The wise going to waste

As workers over the age of 50 are being professionally put out to pasture, employers and the government must act to dispel hurtful stereotypes that are keeping the "grey army" out of work.

STORY **ADAM COURTENAY**

Posted on Spotjobs.com was a simple request: "I'm 67 years old and refuse to retire. I need a career." On Airtasker, there was Bob from Melbourne: "who's better than most with a computer and a dab hand with the paint brush." Phil from Sydney, a permaculture practitioner, offered: "a wide variety of gardening and hard yakka skills."

On digital billboards come the laments of the middle-aged. Nobody told the baby boomers it was going to be like this.

Is this a simple case of out with the old, in with the new? Can we blame the 2008 global financial crisis, the passage of time or simple age prejudice for so many struggling to find work? Where to for the "grey army", as it attempts to remain relevant in a world that seems to be moving at hyper speed?

A study published last year by the University of Melbourne, titled *Rusty, invisible and threatening: ageing, capital and employability*, did not pull any punches as to why the older workforce is being shunned.

First of all, older workers were deemed to be "rusty" – slow, unfit, and at risk of workplace injury. Mature-age job seekers, especially women, felt they were "invisible". One interviewee said that when she arrived for a job interview the manager's "face dropped" when she walked into the room. Finally, older workers are seen to be "threatening" – resistant to change, and less willing or able to adapt.

STEREOTYPED AS ADVERSE TO CHANGE

There are plenty of misconceptions about older workers, says Paul Wolfe, senior vice-president human resources at online jobs portal Indeed. Age discrimination far outweighs other forms of bias in the job seeking process, he says. An Indeed survey found that almost a third of people interviewed experienced discrimination based on their age, compared to gender (8.8 per cent) and nationality (7.7 per cent).

"This means that those over the age of 55 are finding it difficult to find work, despite a willingness to participate in the workforce," Wolfe says. "The result is problematic, given the labour force participation rate of 55-64 year olds has leapt from 47 per cent in early 2000 to 67 per cent today."

Some of the biggest businesses in the world perpetuate these negative biases. There are multinational accounting firms in Australia that mandate partners retire at 58 or 60 – unless the CEO makes an exception. Others, most notably universities, have been a little more progressive, operating without mandatory retirement since the 1990s.

Some companies actively recruit older employees. Hardware chain Bunnings has employed thousands of older workers, targeting former tradespeople with extensive expertise to offer customers in-store. More than a third of the company's workforce is now aged over 50.

THE TOLL ON GOVERNMENT

The sheer weight of grey army numbers and the cost of supporting their gaining employment increases each year. We are living 25 years longer than our great-grandparents. Life expectancy is increasing by 2.5 years per decade, but society is playing catch-up with this unprecedented bulge in the older demographic, and individuals themselves are left confused about what to do when they retire.

It is why the Australian Government will fund a national rollout of the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers Program in 2018-2019, a A$17.4 million initiative seeking people aged 45 to 70 who are employed and at risk of entering the income support system, or recently unemployed and not registered for assistance through an employment services program.

The idea is to thrust older workers into the new gig economy. However, will that alter prejudices? It may be that employer thinking, as much as employee skills, needs to be "retrained".

Alison Monroe, national leader of global career transition firm RiseSmart, says that while upskilling for older people will no doubt be needed, they already have in-demand attributes.

By RiseSmart's reckoning, demand for technology skills from now until 2030 will increase 55 per cent, but the need for leadership skills will rise too – by 24 per cent in the same period, Monroe says.

A progressive intergenerational workforce is one that will create roles that play to people's strengths, she says. "We're saying to employers – you now have four generations on your hands to deal with – stop thinking about age and start thinking about what people can bring to bear on the employment market.

"Talent is like an iceberg. You only know what you can see. Unless you have the conversation that uncovers the 'what else', you'll never know."

UNTAPPED ACQUIRED SKILLS

Wolfe says that in his experience older workers are well equipped to deal with challenging situations. "They're likely to have worked for a variety of different companies under a wide range of management styles," he says. "They often have a calming influence over the office, thanks to the resilience built up over their career."

This is echoed by Stuart Taylor, founder and CEO at SpringFox, which specialises in resilience training and leadership development. He believes there is no better generation than baby boomers when it comes to fortitude; a valuable commodity for companies navigating the ever-changing gig economy. Springfox's data clearly shows that resilience improves with age.

"It's a learned skill," Taylor says. "With time, you begin to contextualise and your ability to respond to the world rather than be reactive to it improves. That's a huge asset to an organisation."

> ***"Older employees can offer wisdom, stability and resilience."***
>
> PAUL WOLFE, INDEED

Monroe, Taylor and Wolfe all agree that companies ignore the talents of older people at their own peril.

"Young workers often inject energy, hunger and agility to their work, while older employees can offer wisdom, stability and resilience," Wolfe says. "The key to a healthy workplace is building teams that are diverse in experience, background and personality.

"Younger workers can also benefit rom tapping into the networks of their often deeply connected older colleagues, who have business relationships going back decades."

PREPARING FOR THE "THIRD ACT"

While William Shakespeare outlined seven "acts" in a person's life ("The Seven Ages of Man"), Irish adult development expert Dr Edward Kelly has opted for just four. By far the most important is the third act, he says, the period a person enters in his or her 50s. Because we are living 25 years longer than our great-grandparents, the period that used to be the final act in a person's life is now a transition into the fourth.

Kelly dislikes the term "Third Age", which is commonly applied to this time in a person's life. He prefers to call it "Third Act" because it is still a period of action. "What was old age for our grandparents is now middle age for us," he says.

It is a view shared by many in the profession. Monroe says the word "transition" is usually applied to people "transitioning into retirement", but it now equally applies to early, mid and late career phases. Transitioning is occurring throughout our careers, not just at the end of it, she says.

Keith Yeo FCPA, a member of the CPA Australia Third Age Network (TAN) of retired or semi-retired professionals, says that behind it all is a vital "life planning" message.

"A person's financial plan should in fact be a subset of their overall life plan," Yeo says. "I would strongly suggest that employees start their life planning by the time they reach 50 years of age, if they haven't already done so."

Yeo says that by 50 they would most likely have their home in order and be well advanced in raising and educating their children.

"If a person's life plan is not where they want it to be at 50 years of age, they still have sufficient time in the workforce to move towards their desired work-life balance as an older employee and plan for life after work," he maintains.

CPA Australia's Third Age Network

CPA Australia has two Third Age Network (TAN) groups, in Melbourne and Sydney. TAN groups offer you the opportunity to network, mentor younger CPA Australia members, and promote issues of interest to the Third Age constituency at workshops, discussion groups and luncheons. TAN membership is open to CPA Australia members aged 55 and older.

In addition, members who are 55 and older and who work less than 15 hours (or two days) per week are eligible to join the retired members list and pay reduced CPA Australia membership fees. Members who are younger than 55 and either working part time or no longer working may also put in an application to pay reduced membership fees.

For more information about TAN groups and the retired members list, visit cpaaustralia.com.au/nextphase or call 1300 73 73 73 (within Australia).

STAYING PROFESSIONALLY ACTIVE

TAN committee chair Russell Day says those entering the normal retirement phase after 60 need to keep themselves relevant, but still accommodate change.

"Instead of being made redundant or getting the sack, the best idea might be to transition down," Day says. "You may remain active in practice three days a week or create a situation where you take eight weeks a year off, rather than the standard four."

He insists that people transitioning into retirement means inclusion, not exclusion. True, they need to reskill in many cases, but networks – both old and new – remain vitally important.

"We're trying to make older CPA Australia members aware that being a CPA well into your 80s and even 90s is possible – you can give yourself an extra 10 or 20 years that you thought you never had."

Brian Maguire, principal of Sydney-based mentoring firm Absolute Clarity Communications, is writing a book called *You're Not Done Yet*. Maguire says many in their 50s apply for the same jobs as 30 years previously and wonder why rejections keep coming.

They are up against a recruitment market that is conservative, risk averse and template-driven. "They think that if you hire a young person and they're mediocre, the template is to blame, but if you hire an older person who doesn't fit the template, you get the blame," Maguire says.

He notes that only 25 per cent of placements are made by the recruitment market, the rest by networks. List your portable skills and target relevant companies, he advises.

"Don't ask people for a job, just ask them for advice. Ask them: 'What do I need for an insight, what do I need to bring to the job?'

"That person will give advice and might say 'call this person' and so on. Before you know it, you're building a network. Don't go looking for a job, just ask the right people the right questions." ■