BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT IN THE THIRD AGE

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Abstract

The 'baby boomers' are now approaching their 'third age' with many people able to live fit, active, healthy lives well beyond that experienced by previous generations. The 'third age' supposedly a time to take up new challenges, or explore new directions, has become possible through life span gains resulting from health and technological advances. For many who are approaching or now in their 'third age', however, the opportunity to continue working appears to be at risk. While it is now possible for 'third agers' to be active in the workforce up to and well beyond the previous retirement age, many older workers experience barriers to remaining in or returning to the workforce. This research, based on semi-structured interviews with eleven employers, identifies three main themes, that is perceptual, cultural and developmental barriers to 'third age' workforce participation. Each of these themes has developed around the changes that have occurred since many 'third agers' began work. At the same time employers are experiencing skill shortages that are predicted to continue and increase in the future. If employers are to maximise their potential workforce and meet the challenges of the ageing population, diversification of their workforce to include all ages will be necessary.

Introduction

In recent years a growing concern has mounted regarding the loss to society generally of many of New Zealand's older workers (Patrickson, 1999; Thomson, 1999; Patterson, 2000;). Since 1999 in particular, various researchers have considered this problem from a number of different angles (Sparrow, 1999; Ng, Gee, et al, 2000;Burns, 2000; McGregor, 2001; McNeill, 2002) including with people aged forty years plus, with human resource professionals, with the mature unemployed and with employers.

This research had become more pressing because of the changes to the Human Rights Act 1973 which meant that workers could not longer be required to compulsorily retire from work at age sixty-five years[1] (Human Rights Commission). While some were concerned that this might prove a difficulty for employers (Green, 2001) others were more concerned for those who had been made redundant during the reforms of the mid-to late 1980's and the organisational structuring which continued during the 1990's (Laczko, & Phillipson, 1991; Littler, Dunford, et al 1997; Collis, Mallier, et al, 1999). While unemployment has reduced considerably more recently there appears to have been a reluctance from employers to hire workers from age forty years onwards (Handy,

1994; Cited in Curnow & Fox 1994) during the last decade of the twentieth century.

Many workers, particularly those with lower level skills, who have become part of the long-term unemployed, are seen as a problem for society (Carpenter, 2001). This situation looked as though it would continue until skill shortages began placing increasing pressure on the labour market during 2001. The trend has continued this year impacting particularly on the trades. As a result unemployment rates have reached a fourteen year low of 5.1% (Statistics New Zealand, September 2002). While this might suggest that problems for the unemployed should now be declining, those who work with the older unemployed currently, have reported no noticeable change at this stage (Tweedy, 2002; cited in Sinoski, 2002).

Third Age

In my research into the apparent barriers to employment for older workers I have linked the problems of unemployment to those in their 'third age'. The term, third age is a relatively new term in New Zealand but has been around since the 1980's in Britain, where it appears to have been coined about the time that the "universities of the third age" (U3A) came into being (Laslett, 1996). Laslett (1996) describes the third age as the "age of

personal achievement and fulfilment". Adults can enter their third age when they are freed from the responsibility of raising a family and have less financial constraints. However, in Laslett's (1996) account, it is considered more a state of mind than a chronological age and time in people's lives.

This is a time, Laslett (1996) suggests, which can be experienced alongside other ages, for example during the second age, if a person's career allows them to achieve a sense of self actualisation.[2] The third age has become available to the 'baby boom' generation because of the increasing life span created by the advances in health care and technology. The third age is set between the second age, which is an age of "independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and saving" and the fourth age, which is reached just before the end of life and is now a relatively short time of "final dependence, decrepitude and death" (p4).[3]

The term 'third age' has also been used by the Carnegie Foundation (1993)in a programme of research carried out in Britain, into seven areas of concern regarding older people, including work and employment. For data collection purposes, the Carnegie Foundation, chose the chronological age range of fifty to seventy-four years to represent those in their third age.

It is my contention that those older workers in New Zealand who have lost their jobs through redundancy and restructuring, are unlikely to achieved their third age unless they can successfully return to the workforce. The fact that many older workers have been unable to find permanent work prompted me to consider what it was that may be preventing them from achieving this goal. The perception that the labour market is problematic for older workers appears to have also constrained the choices for those older workers who are not unemployed but may be considering a change of workplace or career (Ng, et al.2000).

Research carried out by Ng, et al. (2000) in the '40+ project' with people aged from forty years to seventy-nine years, in the Wellington region, found that as workers became older they also became more pessimistic about their job prospects. They expressed doubts about the possibility of successfully changing their jobs and they felt that their access to training decreased with age (Ng, et al. 2000)

The government in New Zealand has recently recognised the third age as a unique and previously unknown stage in the life span of the population. This recognition has meant that government policy is changing in this area and indications are that those known as the "mature unemployed"[4] are now more likely to be recognised as having different problems from the unemployed in previous generations (The Jobs Letter, 10 April 2002).

Methods

Because research had been done elsewhere in New Zealand with the unemployed (McGregor, 2001) and human resource professionals (Burns, 2000), it appeared to me at the time I began this thesis, that employers might be able to shed some light on what I saw as 'barriers' for older people, or those in their third age, continuing to be active in the workforce. Using a qualitative or grounded theory (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Tolich, & Davidson, 1999) approach, I interviewed eleven employers in the private and public sectors in Canterbury and Marlborough from five of the nine work type categories as designated by Statistics New Zealand.[5]

These interviews were with the tertiary sector, law firms, an aeronautical engineering firm, electrical contractors, retail chains and food exporters. These gave me a range of employment types which I felt would be helpful to achieving a reasonably a broad picture of employment conditions for older workers in these work types. The size of the organisations varied from very large to very small, helping to give a picture of the different hiring processes carried out by different types of businesses. In smaller businesses the hiring decisions were more likely to be made by the owner/manager whilst in larger organizations these decisions were usually the responsibility of human resource professionals. While it is not possible to generalise the results from my interviews to all employers, I suggest they do give an interesting insight into why older workers may be seen as problematic workers by employers.

The Data

On analysis, the data from my interviews appeared to follow three broad themes, which I have identified as perceptual, developmental and cultural. The perceptual theme refers to how older people are perceived by employers and others in society. These are general stereotypical views of older people, who they are, what they can do and their advantages and disadvantages to employers. Attitudes towards older people which can be found in society generally may also influence employer's decisions about workers.

The cultural theme includes the effects that technological change in particular has had on work and work culture generally. The status of craftsperson appears to have been lost to some degree and this has had a flow on effect for trades. Other changes such as the pace of work and expected hours at work are also important in relation to older workers and their 'fit' in this new workplace culture.

The development theme, a dynamic overlaying the other themes, refers to the prevailing life-span developmental norms which shape ideas about older people and where they are expected to be in their working lives or careers. These norms and values may conflict with the current market rhetoric of retraining and multiple career paths placing older people in a contradictory position when

they attempt to explore new work opportunities at mid-life or later. Ideas about what is appropriate work for older people could be instrumental in making it more difficult for older people to change career later in life and may also affect employers when they are choosing suitable workers for their firms.

It is my contention that these three themes contribute to the construction of possibly invisible barriers, which appear to make opportunities for older workers in the current labour market problematic. While there has been some positive adjustments to the labour market since my data was collected I suggest that many older workers are still experiencing problems and these are likely to increase if there is a change to the economic situation with a consequential easing of the labour market.

Perceptual Theme

Returning to the first theme of perceptual, there appears to be a number of different factors which help to develop a general perception of just who older workers are. I have identified factors of age, perceived advantages and disadvantages of employing older workers and how these are mediated through the prevailing labour market. Other factors include perceptions of workers' attitudes and images of desirable workers prevalent in the marketplace. Employers' views differed but there were some commonly held perceptions expressed by many of the interviewees.

Employers differed in their descriptions of the age of older workers with some suggesting forty as the age when a worker became 'older' through to those that felt fifty to fifty-five plus was the age of an older worker. One employer felt that the previous retirement age of sixty still had an effect while another employer suggested that the concept of was an older worker, had changed since the removal of the requirement to retire. However, the extension to a working life from sixty to sixty-five did not appear to have been taken up as a positive opportunity for workers or employers. Rather workers could be perceived as 'older' up to twenty years prior to reaching sixty-five years.

When asked to describe the advantages of older workers interviewees gave examples such as keen, enthusiastic, previous work skills and experience, good work ethic, stability, maturity, good communicators, able to relate to the client and having a wide range of contacts which could be useful to the employer in growing his/her business. Along with the advantages all of the interviewees discussed the perceived disadvantages of employing older workers.

These were described as a lack of flexibility, creativity, problems adapting to change, possible attitudinal problems, reluctance to learn new things particularly technology. Physical limitations with attendant health and safety issues and older age chronic conditions such as heart disease, organ failures, cancers which could be debilitating for the worker and mean extended time out of the workplace were also seen as problematic by several employers.

Interestingly, the positive views appeared to be predicted on known workers while the negative views were more generally related to societal views of older workers rather than actual employees. The larger employers in Canterbury, particularly the tertiary employers, with more diverse and long-term employees, expressed more concern with the chronic type of health problems and suggested that these had become more prevalent with the ageing of the workforce. Unfortunately I was not able to ascertain how concrete this perception was, as no figures were available for any comparable period of time. In contrast, in Marlborough, there was more concern with the 'drug and alcohol' problems of the local younger workers who were seen as less desirable as workers than older people because of those perceived disadvantages.

A concern for Canterbury employers in the electrical trade was the necessary passing over of older workers by younger technologically smart workers, for supervisory positions. The traditional career route in the past, had meant that as a worker aged in the trade they tended to move into supervisory positions while younger fitter tradesmen took the more active roles. With the increasingly technological focus of these positions some older tradesmen lacked the knowledge to compete for these positions. When older workers remained working in the active positions, they could be threatened by younger supervisors, who in turn, could become defensive towards older employees. This was suggested as undesirable and a situation to be avoided by employers.

Some workers in the trades area were considered 'unemployables' by employers. These were usually described as former government workers though one employer, who engaged mainly ex government workers, felt that 'local body' workers fitted this category. These 'undesirables' were mainly government trained tradesmen, who if they had not made the change to private work before being made redundant were seen as 'not worth having'. The main reason given for these workers, being seen as problematic, was because they had been trained twenty or thirty years previously and may not have kept up with the changes in the field. They were also considered to have an 'institutional' attitude which did not fit them into the current world of work.

Work Culture Change

The theme of cultural work change developed from my interviewees' considerations their own experiences when thinking about work, the way it has changed and developed since the 1960's and 1970's, but more particularly during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Work cultural change through this time appears to be instrumental in creating some barriers for older workers. Most of the employers interviewed suggested that many older workers did not 'fit' within today's working world because of these changes.

Employers perceptions of older workers revolved around three key changes understood to have occurred in the work environment and included technological change, knowledge capture and cultural change. These changes appear to underlie understandings of work today. The picture that emerges from the data illustrates the emphasis society places on knowledge and how older workers' knowledge appears to have failed to keep pace with or lost value in today's workplace.

Within the above frameworks, workers generally have had to change what they do at work, or be left behind in the process. An employer in the electrical field explained that the way he learnt his trade and the way it is understood and used today are completely different. In the past the job was done section by section, slowly with a better quality of finish than that expected today. The materials available in the past had also meant that one part of a job could take hours to complete. Today's new materials means that it can now take half the time it would have previously to do the same job.

Technology has refashioned the process of doing the work. Along with this have come changes in the regulations and clients' expectations. There has been a change in the culture from slow, meticulous craftwork to the expediency of the job done on time. Not only have the tools changed but the way the trade is learnt is different now suggested my interviewees.

In the past, a tradesman would teach his apprentice how to do the job, and make sure that it looked good as well, which would take time. This has changed as along with the new technology in the shape of tools and materials, have come expectations for reduce cost and much shorter time frames to complete the work. Because of these changes and pressures training to the same level is no longer required or expected suggested the employers.

These much shorter timeframes have resulted in changes to expected working hours. The financial pressure and 'drop dead' completion dates mean that workers can be required to work very long hours particularly towards the completion of a project. These hours may be at all times of the day and night as well as weekends. My interviewees suggested that while long hours and overtime may suit younger workers many older workers did not want to work at that level and this meant that they were perceived as less useful to the employer. While at times, the employer needed to take on extra workers many of these were considered just 'arms and legs' to get the job done. As my interviewees suggested, if these, often older workers had been any good, they would have already been permanently employed.

Employers in other than the trades, were also concerned by expectations regarding the pace at which work has to be completed. Those in the legal field, where email and faxes have meant that the opportunity to take time to consider a document over several days, has been lost, felt that the pressure to reply by return, could lead to faulty decision making. The interviewees who managed rather

than owned their organization reported that they were expected to work more than fifty hours a week or their position in the organization could be at risk.

All of these factors had an impact for employers when considering hiring older workers. Many felt that older workers did not have the same hunger for work or the need to work that younger workers had. They were less likely to want to work long hours or overtime when it was offered, preferring instead, to choice life style over a long working week.

Older workers, who had been trained in earlier times by some, now defunct government departments were discussed by several interviewees. While in the past apprenticeships with these departments had been highly sort after, those who trained in this way often felt that they were inferior to workers in the private sector. One employer who had received his training in a government department but was now running his own firm suggested that he felt branded as a 'government worker'. He was surprised to find when he moved into private industry in the early 1980's that he was considered very employable. Other fellow government trained tradesmen who had also moved to the private sector at about the same time as himself had also done very well and he considered that this was because of the very high level of training available at that time.

These contradictory experiences seem to go some way to explaining why ex-government workers were said to have a 'black mark' against them when looking for work. Those who had not moved into the private sector were considered 'undesirable' by many employers because of their perceived 'work ethic' which did not fit the current framework. Along with expectations that these older workers might have regarding regular break times, their lack of likely performance in terms of the current requirements were seen as problematic by employers.

It appeared to me that ideas about 'work ethic' could be contested depending on where the older worker had been trained. Those who had their training from government departments were seen as having a different 'work ethic' to that which was generally expressed as an advantage to employers when thinking about older workers. This appeared to reflect the changed work culture, which was instrumental in the barriers older workers faced when they looked for new employment.

Developmental Theme

In my third theme or dynamic I have identified life-span developmental understandings regarding how people experience their lives through work and their expectations that this will continue until they choose to retire. The idea that entry level roles were only available to people at certain stages in their lives, became apparent to me when several of my interviewees suggested, that older workers, who chose to retrained in a trade or

professional occupation, were considered 'out of step' by prospective employers.

In the trade area younger apprentices particularly those under twenty years of age were preferred because it was suggested that they were much more likely to be fit, agile and willing to do the 'dirty' jobs without complaint. Older apprentices, it was suggested, created a moral dilemma for the employer because of low pay rates. They were also likely to be less willing to do so called 'rubbish' work and this meant that they were less desirable to employers.

It also became apparent that employers felt that the decision to take up a trade should be made at the time young people left school and making these decisions after a few years in the workforce somehow meant that the worker was less desirable to the employer. They had had their chance and should have taken it at the usual time suggested an employer.

The problem for the new mature graduate though highlighted these contradictory views for me. In one interview it was suggested that clients' expectations would not be realised by a relatively inexperienced older graduate. The client would expect the graduate to have much more experience in the field than they had, because of they looked older. This particular interviewee was only interested in hiring young graduates for this reason.

In discussing these ideas the interviewee also mentioned that mature graduates tend to be less successful in his experience because of the lack of opportunities that came their way, particularly in the legal field. Another interviewee in a legal firm confirmed this process but also suggested that it was dependent on the partners in a firm taking on a mentoring role with the new graduate. It appeared that when a mature graduate was taken on and mentored by a partner then they were much more likely to have a successful career.

My interviewees with the tertiary sector also highlighted the problems that mature graduates might face when applying for academic appointments. Again it was suggested that an entry level position was more likely to be offered to those who were seen as entering their working life. It was less likely that an older person gaining a academic qualification would be offered the same opportunity. This appeared to again be because the mature graduate was seen to be 'out of step' in a working sense with their peers.

The interesting thing is that ideas about career paths appear to be linked back to earlier less turbulent times when workers were more likely to start at an entry level in a firm and progress their career with the same firm over ten, twenty or more years. It seems unlikely that today's younger workers will work for the same organisation for a similar number of years as the idea of a career for life has long past. However, a mature worker taking on a new career at forty could conceivably still have twenty to thirty years working life available to an organisation which should offer most businesses the

loyalty and stability they seem to require. Both these qualities, have been identified by employers as positive attributes of mature workers (McNeill, 2002)

Discussion

Each of the three themes I identified, from my research with employers, appears to highlight ideas about older workers which act as barriers to their future employment opportunities. Within the perceptual theme, perceptions of age, advantages and disadvantages of hiring older workers and workers attitudes appear to create some barriers.

Employers had differing views as to when a worker is considered older, ranging up from forty years of age. Identifying workers as older, can be an important factor in employers' decision making processes, if they regard older as being less useful to their firm. Steinberg, et al. (1998) found that in research with employers, there was a preference for recruiting workers aged twenty-six to thirty-five year olds and employers had no interest in recruiting workers over the age of forty-five years.

Ideas about the advantages and disadvantages of older workers also play a part in employer decision making. Employers appear to give advantages of those workers they know while the disadvantages appear to be more predicated on general societal views of older workers. This result was also found in a small survey with Canterbury employers (McNeill, 2002).

More physical problems were a negative for employers whose staff included many older workers while more drug and alcohol problems were negative for younger workers within my research. In other research with employers, older workers were acknowledged as having positive qualities of experience, knowledge and work ethic, they were also considered negatively in flexibility and adaptability to technology which are considered important attributes for decision making at work (Steinberg, et al.1998).

The pace of technological change and working environments have resulted in consequential changes to working culture. My interviewees highlighted how the work they do, is learnt differently and practiced differently to the way it was learnt and practiced when they were being trained. Much of this change in the trades area has resulted from technological advances in tools, materials and also to the way buildings are now constructed.

Much tighter timeframes for the completion of work has been placed on employers and employees alike. The resulting longer working hours for employees and employers means that older workers, who may not want to work seven days a week, day and night, become less useful to employers. Some considered that the pace of work is likely to cause problematic decision making, because decisons and actions are expected to be made or

taken without delay and this means that less time is available to consider the consequences of these decisions or actions.

In my interviews I found that some older workers, were considered 'undesirable' by employers. These were previously trained ex-government workers who were considered 'institutionised' and less likely to be considered as suitable workers by employers, except when time pressures for completion of work meant that they would be taken on for short periods of time. Employers suggested that these older workers would fail to meet the standards required under a new work culture which operated in private firms. However, this negative view did not apply to those ex-government workers who had moved into the private sector earlier in their careers.

While government trained older workers may have felt inferior to the privately trained workers, they found that they were very acceptable and successful in the private sector. The perception seemed to be that it was necessary to move on to new things at mid-career and if a worker had not taken this action then they were discounted by future employers once they were made redundant.

Grint (1991) suggests that becoming unemployed through redundancy may be seen as an individual problem rather than a societal failure. This perception, I suggest is taken up by employers who see the redundant worker as having failed personally rather than having become unemployed through uncontrollable changes at work (Crowley-Bainton, 1987.Cited in Grint, 1991). Ideas such as the above and those expressed by my interviewees may go some way to explaining the contradictory nature of the beliefs held about and by ex-government workers.

Ideas about what work ethic older workers hold are also problematic particularly for those ex-government workers discussed above. Those that have become unemployed are often considered 'less desirable' by employers because of the work ethic they operated under during their working lives is not that now held by private sector employers.

In the third theme I identified understandings of life-span development which appear to underlie ideas about mature workers being 'out of step' in society generally and with other workers. The 'job for life' understanding, which was the expectation of older workers when they began work now appears to operate against them, in their attempts to begin new working lives, in a different trade or profession.

Many of my interviewees considered that those who want to retrain in a trade should have made that decision on leaving school and those who employ professionals suggested that older graduates would not 'fit' within the clients expectations of an older looking professional. The apparent years meant that clients would expect equivalent experience.

However, Trew, and Sargent (2002) suggest that those mature people who retrain or study in later life "tend to have more flexible attitudes and different approaches to work from those of previous generations" suggesting that older workers can make positive changes through learning and that employers should be giving greater consideration to older graduates (p70). .In the future, employers may need to modify their perceptions of older workers, to combat the increasing skill shortages and the increasing ageing of the population, if they are to have sufficient staff to manage their businesses. Employers, who in the past have overlooked older workers as not fitting within their preferred age choice, may soon realise that for most workers retirement age is at least twenty-five years away and may be even further if the expected life span continues to increase.

To fill the predicted skill shortages more workers will need to consider retraining if they wish to be part of the knowledge economy. It has been suggested that workers can expect to have multiple careers in the future so it appears that a life-long learning perspective, is required by employers, as well as workers.

Future Research

Future research into this topic could usefully focus on helping workers make the best retraining decisions. While many training options are available to those who wish to take them up, there appears to be little independent advice available, to workers generally, unemployed or not, to help them make the best choice of future work.

Research into understandings regarding work and what it means to workers could be enhanced by cohort research which compares the current experiences of workers with those of previous cohorts. This may help to highlight how each cohort has understood work and how it fits into their lives. These understandings may also lead to the changes needed to allow a much more flexible and intertwined way of living, with work, education and leisure being more easily moved into and out of, throughout the life span.

Notes

[1] Some exceptions include employment contracts where they were required to retire at certain ages and other occupational rules of practice.

[2] A term used by Abraham Maslow (1954) to describe the highest level of self fulfilment and endeavour that people strive for in their lives.

[3] The first age covers the period from birth to adulthood and is described as a time of "dependence, socialisation, immaturity and education".

[4] Identified has those people aged forty years and above by the Third Age caseworker at WINZ Christchurch.

[5] The five chosen work types were Major Group 2, Professionals; Major Group 4, Clerks; Major Group 5, Service and Sales Workers; Major Group 7, Trade Workers; and Major Group 8, Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers.

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