, the ABS statistics reflect lower fertility and mortality rates worldwide, indicating that the recruitment pool of the future will be disproportionately composed of older workers who are confronted with changing expectations in their employment. To compensate for the ageing workforce, organizational incentives and job modifications tailored towards supporting older workers are emerging in some parts of the world. Such practices are most advanced in the Nordic countries where the smaller population effectively accentuates the demographic shift (Ilmarinen, 2001). Although Australian policies and programmes to encourage older persons to remain in the workforce have been developed in recent years, they have been generally underutilized, particularly at the organizational level, owing to barriers such as negative age stereotypes (Ozanne, 2001).

Background literature

Employer attitudes and behaviours

Maurer *et al.* (2003) summarize employer attitudes towards older workers' ability and interest in continuous up-skilling as: (1) older workers are disinterested or lack the ability to undertake training and development; (2) contradictory evidence of older workers' ability to change; (3) belief that older workers lack competence because of ageing processes; and (4) social/organizational factors such as discrimination or social exclusion. Other studies such as those by Gringart *et al.* (2005) and Warr and Birdi (1998) confirm the existence of such stereotypes. However, workplace training programmes often discriminate against older workers by emphasizing abilities that are typically superior in younger workers such as mental processing or motor speed, or the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) (Maurer *et al.*, 2003). Thus, older workers may have very few opportunities to refute negative stereotypes (Gringart *et al.*, 2005). Such negative views perpetuate a sense of hopelessness and impact on the self-esteem and self efficacy of the older workers.

Reviews of older adults' work performance by Davies *et al.* (1991), Maurer *et al.* (2003) and Warr (2000) have demonstrated that older adults are heterogenous in their physical and mental abilities and that the slowing of either ability can be affected by many factors besides ageing. Also, physical decrements can be ameliorated by exercise programmes intended to maintain fitness level such that physical capacity remains consistent during the later years (Ilmarinen, 2001). The mental abilities most affected by the ageing process are *fluid abilities* such as speed of working memory and sensory abilities, especially hearing and vision (Davies *et al.*, 1991). On the other hand, *crystallized abilities*, which incorporate learned or specialized skills such as complex reasoning and verbal abilities, are less likely to decline with age and may even improve (Warr, 2000). Davies *et al.* (1991) argue that improved task performance amongst older workers can be achieved through compensation (involves the use of mental abilities less affected by age to accommodate hindrances that may result from other deteriorating

mental abilities) or compilation (involves the synthesis of numerous micro tasks into one action).

Despite the complex relationship between age and physical and mental abilities, work performance has consistently been shown to follow a curvilinear pattern, peaking in the late fourth or early fifth decade of life for manual occupations and approximately 10 years later for service and academic professions (Davies *et al.*, 1991). Such findings are reflected in organizational attitudes, particularly towards older manual workers. Older manual workers appear to experience the greatest disadvantage as they are less likely to receive training or be recruited after the age of 45 years compared to office and service workers (Tikkanen *et al.*, 2002). Older workers in service or office occupations are viewed more favourably by their employers because of the retention and development of customer service skills and their congruence with an increasingly ageing clientele.

Employee characteristics

Characteristics of the current cohort of older workers have been shaped by their experiences and attitudes acquired during the Industrial Age. Ozanne (2001) notes that this era was marked by a continuous full-time employment amongst men many of whom retired at the age of 60 with benefits or were involuntarily retrenched at approximately 55 years of age. During this era, the role of women changed from that of a homemaker to part-time employment outside the home. From the 1990s onwards, career paths have become increasingly cyclical and similar for both genders (Ozanne, 2001). However, historical gender differences persist in Australian older workers, with full-time and part-time workers being disproportionately male and female, respectively (ABS, 2004). Over the age of 50 years, men express a greater interest in career advancement whereas women are more interested in obtaining part-time employment (Wolcott, 1999).

The majority of older workers have low levels of basic education compared to their younger counterparts (ABS, 2004), a historical artefact of their cohort that leads to unskilled jobs with few learning opportunities in the jobs of today. Education level is a strong predictor of further training amongst older workers, and consequently, the training participation of older workers is low (Tikkanen, 1998). Older workers with limited schooling may suffer from lack of motivation and confidence in regard to learning,

reinforced by weak literacy and numeracy skills and limited encouragement from their fellow workers (Warr, 2000).

The Work Climates Survey conducted by the ABS (2004) suggest that approximately 33 per cent of lower-skilled occupations (mainly manual labour) and at least 40 percent of higher-skilled jobs such as managerial positions are held by workers between 45 and 64 years of age. The lower-skilled manual workers are the most challenging group of older workers, as learning has unintentionally become virtually irrelevant to their jobs and identities (Pillay *et al.*, 2003). Thus, many low-skilled older workers harbour negative attitudes regarding their ability to learn, learning in the workplace and the value of learning at later stages of career development (Tikkanen *et al.*, 2002).

The study

This study is a preliminary investigation to understand the career aspirations of older workers employed in the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ). The LGAQ is a peak body supporting 157 local government councils, which provide the majority of utility services to their respective communities.

Specific research questions were:

1. Do workers aged ≥ 40 years differ from workers aged < 40 years in terms of their career aspirations, learning attitudes and preferences, retirement plans and perception of workplace support?
2. Is there a significant difference in the previously noted variables between gender, job type and education levels subgroups?

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 397 employees from various occupations. Table 1 profiles the total sample, categorized by age group.

Procedure

An anonymous survey was used to investigate the aspirations of workers. The survey solicited information regarding the levels of satisfaction with their current job; training

opportunities available to them; and attitudes to and preferences for learning, and perceptions of organizational support. The survey comprised two sections and was developed from international literature and LGAQ corporate knowledge. Section 1 had five items to cover demographic details including: (1) age, (2) gender, (3) geographic location, (4) level of education and training, (5) current job description and responsibilities and (6) future career aspirations and technology use. The response formats were a mix of choices for the demographic data and open-ended questions regarding their job description and responsibilities. Section 2 had 27 items and covered attitudes towards training and learning, learning preferences, future career options such as retirement, career change or flexible work arrangements and employer support. These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The survey was administered face-to-face by LGAQ training staff, and participation was voluntary.

Results

Table 2 report the results of *t*-tests for independent means for significant items from Section 2 of the survey. Means comparisons were computed for the younger and older cohorts for the following variables: (1) age group, (2) gender, (3) job type and (4) level of education.

Discussion

The results show a few statistically significant differences according to age; however, the effect sizes for all age differences were below what is considered a small effect size (Green & Salkind, 2005). Similar to other studies (Pillay *et al.*, 2003; Warr & Birdi, 1998), older workers were less likely to want to improve their work skills and qualification compared to the younger workers. However, older workers were less likely to want to retire early than younger workers and were interested in less physically demanding jobs, which is a significant shift in terms of the stereotypical views that older workers are resistant to change. This suggests that training in alternative jobs may be preferable to further training in current jobs, some of which may be approaching obsolescence.

Patterns of career aspirations and future intentions varied according to gender, job type and educational attainment in the workers over 40 years of age, but not their younger

Table 2: Attitudinal differences in work and learning by age group, gender, job type and education level

	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	<i>d</i>
By age group			
I enjoy learning on a computer.	-3.245	0.001	-0.163
I would like to improve my qualifications.	-2.801	0.005	-0.141
I would like to improve my work skills.	-2.897	0.004	-0.145
I intend to retire early.	-1.985	0.048	-0.099
I would like to work flexible hours, if possible.	-2.670	0.008	-0.134
I would like a less physically demanding job.	2.998	0.003	0.151
I am supported by the Council as an employer, in my work.	2.182	0.030	0.11
	<40 years		>40 years
	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>d</i>
By gender			
I participate in training when it is available.	ns	ns	ns
I enjoy learning on a computer.	-2.031	0.044	-0.16
I intend to retire early.	3.455	0.001	0.276 ^a
I intend to remain employed for as long as I can.	ns	ns	ns
I would like to retire and then work part-time.	ns	ns	ns
I would like to work part-time, rather than full-time.	ns	ns	ns
I would like to work flexible hours, if possible.	ns	ns	ns
I currently work flexible hours.	ns	ns	ns
I would like a less physically demanding job.	3.187	0.002	0.25 ^a
	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>d</i>
I participate in training when it is available.	-2.048	0.042	-0.134
I enjoy learning on a computer.	-2.902	0.004	-0.19
I intend to retire early.	3.072	0.002	0.201 ^a
I intend to remain employed for as long as I can.	-3.209	0.002	-0.21
I would like to retire and then work part-time.	-3.261	0.001	-0.205 ^a
I would like to work part-time, rather than full-time.	-2.867	0.005	-0.188
I would like to work flexible hours, if possible.	-3.145	0.002	-0.206 ^a
I currently work flexible hours.	-2.547	0.014	-0.167
I would like a less physically demanding job.	ns	ns	ns

By job type									
My job requires continuous learning.	ns	ns	ns	ns	-2.362	0.019	-0.155		
I intend to retire early.	ns	ns	ns	ns	2.617	0.010	0.17		
I intend to remain employed for as long as I can.	ns	ns	ns	ns	-2.160	0.032	-0.142		
I would like to work part-time, rather than full-time.	ns	ns	ns	ns	-1.976	0.050	-0.129		
I would like to work flexible hours, if possible.	-3.278	0.001	-0.26 ^a	-2.080	0.039	-0.136			
I would like a less physically demanding job.	2.773	0.006	0.22 ^a	2.763	0.006	0.181			
By education level									
I enjoy learning new skills for my job.	ns	ns	ns	ns	2.474	0.014	0.162		
I often share my knowledge with other workers.	ns	ns	ns	ns	2.307	0.022	0.151		
I enjoy learning on a computer.	ns	ns	ns	ns	3.631	0.000	0.238 ^a		
I prefer to learn by attending classes.	ns	ns	ns	ns	2.357	0.019	0.154		
My job requires training to be available.	ns	ns	ns	ns	2.001	0.047	0.131		
My job requires continuous learning.	ns	ns	ns	ns	2.774	0.006	0.182		

^a Indicates a small effect size (Green & Salkind, 2005).

Positive *t* values indicate greater positive endorsement of statements for workers who identify as <40 years, male, manual worker, or post-school educational advancement (on-the-job training, Technical and Further Education or university degree).

Negative *t* values indicate greater positive endorsement of statements for workers who identify as >40 years, female or office worker.

ns = not significant

colleagues. Female workers generally took greater advantage of training opportunities than males, with a more pronounced difference in the older sample. The preference for computer-based learning amongst females may reflect the higher proportion of female office workers (computer literacy), whereas desire for early retirement amongst men may be related to their manual occupational status, which tends to become more physically demanding as they get older. Interest in flexible work arrangements was only apparent in the older cohort of women, confirming Wolcott's (1999) findings and suggesting that older women have greater external commitments than younger women.

Differences in learning attitudes and employment conditions were evident for job type amongst the entire cohort. The item 'I would like a less physically demanding job' was endorsed by manual workers, and the item 'I would like to work flexible hours, if possible' was endorsed by office workers. Amongst the older workers, preferences of office and manual workers largely reflect the patterns obtained for older female and male workers, respectively. However, older office workers were more likely to agree that their jobs required continuous learning, which may be reflective of the increased learning opportunities provided to older service and office workers as the technology continuously changes, compared to manual workers (Tikkanen *et al.*, 2002).

Amongst the older cohort, education level was related to preferences for further learning by those that had post-school qualifications. The completion of a post-school qualification was related to endorsement of a variety of learning behaviours and attitudes within the workplace, including sharing knowledge with other workers, enjoyment of learning new skills for the current job, learning using a computer and learning by attending classes. Older workers with post-school qualifications also believed that their jobs required continuous learning and that training should be available. These findings are unlikely to reflect gender or job type, as there are no significant differences in post-school qualification rates pertaining to gender or job type amongst the older workers.

However, despite low rates of high school completion amongst older workers in the sample, the proportion of workers with post-school qualifications was similar for the younger and older workers in the current study. Therefore, our findings concur with those of Tikkanen (1998), namely that older workers with higher levels of education are more likely to consider further training than older workers with limited education. Compared to

the younger workers, older workers perceived more organizational support than younger workers, which may encourage some older workers to participate in training opportunities.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that older workers are a heterogeneous sample (Maurer *et al.*, 2003); hence, a 'one size fits all' training programme will not benefit all older workers. Patterns of learning preferences and attitudes, and flexible work options and job redesign preferences varied according to education level, gender and job type amongst the older workers in this sample. Limited formal schooling seemed to be compensated for by post-school qualification attainment, as evidenced by more positive attitudes towards learning and training in this subset of older workers. Additionally, older workers perceived their workplace to be more supportive compared to their younger peers. The findings of the current study found that contrary to the stereotypical views, older workers in LGAQ are open to change and express an interest in further learning and job change.

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