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**Population Ageing in a Globalizing Labour Market: Implications for Older Workers**

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## **Introduction**

Against a background of population ageing, and with it, warnings about the sustainability of social welfare systems and problems associated with declining labour supply, there is an increasing policy emphasis on extending working lives of older workers among the industrialised nations (Hirsch, 2003; Keese, 2005; Taylor, 2006). However, recent commentaries have tended to focus on the relationship between population ageing and the labour market, largely ignoring other critical factors that are affecting older workers' relationship with the labour market. This contrasts with extensive research undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s when the forces acting upon older workers at that time were thoroughly elucidated (e.g. Kohli et al., 1991).

The focus of this paper is on the labour supply challenges for employers and nations arising from demographic trends, in combination with social and technological changes and the wider forces of globalisation, how each is responding, and how these trends are affecting older workers' trying to secure or maintain footholds in a labour market but facing, as Richard Sennett (2006) puts it, the 'spectre of uselessness' as jobs they could do have either migrated to other parts of the world or have been destroyed in the wake of industry failure.

Policy makers in most industrialised nations view an extension of the working lives of individuals as the basis of sustaining welfare systems and off-setting declines in numbers of young labour market entrants. Globalization and the competition this fosters however, provides a strong countervailing force for both government and employers. Additionally, nation states' capacities to resist the dynamism of global market forces and to enact policy in the interests of citizens are weakening. The current Global Financial Crisis (GFC) provides a case in point. In the USA, export earnings in the first quarter of 2009 were 21.5 per cent lower than the earnings for the same period in 2008. A similar result was recorded for China and in Japan export

earnings were 40.6 cent lower (Miller, 2009). The scale and pace of the shift in the export earnings profiles of these three large economies and the general disruption associated with the GFC has outflanked policy, exposing many individuals to the risk of job loss and, for some (perhaps many), long-term unemployment. In the USA, the number of persons who lost their jobs due to mass layoffs doubled from 150,000 in 2008, rising to slightly over 300,000 in May 2009. More broadly, since December, 2007 some 3.8 million US workers lost their jobs in about 37,000 mass layoffs (Dugan, 2009). This type of pattern has been repeated across the OECD, the fallout from which is yet to be fully understood. Given the weight and pace of these types of shifts, certain groups, including older workers with few or outdated skills and those with declining health may be particularly vulnerable to job-loss and long-term unemployment. Reconciling these countervailing tensions is a problem now facing a number of industrialised economies.

### **The changing global context**

Societies are experiencing rapid social, economic, and cultural change brought about, in the main, by the emergence of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Castells, 2005). New global economic structures are rewarding and requiring new configurations of economic relations, work skills, human and social capital as well as the resources of flexible capacities, agility and creativity rather than just the physical and material resources once emphasised in the industrial era (Stewart, 2001; Dossani and Kenney, 2004). Additionally, the structure and character of families, communities, organisations, industries and societies are changing as a result of new patterns of employment, heightened business competition, shifting life-cycle trajectories, new types of work and, increasingly, contingent forms of employment

(Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, (2001). Employability' built through a portfolio of careers is becoming more common (Smith and Hartley, 2003).

For older workers, however, some of whom may lack the necessary human and social capital resources needed to navigate this new terrain, dynamic change presents as a risk factor. The elements of change identified in the literature, for example, portray a complex of discontinuities that carry with them particular risks for older low/semi-skilled workers, especially those employed in highly competitive industries, although those with higher level skills are not immune. Economic globalisation (Kleiner, 2002; Gereffi, 2006; Palmisano, 2006) has not only transformed industry (Gereffi, 1999; Rajan, 2005) but also labour markets. In particular, growth in the volume of business process outsourcing and production offshoring has attracted much attention both in the popular press and the literature (Amiti & Wei, 2004; Banham, 2006; Business Week, 2006; Colvin, 2006; Heywood, 2006; Kitazume, 2006).

The National Academy of Sciences' report 'Rising Above the Gathering Storm' describes this phenomenon as an outcome of the death of distance, where workers in virtually every sector now face competitors who 'live just one click away' (National Academy of Engineering, 2006). Though, the recessionary effects associated with the GFC have contributed to a slow-down in the rate offshoring and in some cases, a retreat, in the future, the OECD predicts that up to 15-20 per cent of total employment may be subject to international sourcing. More recently, Blinder and Krueger (2009) noted that up to 25% of jobs in the US are offshorable. Post-GFC, predictions that China will become the 'supplier of choice' for importers in the US are expected to be realised. This suggests that in some labour market segments previously regarded as protected against the effects of trade-related competition (Károlyi and Panis, 2004) will inevitably be

exposed to the risks of offshoring. In this, global demographic change presents both as an enabler and as a complication.

### **The paradox of demographic ageing and declining labour force participation**

The 'developed world' is experiencing great demographic change, characterised by declining birth rates, greater longevity and ageing populations. As a consequence, a progressively larger number of countries are expected to experience a substantial ageing and, simultaneously, shrinking of their labour forces (OECD, 1998: 2000). In sharp contrast, however, employment rates of older workers in many countries have declined dramatically over the last 20 years, although they are still relatively high in countries such as Japan and Sweden. This is mainly due to early retirement schemes implemented in the 1980s and 1990s. While recently, many schemes have been terminated or access to them severely restricted, early retirement has cast a long shadow over the fortunes of older workers. Business, trade unions and workers have colluded in the perpetuation of a system where 55 has become 'the normal age for definitively leaving the labour market' (Guillemard, 2004, p. 177). Such a situation has not only had a profoundly negative effect on how such workers are viewed by managers and supervisors, but moreover, workers aged in their 40s are now viewed as 'nearly old' and find their career prospects curtailed (Guillemard, 2004, p. 178). While rates have increased recently in many countries, these often remain at levels below those seen in the 1970s and 1980s (Keese 2005; Taylor 2006).

The apparent stickiness of retirement intentions and workforce participation trends for male employees, aged 51-64 years, raises issues about the management of ageing workforces (Figure 1) and the effectiveness of current policy approaches. In response many governments have, adopted a policy architecture that emphasises population, participation and productivity measures.

Figure 1. Labour Force Participation Rates. Men - Women Aged 55-64 years. 1979-2007 (OECD Employment Outlook. Various)

	Men						Women					
	1979	1983	1990	1995	2000	2007	1979	1983	1990	1995	2000	2007
Australia	69.5	62.0	63.2	60.8	61.2	67.8	20.3	20.5	24.9	28.6	36.1	48.8
Finland	56.3	54.1	47.1	41.6	48.1	59.2	41.3	47.4	40.8	42.9	45.2	58.3
Germany	66.9	63.1	55.9	52.7	52.4	65.8	28.4	26.3	24.7	28.1	33.5	48.9
Netherlands	65.3	54.2	45.8	41.4	50.8	63.3	14.4	14.4	16.8	18.6	26.4	41.1
Japan	85.2	84.7	83.3	84.8	84.1	84.9	45.4	46.1	47.2	48.5	49.7	52.5
UK	-	71.5	68.1	62.4	63.3	68.9	-	-	38.7	40.8	42.6	50.1
USA	72.8	69.4	67.8	66.0	67.3	69.6	41.7	41.5	45.2	49.2	51.9	58.3
EU-15	-	-	55.4	51.5	53.0	58.4	-	-	25.7	27.0	31.0	40.4

Workforce ageing is also prompting a re-examination of what globalisation means for at risk individuals, their capacities and abilities in the face of dynamic change (Jorgensen, 2003; Van Yoder, 2002).

### **Offshoring and the reorganisation of work: risks for older workers**

The changing circumstances associated with globalisation, the introduction of ICTs and new social, economic and political environments have also created a new context for work and the prosperity and security that comes from gainful participation in work and society. As the OECD report ‘Teachers for Tomorrow’s Schools’ suggests, in the face of technological and societal change, the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be redefined to include a focus on expertise and continual updating, use of technology and the capacity to continuously adapt and collaborate within networks (OECD, 1998). Global competition has also placed a premium on the adjustment

potential especially in vulnerable labour intensive industries (Clark, Palaskas, Tracey, and Tsampraf, 2004). Older workers employed in failing sectors may be at particular risk.

According to the OECD, adjustment costs are higher for trade-displaced workers than for other job losers (OECD, 2005b). In particular, workers displaced from jobs in industries facing the most intense international competition are slower to become reemployed and experience larger wage losses once re-employed than do job losers in other industries (OECD, 2005b; Kletzer, 2005). More generally, a shift to economic inactivity is generally permanent across older age groups (OECD 2006). Added to this, there are questions regarding the quality and sustainability of the growth in employment opportunities among the aged 50 years and over population. In the US, for example, the New York Times of 12th April 2009 commented that ‘The unemployment rate in March for workers ages 45 and over was 6.4 percent, the highest since at least 1948.’ Rates are also on the increase in Australia and elsewhere.

Some also argue that older workers have been overrepresented in the expansion of precarious work and therefore risk ill-health and injury associated with poor work organisation, inadequate training and poorer knowledge of hazards and managing them (Quinlan, Mayhew et al., 2001; Quinlan and Bohle 2003; Frerichs and Taylor, 2005). Their job security is also threatened due to work intensification and the loss of soft and bridge jobs due to lean production processes (Tros, 2004). Job quality is critical if older people are to find work attractive.

While the greater global integration and increased outsourcing of products and services may bring benefits to societies, these necessitate adjustments (Mann, 2005). Martin notes, for example, that many OECD jobs are now at risk from developments associated with the integration of China and India into the world economy and that there is a need for effective policies to foster worker adjustments and to compensate the losers (Martin, 2006a). The



Economist (2006) also suggests that the real threat of outsourcing is less about jobs and more about wages. For example, while manufacturing employment in the USA shrank by two million jobs over the last 20 years, net employment increased by 43 million jobs in other areas (Baily and Farrell, 2004 p. 2). Older workers employed in service based industries are not immune from these risks.

While the phenomenon of outsourcing in the arena of manufacturing is not new, the international outsourcing of services has been a more recent innovation, extending its reach to, potentially, affect a range of previously 'secure' white collar occupations. In recent years higher volumes of service intermediaries in the health and banking sectors have been offshored while in the electronics sector 'higher abstraction' or intellectual activities previously regarded as core have also been offshored (Gorg and Hanley, 2004). These developments have triggered consternation in advanced economies about potential job losses to low wage economies. For instance, after an article appeared in *Business Week* which asked 'Is your job next' prompted a string of related announcements in the media. According to Amiti and Wei (2004), in the five months between January and May 2004, there were 2,634 reports in newspapers in the USA which concerned services outsourcing. The concerns expressed in these reports have also featured in national newspapers in the United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere (Heywood, 2006; Banham, 2006; ABCNews Online, 2006; *Business Week*, 2006; Colvin, 2006; Kitazume, 2006). In the academic literature a range of authors (Amiti and Wei, 2004; Stiglitz, 2002; Poelmans, 2005; Gereffi, 2006; Freeman, 2006a) also observe that the emerging discontent associated with globalisation is a function of rapid change in the interconnected economy.

While economic theory indicates that in the long run inter-sectoral mobility will absorb the negative effects of sectoral change or contraction, older and semi/low skilled workers may find it

more difficult to overcome inter-sectoral labour mobility barriers (Falvey, Greenaway, and Silva, 2006; OECD, 2005b). For some older workers therefore, these barriers may ultimately prove insurmountable. In Australia, in September 2008 there were 73,900 discouraged job seekers aged 15 years and over of which 66 per cent (n=48,800) were aged 55 years and over (ABS, 2008).

According to Egger, Pfaffermayer, and Weber (2003) the immediate effects of outsourcing may be to contribute to unemployment, because laid off workers can not readily switch to alternative employment. In both the USA and Europe, workers displaced from jobs in the industries facing the most intense international competition are slower to become re-employed and experience larger wage losses once re-employed than do job losers in other industries (Martin, 2006b). Kletzer (2005) notes that outsourcing reduces the flow of labour to non-competitive sectors while net flows to advantaged sectors remain unchanged. In such a situation unskilled labour is bound to be the losing party (Teitel, 2005). In particular, higher wage losses for older workers appear to be a universal pattern (OECD, 2005b, p 36; Mann, 2005). These findings suggest that an outcome of outsourcing may be to generate large numbers of disaffected job-seekers among the ranks of the older unemployed.

This is a concern because older workers, once unemployed, generally experience longer periods of unemployment with a relatively large proportion lapsing into discouraged job seeker status (OECD, 2005a). Data on duration of finding work for job starters by age group show that 60 per cent of jobseekers aged 20-24 found their jobs in less than one year compared with 50 per cent of people aged 45-54 and 43 per cent of those aged 55 and over. At the high end of duration of unemployment, four per cent of jobseekers aged 45-54 and 10 per cent of those aged 55 and over searched for 1-2 years compared with two per cent of people aged 20-24 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). This suggests that a large proportion of older workers have struggled to

make the adjustment, late in life, from unemployed to re-employed. Given the noted effects associated with globalisation, the proportion of discouraged job-seekers is likely to remain a policy concern in Australia for many years to come. In particular, for longer tenured older workers with an outdated or narrow skills base, employed in highly competitive industry sectors, the downside risks associated with trade displaced unemployment presents as a particular concern. Individual flexibility has now become an important resource for all employees. As the (Australian Industry Group, 2006) notes there are no more jobs for life and employees can no longer train just once.

Importantly, since the life-cycles of occupations and functions offered by organizations have shortened significantly in the last 20 years, the mastering of learning and coping strategies is relevant to all employees regardless of age. However, the ability to access ‘learning’ or redevelopment opportunities is not shared equally between younger and older workers (Taylor and Urwin, 2001). The adverse implications for ageing workers who have been isolated from the learning agenda (Schienstock, 1999; Ilmarinen, 2001) are well documented. For business, it is quite simply cheaper (and easier) to buy skills than to invest in training, and the draw of skilled workers from overseas will not be stemmed by invoking the experience of workers at home (Sennett, 2006).

### **Ageing and work in a globalizing economy**

In recent times, the term ‘active ageing’ has replaced ‘early retirement’ in the policy vernacular (Prager and Schoof 2006) and bodies such as the World Health Organization (2002) and the European Commission (1999) have been busy promoting the concept. A policy framework for active ageing has been set out by the World Health Organization. Here the concept is defined as:

‘the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age’ (WHO 2002, p. 12). Active refers to: ‘continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force. Active ageing aims to extend healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people as they age, including those who are frail, disabled and in need of care.’

However, is this realisable? The European Commission (2003) has estimated that an increase in the effective age of retirement of one year would reduce the expected increase in expenditure on public pensions by between 0.6 and 1 percentage points of GDP. Thus, the economic gains alone resulting from ‘active ageing’ could be enormous. However, there is cause to be pessimistic that active ageing is realisable, at least in the near future, and without the risk of severe hardship for many older workers.

At present, at least in the minds of most policy makers and many commentators, the continued participation of older workers presents an obvious solution to anticipated shortfalls in social welfare provision and labour shortages associated with ageing populations. Working later seems, at first glance, like a policy panacea, easing the strain on the public purse due to population ageing, responding to problems of labour supply and particularly if one also adds in benefits for older workers such as income and social participation. Surely, this has to be better than the past when older age was synonymous with early retirement? As vociferously as many used to argue for the right to early retirement, equal force is now applied to arguments for prolonging careers.

However this position neglects the reality of older workers’ experiences. There is no doubting the potential benefits for economies and older people from working later. Yet, it is easy

to point to gaps in arguments concerning the value of blocking off early exit pathways and instead exposing older workers to the labour market via promoting re-entry and retention. For instance some argue that the true target of anti-early-retirement policy is lowering pension costs, not the welfare older workers. If the evidence is picked through carefully, it is possible to mount a serious challenge to those who would make a case for 'active ageing' as it applies to the labour market. It is difficult to argue with the principle; after all, it appears to offer something to everyone, but for older workers serious risks are clearly present.

For it to be achieved a number of factors need to be in place. Underpinning public policy is a prerequisite. Unfortunately, a somewhat hesitant and not particularly holistic policy approach is emerging in industrialised countries, which undermines efforts. For instance, somewhat perversely, mandatory retirement has yet to be abolished in many countries. Active labour market policy, where it has emerged, it appears has made limited inroads so far, and arguably, may not be resourced to the levels required to make a real difference. Vulnerable groups, in particular, such as the older disabled and long-term unemployed have not fared well, and many remain unlikely to, considering the sheer volumes of benefit claimants and the complexity of the barriers they face. Where jobs are found it seems that occupational downgrading is common. It could be countered that these jobs, such as they are, may at least act as a step towards better work later on, something that would be unachievable from unemployment or inactivity. Unfortunately, this does not actually appear to occur (Taylor 2006).

Deeper cultural change, for instance in the form of the stirrings of a shift towards lifelong learning, has been emerging in certain occupational groups. Auer and Fortuny (2000) from the ILO stress its importance in meeting the challenge of ageing populations: helping the adjustment of workers' skills and competences to labour market demand; improving the attachment of older

workers to the labour market; and overcoming productivity declines after a certain age.

However, research into individual-initiated vocational training among middle-aged workers indicates that it is primarily those with skills already who participate. Those with lower levels of education, who arguably have most to gain, are less likely to participate. For older workers, flexible working may not be conducive to maintaining skills currency. They also often consider themselves unsuited to new learning and lack confidence in such situations. While lifelong learning is a popular notion among policy makers, is it really achievable in the modern labour market, or will the skills gap eventually become just too great to be bridged?

Thus, while older workers may nowadays be somewhat closer to the labour market than they once were, their employability is often quite poor. Many unemployed workers will be, in effect, retired but lack the financial wherewithal to withdraw from the labour market, even though logic would dictate that this was the fairer course of action. Hard to accept in policy circles though such a suggestion might be, it should at least be acknowledged that ‘active ageing’ that is little more than unemployment is a denial of the dignity that early labour market withdrawal would provide. Something that surely even its most ardent proponents must recognize is that ‘activation’ in terms of offering the ‘right’ of older people to work, when there is no work to be had, due to age discrimination, a lack of skills currency, or failing health may simply be condemning many to labour force participation, but with little or no prospect of meaningful job opportunities.

Is working better than retirement? Although policy makers would point to the individual benefits of working, if this is not good work then this may reduce the prospect of successful ageing. Research indicates that improvements in mental well-being on re-entering employment depend on the contractual arrangement. A return to permanent employment results in a larger

increase in well-being than one to temporary employment or self-employment. Interestingly, exit to early retirement appears not to alter well-being (Strandh 2000). It is apparent that much of what is available to older workers would not fall into the 'good' category. Flexible working has obvious appeal but difficult working conditions and meaningless jobs, which are monotonous, lack learning opportunities or do not provide recognition, are not conducive to longer working. Rix (2008) in the case of the USA points out that despite the shift to knowledge-based jobs, many workers are to be found in physically demanding employment or unsafe or unpleasant work environments that do not lend themselves to prolonged working lives. A significant number also lack the skills and ability to make an easy transition to something new. While surveys show that large proportions of older workers would be inclined to remain in work under different conditions and 'flexible working' is promoted as a policy cure-all, in order for older workers to truly have 'flexibility' or a 'choice' about work or retirement, this should not result in a serious risk of social exclusion or poverty or present risks to health.

The new policy rhetoric of working until the age of 70 or beyond must surely ring hollow to job-seekers aged in their 50s or those whose life expectancy, due to a combination of social and health risk factors is likely to fall short of this or not exceed it by very much. This perspective is generally neglected in official statements and amid the recent deluge of media coverage on older workers. Though 'baby-boomers are once again reshaping their world' is a currently a common refrain, it is a claim that does not stand close scrutiny. The reality for many older workers is that their choices are severely constrained. While they may be drawn to the idea of flexible retirement this is simply not an option for many, and even those with apparently valuable skill sets may struggle to maintain their employability. Added to this, while some economies have been growing steadily in recent years, it has been relatively easy to point to the

business imperatives of employing older workers. How sustainable such a position is in the current recession is another matter.

That governments have been reluctant to open labour markets to all older workers has left plenty of room for organizations to dispose of them if they so wish. This seems to reflect the reality that, while new public policies are intent on increasing the supply of older workers, it is by no means certain that they will be welcomed by the market. There is evidence that where employer behaviour has been considered, even in relatively buoyant economies, recruiting them may not be paramount in the minds of managers. While active ageing is high on the agenda of policy makers, it is rarely so within organizations. Firms view the ageing of their workforces with great concern, but few are aiming to delay retirement and they are biased against recruiting older workers who are generally viewed as employee of last resort.

Workplace age barriers are also manifested elsewhere. For instance, in Japan, many companies will only entertain retaining older workers with certain skills, while Rix (2008) in the case of the USA notes that the policy makers' favourite, phased retirement, is not manifested in many formal programmes but instead, there are many ad hoc opportunities to ease into retirement, suggesting that employers want flexibility in deciding whom to keep. Where older workers are targeted, certain conditions are attached. Rix puts it well when she states that 'Employers, however, have considerable discretion over providing the flexible options that so many older workers say they want'. Evidence of strong market demand for older labour is simply absent.

It seems somewhat paradoxical that, despite remarkable unanimity among the social actors concerning the economic and social benefits of working later, much of industry does not appear to have been galvanized and older workers struggle to maintain a foothold in the labour



market. Why might this be so? Understanding the context is important. In the past, older workers were overrepresented in declining industries, underrepresented in those experiencing growth and were affected by reduced demand for unskilled workers (Jacobs, Kohli and Rein 1991; Trinder 1989). Organizational delayering, downsizing of operations and process reengineering fragmented the traditional employment relationship and undermined the ability of older workers to sustain positions on age-stage career ladders.

While the large scale devastation of certain kinds of manufacturing and production industry about which these authors were writing has ended, global forces continue to shape the employment landscape in ways that are not conducive to older workers' job prospects. Indeed, the recent actions of some employers, mentioned earlier, in facing the challenges associated with surviving in a global marketplace via programmes which involve the removal of workers over a certain age are highly reminiscent of the situation in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Walker (2005) has argued that 'Future competitiveness in the private sector and efficiency in the public sector will rest increasingly on the performance and productivity of ageing workforces'. This scenario may eventuate, but employers are already thinking otherwise, and some taking steps that are at odds with it. If labour supply choices were, against a background of population ageing, really so constrained, then those who point to a looming crisis facing economies would have a stronger case, but for some industry sectors at least, it may not be unrealistic to suppose that, in an era of increasing global connectedness, younger, cheaper and skilled labour forces will be sought out as opposed to what may be considered a more risky, home-grown and, of course, older solution. While European policymakers, in particular, describe a scenario consisting of dwindling numbers of young labour market entrants and continuing early exit, and conclude that this will inevitably constrain economic growth if drastic action is not

taken, importantly, others have drawn attention to a doubling of global labour supply in the last decade and a half and argue that capital will find the lure of the cheap labour impossible to resist (Freeman 2005; Roach 2004). This raises questions about whether the expected labour drought bought on by demographic change really will exert such pressure on business that this will, in turn, result in a strong market pull on older workers, or indeed, whether instead, early exit, at least in some form, will be a continuing feature of labour markets if some employees are discarded in a drive to obtain supplies from elsewhere.

Another clue to understanding employer ambivalence towards older workers comes from management theory. While policy makers would, currently, prefer business to view older workers as an investment, according to Lyon and his colleagues, this sits uneasily with new approaches to managing human resources (HRM), which stress the need to align strategic business planning and HR practices in order to achieve worker flexibility, organizational commitment and the retention of a 'core' workforce. While the importance of workforce investment over the long-term is also stressed, there is selectivity in to whom this investment should apply. Older workers' employment with the firm may pre-date, by some considerable time, the introduction of new practices. This may generate suspicion among managers who may view them as having ideologies and allegiances at odds with the new value system they are trying to establish. Such perspectives may provide the rationale for recruiting younger and inexperienced workers to new businesses and to the exclusion of older ones among established businesses seeking to emulate these conditions. According to Lyon and his colleagues, this perspective not only legitimizes existing attitudes, it also provides a coherent and, above all, business-focused explanation for the apparent drawbacks in employing older workers. They are

not merely perceived as being less effective, they represent a potentially serious barrier to organizational change and flexible performance.

Such considerations are important if national policymakers wish to promote a business case for employing older workers. Current HRM theory provides employers with a convenient and powerful alternative rhetoric for legitimising the exclusion older workers. As a result, commonly used arguments for employing them may be largely ineffective. For example, what follows from HRM theory is that one of the so-called 'positive' attributes of older workers, corporate memory and experience, might be viewed as largely irrelevant or even disadvantageous by employers. And the 'lump of labour fallacy' economic view, which is a challenge to the notion that any increase in older workers' employment would come at the expense of younger ones hardly fits with the day-to-day reality of workplaces, where difficult decisions concerning who to keep on are made. Here, employment levels really are finite. Even the commentator's 'sacred cow' of the inevitability of business responding to the imperatives flowing from demographic change has been challenged. Turning the argument on its head, in a recent article in *The Economist* (2005) it was argued that population decline might spur Japanese business towards greater efficiency in its use of labour, and as shown already, the overall global picture is one of increasing labour supply. In sum, the foundations of the business case may be weak.

Moreover, some examples of employer good practice towards older workers that have been identified in recent years appear to resemble HRM's core and periphery workers, with them often appearing to have been relegated to the latter position. To quote Oka (2008) in considering post 'Teinen' or retirement employment in Japanese firms, currently in vogue: 'the pay and working conditions of these [reemployment] schemes appears to be poor on the whole. In many

cases, pay is halved, status reduced, while working hours and assignments are almost the same'. Moreover, 'the quality of work of Teinen retirees also often appears poor. It seems likely that most post-Teinen schemes will not fulfil the needs of older workers, as their roles will be ambiguous and unimportant in many cases'. Thus, for policy makers the problem with promoting flexible employment for older workers is that it may push many towards certain roles or kinds of organizations, ones that may be associated with low status, skill, security and pay, and which carry additional occupational health and safety risks. Raising levels of employment may have adverse consequences that do not seem to have been much considered. Rix (2008) in the case of the USA points out that retail work, not traditionally considered high risk or dangerous to older workers, may in fact be so. It is rather ironic, therefore, that British researcher Duncan notes recently that 'where older workers are positively favoured on commercial grounds, seem mostly confined to those widely-publicised policies of firms chiefly in the retail and catering sectors'.

The European Commission (2002) has acknowledged the potential risks for older workers, when it notes that 'Transition rates into both unemployment and inactivity are considerably higher for older workers in jobs of low quality'. This issue has also been considered by Walker (2005) when he states: 'Unless the factors which limit work ability are mitigated, as well as combating the access barriers to employment, then it will not be possible for active ageing to be achieved widely and, therefore, nor will the age diverse workforce become a reality. To put it another way: if the health and work ability of workers is maintained then they will be more able and, in all probability, more willing to extend their working lives'. However, it is also important to consider the relationship between work and non-work activities, or to put it another way, to consider the bigger active ageing picture. It is interesting to speculate on how working later might impede caring activities or reduce the amount of participation in civil society, that is

activating in one sphere but deactivating in others. Frerichs and Naegele (2008) argue that welfare-to-work policies may increase poverty risks for those older people who cannot find a job or take refuge in early retirement measures. As a consequence, this group will also be lost to community involvement and volunteering, a sound income base being a prerequisite for this. An emphasis on work and the neglect of 'life' is a significant weakness in current policymaking and in the older worker literature.

Finally, what will the future employment landscape look like for older workers and how can it be shaped to best meet their needs? It is clear that, so far, 'age free' employment is more aspiration than reality. While some observers point to a coming era employment opportunity for older workers, what might emerge instead is even greater age segmentation of labour markets as global industry demands a highly flexible, mobile and skilled workforce. While industrialized nations are ageing and some commentators draw an obvious link with ageing workforces, new labour reserves in emerging economies will prove an irresistible temptation for capital. It cannot, therefore, yet be said with any certainty that a new era of employment opportunity is unfolding for older people. A plausible scenario is one of increasing labour market insecurity and personal hardship as workers can no longer fall back on early retirement when they begin to lose the struggle to maintain labour market competitiveness. The implications of employment instability for retirement transitions are understood. The prognosis for old age is often poor.

Public policymakers must, then, be wary of pushing older people into labour markets where their abilities are not valued. It might even be concluded that in some countries there is a 'lost generation' for whom the notion of working longer has come too late. Unfortunately, but realistically, no program of activation could now make many of them work ready. This assessment might be viewed as being somewhat defeatist, but appears to have been tacitly

recognized by some public policymakers, in the form of relatively weak activation measures. If commitment is measured in terms of resources allocated, then in many countries, despite a great deal of rhetoric, it appears that older workers are not being prioritized for assistance. And while at odds with an activation ideology, it must surely also be recognized that the legacy of decades of early exit is a cohort who should be accorded the dignity of retirement and not face, what might be perceived as the threat of activation. Much of industry may simply feel unable to countenance ageing workforces, with the consequence that those who might hitherto have left the labour market for retirement will instead now be forced to remain economically active, but jobless or underemployed. The likelihood of significant social and individual costs resulting from 'activation' should be considered. As a singular focus on early exit benefited some, but had unintended negative consequences, 'activation' has its own pros and cons. Bridging the gap between work and retirement with something other than unemployment assistance would acknowledge the contribution older people have made and recognize their future prospects. The Social Protection Committee of the European Commission (2003) acknowledges the importance of maintaining a good social safety net for older workers, but to be implemented once integration methods have been tried. Once again, these are important, but neglected areas deserving proper consideration.

In summary, at present a general shift towards the greater labour market inclusion of older workers can be observed. Whether this represents the beginning of a long-term change in their fortunes is as yet unclear. For instance, will a prolonged recession result in a reversal of the gains made by older workers in recent years? Also, a seemingly plausible scenario is that much of business, perceiving a threat to labour supply from demographic ageing, and wishing to remain globally competitive, will endeavour to become more efficient, doing more with the labour it

already has, import more of it from overseas, or offshore activities to regions of the world where there is an abundance of skilled human resources available at low cost. Rather than being at the vanguard of an employment revolution involving choice and flexibility, a plausible scenario is that many older workers will continue to face the now familiar problem of diminishing opportunities and with it, prospects for a successful transition to old age.

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