

Managing older worker exit and re-entry practices: A 'revolving door'?

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This paper reports findings from an Australian study about the post-employment experiences of older persons who had left the full-time workforce (either voluntarily or involuntarily). It examines their perceptions about seeking re-employment in terms of their desires to remain in or return to work, and what employment conditions might entice them to remain in or return to work, including how organisations might help or hinder such re-entry to the workforce. A qualitative approach using exploratory semi-structured interviews was chosen to explore this relatively underresearched area. Participants from a mix of employment histories, industries, occupational categories and ages (but all over 45 years of age) formed the sample.

A key finding of the study was the lack of planning on the part of employers to consider these older workers as a potential future pool of employees. The study points to some important lessons for the management of older workers to meet the predicted looming labour shortage in Australia.

Keywords: ageing workforce, Australia, extended working lives, human resource management, older workers

The population of Australia is ageing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003). In Australia, as in other western countries, the average age of people in the workforce is also increasing, with people generally living longer. Population ageing has thus become a primary focus of financial and welfare policy-makers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2003) forecasts that the

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proportion of Australia's population over the age of 65 years would double to a quarter of all Australians by 2051. In the same report, the ABS predicted that the 15 to 64 year-old cohort (those relied upon to fund the general taxation reserve from which future welfare payments would be made) will decline by 7 percent over the same period.

Australia's ageing profile is a consequence of the post-World War II baby boom – baby boomers are those turning 65 years old between 2011 and 2031 (Productivity Commission 2005) – declining post-war birthrates, the immigration of people of working age, and increased longevity (ACIL Consulting 2000). Further, ageing largely causes a decline in workforce participation rates because, as people grow older, they tend to participate less in the labour force, through retiring or leaving the workforce – either voluntarily or involuntarily. As can be seen in table 1, in 1984, compared to those aged 45 to 54 years (with a participation rate of 70.25 percent), the participation rate for those aged between 55 and 65 years was 42.25 percent. A similar drop was recorded in 2003 between the same age groups from 82.2 percent to 55.2 percent (ABS 2005).

Such demographic changes in Australia's future workforce highlight the need for organisations to ensure the effective management of their older workforces, including increasing the retention rates of older workers, and possibly, re-employing older people who have already left the workforce. However, little research has been conducted with individual older workers to investigate whether they want to extend their working lives, or what employment arrangements might entice them back to work (except for example: Encel and Studencki 2004; Myers 2001; Onyx 1998; Patrickson and Clarke 2001; Stein, Rocco and Goldenetz 2000). Additionally, Minichiello, Browne and Kendig (2000) commented that there was limited research into the area of how older people felt about how they were stereotypically treated. According to Glover and Branine (2001, 363), students of HRM and management 'have done little so far to understand age–employment relationships, and need to do more'. Therefore, there is a need to further explore the intentions of older workers to continue working and assist to meet the predicted shortfall of labour, and what factors might influence such intentions. This paper begins to address this important issue.

Table 1 **Labour force participation rates for over-45 year olds**

	45–54 years		55–64 years	
	1984	2003	1984	2003
Males (%)	92.2	90.2	63.6	66.7
Females (%)	48.3	74.2	20.9	43.7
Average (%)	70.25	82.2	42.25	55.2

Source: Adapted from ABS (2005).

The Australian government and policy-makers have begun the public debate, policy discussions and research into the issues of the ageing workforce and the predicted labour shortfall (Department of Parliamentary Services 2005; Department of the Treasury 2004; Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria 2001; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment Education and Workplace Relations 2000; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing (H of R Health and Ageing) 2005; Productivity Commission 2005) in an effort to reduce negative impacts from these workforce challenges. One shared recommendation was to increase the workforce participation rates of older people, including extending their working lives. The advantages of such extended working lives include: additional productivity within the workforce; reducing the financial burden on (younger) tax payers who will be relied upon to cover health and allied care; increased tax income which will improve government budgets; and the potential for increased private financial resources (Sheen 2001).

However, the impact of the ageing population appears not yet to have been fully acknowledged by employers. Older people find it harder to get and keep jobs, are kept out of the workforce for longer, and suffer from the effects of ageism (Encel and Studencki 2004). In terms of trying to gain employment, just over one-fifth (21 percent) of Australia's unemployed people had been unemployed for 12 months or longer at July 2004 (ABS 2005). According to Hartmann (1998, 10), Australian employers have 'continued to reduce their older workforce and to disregard the advantages that these (older) people may bring'.

On the one hand, with increased life expectancy, better health facilities and medical advances, the financial need to continue to work is likely to have made changes in the retirement plans of many potential retirees. The 'older Baby Boomers are already becoming financially sandwiched in their need to provide for two other generations' (O'Neill 1998, 178). Not only are people commonly having children later in life – so that older people may still have children to educate, financially help to buy a home and so on – but also, the parents of baby boomers are more likely to still be alive and if they are, their health care costs are likely to be greater and last longer. These financial imperatives may push older people to continue working or to desire to return to the workforce. The same consequence could result from dwindling government-funded social service payments with individuals having to financially fend for themselves more than in previous decades. Some older workers will be forced to continue working because they will not be able to live on their accumulated savings, superannuation and pension (Schwartz and Kleiner 1999), and this situation is more likely to occur for women (Patrickson and Hartmann 1996; Patrickson and Ranzijn 2004) Concurring with this perspective, Gardyn (2000, 55) reported 'about 44 percent [of retirement aged American people] say they've worked for pay at some point after they retired'.

On the other hand, from a healthy older person's perspective, working

may provide benefits including greater lifestyle choices, increased spending power, and greater resources to rely on for a probably extended life span. Other advantages may include greater feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, and associated psychological benefits. Many baby boomers enjoy working, according to Shoebriidge and Ferguson (1997, 34), and 'will never retire; they will simply change what they do. They'll remain active and adventurous'. Furthermore, Australian research (Leonard 1999, 28) has found that many older workers were continuing to work, not because of financial needs but because their work colleagues had become like family to them, and 'their pride and self-esteem are also linked to the notion that they are making a contribution to society'. Likewise, Field (2001) and Gardyn (2000) found that the main motivator for older workers continuing to work was not to earn money, but to keep active, have social interaction, and feel productive. This is borne out in a survey of Australian managers aged 50–55 years. Participants were asked: 'if the company provided you with the option of working part-time, and arranging different ways so you can continue the knowledge transfer, would you be interested in maintaining employment? In 100 percent of cases, the answer [was] yes' (Tabakoff and Skeffington 2000, 4). In other words, many older people may enjoy working, yet desire different working circumstances than the traditional full-time standard hours. Further, from older people's perspectives, opportunities to remain in or return to the workforce may have increased, now that age-based retirement has been removed.

To summarise to this point, there is a labour shortage imperative to both retain older workers and to find suitable and attractive opportunities for older people to re-enter the workforce. While older people may financially need to continue working later in their lives, organisations may simultaneously be keen for more older people to work. However, the slim evidence in the literature suggests that alternative arrangements that might be attractive to older people have not been fully canvassed with older people.

Any solution to the predicted labour shortage based on increased employment of older people is likely to find the consequences of ageism (age discrimination) to be a hurdle. Age discrimination has been blamed as a key reason for older people not getting jobs (see for example, Bennington and Calvert 1998 Encel and Studencki 2004; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2000; Sheen 2000, 2004; Taylor and Walker 1997; VandenHeuvel 1999) even though ageism is outlawed in Australia. Moreover, older people found it difficult to return to the workforce once they had left, tended to be out of the workforce for longer, and were less likely to be offered job-related training (H of R Health and Ageing 2005).

While there appear to be fewer current job opportunities for older people (at a time when a labour shortage is predicted), and notwithstanding the power of employers in such situations, there is a gap in the literature concerning employment arrangements that would be attractive to older people choosing to remain in, or re-enter, the workforce. The remainder of the paper discusses

the literature about whether older workers desire to continue working, followed by a description of the study undertaken, the findings and discussion from that study and, finally, the implications and conclusions.

To work or not to work?

In an Australian survey of those unemployed aged 45–54 years, 29 percent reported their main difficulty finding employment was that they were ‘considered too old by employers’, and this rose to nearly half (46 percent) of unemployed people aged 55 years and over (ABS 2005). While the situation for older people may be improving, those who lose their jobs are likely to experience long periods without work or with marginal workforce attachment. It is these discouraged older people who may then slide into early retirement (Sheen 2000). Alternatively, some older workers may have left the workforce temporarily, only to find that when they wanted to return, or tried to find another job, the opportunities were not available (Encel and Studencki 2004), or they may have insufficient training for the available jobs (Crown, Chen and McConaghy 1996), as stereotyped by employers (Wrenn and Maurer 2004). Older people were reportedly stereotyped by employers as being less able to learn new things (American Association of Retired Persons 1992; H of R Health and Ageing 2005; Reark Research 1990), less adaptable (Steinberg et al. 1998) and less trainable (Encel 2001; Kern 1990; Steinberg et al. 1998; Taylor and Walker 1994).

A theme concerning the lack of employment opportunities for older people is consistent throughout much of the literature. For example, there were many ‘job losers rather than job leavers’ in the age group of 45 to 64 years who had retired from full-time work (Sheen 1999, 6). The majority retired for reasons beyond their control, citing ‘significant employment problems’ prior to their retirement (Sheen 1999, 8). According to Sheen, these reasons included age victimisation in the workplace, the forceful casualisation of jobs, or the perception that older workers’ performance is not satisfactory. These issues are central to the apparent growing likelihood of older people finding it more difficult to keep, or get, a job.

According to ACIL Consulting (2000) and Taylor and Walker (1997), many employees would have liked to remain working (arguing that most redundancies were involuntary), and had high levels of employment commitment. Moreover, VandenHeuvel (1999) found many older people were underemployed and would prefer to work more hours. However, according to Taylor and Walker, many older people felt there were strong pressures to retire early due to social attitudes, employer preferences, and individual pension/superannuation timing advantages.

If the demographers and statisticians are accurate forecasters, the swing of the pendulum towards demand for labour should create conditions in which

employers will be forced to increase opportunities for the employment of older people. However, if older people are not sufficiently healthy, or become discouraged through lack of opportunity and success at employment, they are less likely to seek (re)employment. Instead of 'does the workforce want or need older people?', the more important question may be 'do older people want or need the workforce?' The study in this paper therefore investigated older people's perceptions about seeking re-employment in terms of their desires to remain in or return to work, and what employment conditions might entice them to remain in or return to work, including how organisations might help or hinder such re-entry to the workforce.

The next section describes the methodology adopted for the study, including the participants, all of whom had left the paid full-time workforce. Many participants had voluntarily retired, with some then returning to work, while others had involuntarily left the workforce and subsequently retired.

Research design

In-depth, semi-structured exploratory interviews were used to investigate participants' experiences of being older ex-workers, and their re-employment-seeking experiences. The issues investigated with each participant were: their work and retirement history; their current desire for paid work; their experiences of seeking re-employment; and any employment conditions or arrangements considered attractive to entice them back to work. Interviews each lasted between 60 and 125 minutes, with the majority conducted in participants' homes or offices. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participants' anonymity, and selected participants' verbatim comments are presented below to represent the views of other participants, usually for their descriptiveness or comprehensiveness. The audiotapes obtained from the interviews were transcribed using voice recognition software, which was found to be effective and resource-saving. The researchers analysed the resulting data firstly, by identifying and coding the dominant themes, and secondly, by finding supporting comments for each theme.

Twenty participants were involved in the study – ten females and ten males (see table 2). The sample was selected using purposeful sampling (Creswell 2003, 185), as 'the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problems and the research question'. The snowballing technique (Minichiello et al. 1995) was also used: the researcher sought participation from retirees from an Australian tertiary sector organisation, and these participants were then asked if they knew of other suitable older people who might be willing to participate in the study. Once the data began being repeated, the point of 'saturation' was reached and then no more participants were sought (Cresswell 1998, 57). The final number of participants was thereby determined at 20. Participants of both genders were selected with differing employment

Table 2 Participant categories and ages

	Total number	Average age	Age range	Average retire age	Now working
Males	10	62.5	49–69	58.4	8
Females	10	59	46–69	57	2
Total	20	60.7	46–69	57.7	10

histories, age and industry type (including academia, accountancy, corporate finance, retail sales, childcare and teaching schoolchildren).

The sample was a mix of persons currently in the paid workforce (8 of 10 males; 2 of 10 females) and out of the paid workforce (2 males; 8 females). The majority (14 of 20) had voluntarily left the paid workforce; others had left the workforce involuntarily (6 of 20). Three of the involuntarily retired persons had continued seeking work, but had eventually become discouraged and stopped looking, declaring themselves 'retired'. Some participants (8 of 20), including three involuntarily retired participants, had 'retired' then returned to work but with different (usually contractual) working arrangements. Other participants (9 of 20) had retired with no intention of ever seeking work again. One advantage of such a variety of participants was the consequent mix of attitudes to working. However, the gender mix of working/non-working participants was noteworthy, and may represent a preference for certain types of older men and women to continue working later than others. However, gender issues were not a focus of this study and therefore further analysis along those lines was not pursued.

The age range of participants was 46 to 69 years, with the average age of participants being 60.7 years (62.5 years for males and 59 years for females). Several participants had retired many years prior to the interviews (one as long as 10 years prior), and one participant had only recently retired. The average age at retirement was 57.7 years (58.4 years for males and 57 years for the females). None of the participants reported having childcare or elder-care responsibilities to restrict their availability to work. See table 3 for further participant details.

It is generally accepted that 45 years of age is the benchmark for an 'older' worker (ABS 2004). Thus, 45 years was selected as the minimum age for this study. There was no maximum age as Drucker (2001) predicted that within three decades, Australia and other developed countries would have raised the minimum age of access to full retirement benefits to 75 years. At the time of the interviews, age pension access was available to males at the age of 65 years and to females at the age of 60 years. However, Australia is in the process of incrementally increasing the age of female access to the age pension to 65 years, to match that of males.

Table 3 Participant details

Athena	aged 63, widow, ex-administration clerk, 'retired permanently'
Barb	aged 46, married, ex-childcare director, supported by husband, 'retired permanently'
Bill	aged 68, married, ex-salesman, involuntarily retired but returned to work several years later in similar industry
Doris	aged 60, married, ex-administration clerk, retired but returned to work part-time in similar work
Doug	aged 64, married, ex-academic, retired but returned to work in similar job on part-time contract
Geoff	aged 61, married, self-funded retiree, ex-accountant, 'involuntary age-related retirement', became discouraged seeking work, now 'retired permanently'
Howard	aged 65, married, self-funded retiree, some consulting work
Jean	aged 65, married, ex-administration clerk, 'retired permanently'
Jenny	aged 54, married, ex-library clerk, 'retired permanently'
Jerry	aged 64, married, self-funded retiree, ex-academic, works as a consultant
John	aged 69, married, retired ex-senior administrator, now working as a mail delivery person
Lee-Anne	aged 49, married, ex-finance clerk, 'permanently full-time' retired
Marg	aged 67, married, ex-general clerk, involuntarily retired, 'retired permanently'
Michaela	aged 69, single, ex-academic, involuntarily age retired, and returned to work part-time in the same job
Norma	aged 60, single, ex-general clerk, involuntarily retired on a disability pension, now 'retired permanently'
Paul	aged 49, married, ex-businessman, 'retired permanently'
Sarah	aged 60, married, ex-general clerk, 'retired permanently'
Sam	aged 67, ex-academic, married, involuntarily age retired, working part-time in the same field as before his retirement
Tony	aged 55, ex-teacher, married, 'retired permanently'
Wayne	aged 63, ex-academic, married, retired but returned to work in similar job on part-time contract

Findings and discussion

Six dominant themes emerged from the participants' comments: 1) flexible working arrangements were considered very desirable; 2) their age was reported as the most common cause of participants leaving the workforce; 3) age was reported as a barrier to re-entry to work; 4) working with a team and other social aspects of work were seen as attractive; 5) the qualified participants wanted to continue working; and 6) self-worth and job satisfaction were important to older people. Details of comments made by participants in support of each of the six themes are provided below.

Flexible working arrangements

In response to questions about what kind of working arrangements older people found attractive, the majority (18 of 20) of participants reported flexible

and less than full-time arrangements as the most attractive. All participants interested in working (10 of 20), irrespective of their employment history or qualifications, specified that they would prefer 2 or 3 days' work a week, or assignment-type employment. For example, Howard represented others' views with his comment, 'I wouldn't mind a job that was for three months full-time but I wouldn't like full-time for two years – but for three to six months that would be okay'. Comments associated with the attractiveness of less than full-time work included 'less pressure and stress', 'more time to do the other interests in my life', 'only accepting jobs that utilise my skills', and 'only taking jobs that I want'. Agreeing, Norma added, 'I don't mind if I could find a job for two days a week. I would be happy because I think that's all I could manage.' Lee-Anne commented that she thought 'family' was a very important part of older workers' decisions about continuing to work, and that offering employment arrangements other than full-time would be attractive to her and may entice her back to work. Soon after their leaving the workforce, the two involuntarily 'retired' participants had been keen to earn a high income and would have preferred to find full-time work. However, they had become discouraged, had stopped searching for work, and now would be willing to work part-time.

This flexible employment finding supports previous research in the USA by Maurer (2001) who found that 24 percent of organisations were offering flexible working schedules to retain workers. In New Zealand, Koopman-Boyden and Macdonald (2003) likewise found flexible working arrangements to be a successful retention strategy, and in Australia, Patrickson and Hartmann (2001) argued a similar case. This finding also supports the statistics showing older workers work fewer hours per week (ABS 2005).

Offering part-time working arrangements to older workers might prove a bonus to both organisations and individual older workers, as it suits both parties' needs in times of dwindling labour and skills supply. For employers, it may attract extra staff with specific skills who wish to reduce their hours or cease working completely. For individual older people, the opportunity to work part-time may be attractive whereas working full-time may not. In other words, extra labour may be found in addition to those already employed. However, the social justice issue of age discrimination may impinge on individual older people's expectations with regard to employment opportunities, and this is discussed next.

Age and leaving the workforce

A significant finding was that all participants reported age-related reasons for leaving the workforce, whether they chose to leave because they judged they were at a suitable age, or their organisation forced them to leave. Seven (of 10) males and 7 (of 10) females had retired voluntarily, citing age-related reasons for choosing to retire including, 'I had had enough – I wanted to get off the

treadmill', 'I wanted to make room for the young blokes to come up', and 'I had been working for 40 years – it was time'. Of the 6 participants (3 males; 3 females) who had involuntarily retired, all reported age was the reason they were made redundant, or 'pushed' out of their last jobs. For Bill, 'we moved to the Gold Coast and nobody wants a 55 plus [years of age] person anymore'. Geoff remarked, 'it was expected that I would leave because of my age'. Jerry added that he thought older people 'have a slippery [employment] path. It doesn't take much to fall off and if you do fall off it, then pity help you, because I don't think there are very many opportunities to get back on it'.

This theme reflects older people's lack of opportunity to return to the workforce. As mentioned by the ABS (2005), age was reported as the single most important factor in older people not being able to get another job – supporting findings by Encel and Studencki (2004) that age discrimination still occurred in Australia, and Sheen's (1999) notion of 'job losers' rather than 'job leavers'. However, other researchers have argued that while ageism is widely accepted as prevalent, the causes are more contentious (for example, Duncan and Loretto 2004; Murray and Syed 2005). In other words, participants' comments lend support to the literature concerning the critical nature of age-related factors in employment decisions.

Re-entry to work

In discussing their experiences with trying to re-enter the workforce, participants commented on a range of issues such as barriers resulting from their age, a perception by employers of their over-qualification, a lack of training of the hiring interviewers, the bias that can occur in an interview situation itself (such as lack of empathy and age differences between applicant and interviewer), an inability to provide recent references, and the process of hiring being perceived to be a farce.

Four participants had left the workforce, expecting to be able to re-enter later, but all had been unsuccessful. For example, Norma remarked, 'I went back and applied for all these jobs and you know, you go in and you could see it on their faces, in "oh gosh, she's an old biddy, and we don't want her"'. Similarly, Marg reported that having resigned from her job after the company had relocated a long distance away, she was unable to find suitable employment and was convinced this was due to her age. Geoff commented, 'why I don't think I progressed any further [in the selection process] was that I was not able to offer a current referee. They wanted a referee that you had reported to within the last 12 to 18 months'. Bill noted, 'the interviewers are always much, much younger than you, and you could always tell, in their faces, that they thought you were too old'.

One explanation of why age may be the reason reported for lack of job search success could be that 'age' is a well-known and socially accepted reason to provide others (and yourself) as to why a job search has been unsuccessful.

Using this explanation could mean that no self-analysis is undertaken, as the cause for non-hiring appears beyond the control of the individual and therefore analysis of one's own comparative competence or experience seems unnecessary. Another reason could be employers' stereotypical perceptions of older people's lesser abilities and adaptability.

Eight other participants (6 males; 2 females) had left the workforce but immediately started working again, mostly in a similar role in the same organisation, but less than full-time. These participants commented that they recognised the difficulties in re-entering the workforce, and therefore most (5 of 8) had negotiated their 'return to work' prior to their 'retirement'. None of their organisations had been proactive in this negotiation; the initiative had come from the employees. Yet, according to the participants, the arrangement was successful for both parties. Six months after having retired, one female decided that she wanted to return to work and contacted her previous employer who found her ongoing part-time work. Additionally, these older workers reported high levels of satisfaction with their new more flexible, less than full-time, working arrangements.

This finding suggests the need to provide flexible working arrangements to attract older persons to either stay in or return to the workforce. If organisations are keen to retain the abilities and corporate knowledge of older workers, different proactive approaches to the exit and re-entry of older workers appear needed. However, there was little evidence of proactive approaches on the part of organisational human resource management (HRM) in this study.

The social aspects of work

In terms of the employment circumstances under which they would prefer to work, most non-working participants (8 of 9 females; 1 of 2 males) commented that, having retired, they missed the social aspects of working. As Sarah said, 'I liked the company. I liked the socialising and the company at work. That's what I missed most I think when I gave up work, is the company'. Similarly, Jean remarked:

I liked the friendliness and the interaction with people. I'd talk to people and have a joke and walk on. I am quite happy with my own company, but after a while if I do want to meet with other people, then yes I do miss the interaction.

John commented that his desire for social interaction was one of the reasons he returned to work after retiring 'the first time'. He reported, 'I missed the people tremendously. I really did. I would come back every two or three weeks and call in and see people and have a couple of cups of coffee'.

Participants mentioned that the social aspects of work are attractive to

them, and having a pleasant social environment would assist to make working more attractive to them, and positively affect their health and well-being. Therefore, to increase retention and re-entry rates, management and HRM could increase opportunities for social interaction at work.

Qualifications and the desire to continue working

Half the participants (8 males; 2 females) were working, the majority (6 males; 2 females) involved in part-time work, for example undertaking casual or contract work. They reported being content with less than full-time arrangements, commenting that they liked continuing using their skills and experience, and wanted to continue doing so for longer. Doug represented others' views when he said, 'I want to keep using my skills and knowledge for a while yet'. Yet, whether working or not, none of the qualified participants (8 males; 1 female) was interested in full-time paid work.

In contrast, the majority (7 of 8) of the non-working females, none of whom was qualified, reported that they did not want to return to work at all. The majority (6 of 8) of these females also reported they relied upon a government pension for income in their retirement. It appears that there may be a negative relationship between access to a government pension and the desire to work in later years. Five participants (2 males; 3 females), who were not qualified or financially independent, would have liked to have worked to an older age to save for their retirement, or were still interested in work to 'top up' or save more for full-time retirement. For example, Geoff said, 'but by the time you get to 60 or 70 or 80 the money can go pretty quick so I was still keen to get something to top up the money'. Further, Bill said, 'And I actively looked in the paper for positions for the first few years coming up here. No one ever asked for a 55 or 60 year-old manager to work.' Geoff concurred, 'I looked at buying a business in order to buy a job'. However, none of these unqualified older people was successful in re-entering the workforce.

These findings suggest, perhaps not surprisingly, there may be a relationship between being qualified and having greater access to work later in life. There may also be a relationship between being qualified and wanting to continue working. Explanations could include higher levels of work autonomy and networking capabilities of qualified people, enabling higher levels of flexibility (Platman 2004).

Self-worth and job satisfaction

Another theme that emerged from comments by several participants (12 of 20) was the importance of job satisfaction and self-worth found from work. While not all of these participants wanted to work, they reported that if they did, such work would need to be satisfying and worthwhile. As Sam said, 'job satisfaction is probably the number one priority'. When asked what might attract

him back to the workforce, Howard said, 'the most attractive thing would be being asked to do something that I felt that I had experience and competence to do better than most people'. Agreeing with the general sentiment, Bill said, 'I would rather earn money than have it given to me'.

These views support the literature about the low rates of absenteeism and turnover of older people (for example, Encel 1998; Gordon 1995; Steinberg et al. 1998; Tabakoff and Skeffington 2000). Further, perhaps some older people may be more selective when choosing to re-enter the workforce, wanting to maximise the levels of job satisfaction and self-worth.

Implications and concluding remarks

The comments made by the participants supported the literature in the areas of: flexible working hours being attractive employment options to older people; age being a common reason for leaving the workforce; and age being a common barrier to rejoining the workforce. New findings from this study were that: access to social aspects at work were attractive to older workers; qualified older workers were more likely to want to continue working; and older people seek self-worth and job satisfaction from working, and are less likely to accept work that does not provide both.

Some participants commented that they had found job searching to be a difficult task, and they believed their age was a significant part of the reason for their lack of success. In other words, Australian employers apparently did not value older people as new hires, supporting the literature previously mentioned. The participants' comments suggest that there are several changes that Australian organisations will need to make to reduce the apparent preference for youth as employees, as well as revising some broad policy issues, such as the taxation system, to entice people to continue to work beyond the traditional age of retirement.

However, generalisability of the findings is limited as the sample size was small and the study used purposeful and snowballing sampling techniques. While these types of sampling may introduce the possibility of bias, this study was exploratory and sought attitudes and perceptions in general, and rich descriptive material on personal perceptions of experiences. Such possible bias is thus not of great concern here. In this study, there appeared to be a gendered effect in the desire to work in retirement. The majority of males (8 of 10) wanted to work in retirement, while, only a minority of females (3 of 10) wanted to work in retirement. With a small sample size, and the differences between the employment types, levels of qualification and skill of the genders, it is not meaningful to generalise from this finding. This gendered issue was not pursued in this study, but appears worthy of additional investigation. Therefore, research would be worthwhile in broader contexts and exhausting all factors likely to influence the intention to continue working.

Overall, the findings confirm that flexible employment options are needed to attract older people to possibly return to, or stay in, the workforce, and that, depending on individual circumstances, many older people may want to continue to work. Notably, these older people commented that they were willing to learn new things, challenging employers' views about older people not being as flexible, adaptable or willing to learn as younger people.

The implications from the findings suggest the need for change if organisations/HRM wish to create an environment where older people are attracted to stay in or return to paid work. Although older workers differ from one another in their needs and desires about work, a re-entry strategy might be effective, made available to those older workers valued by the organisation. Early discussion with those considering their future working or retirement options, including the offer to continue working either immediately or at a later date, with flexible employment arrangements, could create a database of skilled and knowledgeable older people – a kind of 'grey army', similar to 'the reserves' of most military forces.

The HRM challenge in managing the exit and re-entry of older workers may be partly met by a 'revolving door' approach, whereby valued older workers may exit and re-enter the organisation many times after initially leaving. Such arrangements would need to meet both parties' needs, including performance standards and expectations. The rotating movement into and out of an organisation could include staged work, seasonal or busy period extra staff, as well as ongoing part-time roles. In summary, to meet the predicted labour shortage, organisations could offer 'revolving door' employment opportunities to older workers considering leaving the workforce, including roles that maximise job satisfaction and self-worth, flexible working arrangements and social interaction.

Finally, further inquiry would seem beneficial in the areas of gender, employment arrangements, qualification and older people's desires to continue working. The findings from this study suggest relevance within the international context, at least for other OECD countries that share the challenges of their own ageing workforces. For example, there is a suggestion that more flexible working arrangements are more attractive to older persons, who will be needed in the labour force to assist in meeting the predicted shortfall of labour. Further, the finding that age is still perceived as a barrier to employment and as a reason for retirement may be relevant to other countries in the development of public policies, and to organisations in their human resource strategies.

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