

Ageism isn't the only barrier keeping older workers out of job

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Governments internationally are pushing out the ages at which pensions can be claimed and influential bodies such as the OECD are pointing to the inevitability of longer working lives as the average life expectancy is increasing. Some commentators have claimed that it is time to retire retirement, but it is contestable whether working longer is a realistic goal for all workers, raising the question as to what happens to those who are unable to remain in the paid labour force.

Amid present efforts to promote working longer there is considerable policy interest in overcoming potential barriers to older workers' continued employment. One barrier that has received much recent attention is age discrimination in the labour market. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission and advocacy organisations for older people this is a major obstacle to older workers' employment. It has even been argued that ageism is endemic in Australian society. However, claims for the prevalence of age discrimination experienced by older people are probably exaggerated. Thus, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Multipurpose Household Survey undertaken in 2014-15 demonstrated that perceptions of age discrimination are actually in decline: 17 per cent of people aged over 55 believed that they were considered too old by employers, down from 21 per cent in the equivalent 2012-13 survey and 30 per cent in 2004-05. Age discrimination also appears to primarily manifest in terms of the experiences of those older people who are looking for work. The risk here is of advocacy stigmatising all older people as being prone to experience age discrimination, with the potential for adverse consequences for an individual's sense of identity and self-worth and societal perceptions of the old and of growing older.

Advocates might have a stronger case for stating that age discrimination is endemic if they were to define it more broadly. Thus, researchers have observed that older people may be both perpetrators and victims of age discrimination and that older people may be perpetrators of age discrimination against the young. Australian evidence concerning the incidence of age discrimination as experienced by young people is lacking, but analysis of the ABS Social Survey 2014 carried out by Per Capita indicates that it is those aged 15-24 who are most likely to report experiences of age discrimination, just over seven per cent, compared with just over six per cent of those aged 55-64. People of other ages reported rather fewer experiences of age discrimination. Also of note from the ABS data is that, overall, relatively few people report experiences of age discrimination – four per cent. Importantly, research also indicates that, contrary to notions of age discrimination being

observable everywhere, many Australian employers are already responding to labour shortages and the ageing of their workforces by implementing measures targeting older workers' employment.

There is no doubting that some people experience age discrimination and research indicates that this can have deleterious consequences for wellbeing. Tackling it is necessary if people of all ages are to be given employment opportunities. Yet, structural factors may be more important in limiting older workers' employment opportunities and for these there may not be ready remedies. Thus, the labour market has undergone substantial changes over the last few decades. This trend is likely to continue as we are confronted by what has been called the fourth industrial revolution - driven by artificial intelligence and robots. Analysis of ABS data carried out by Per Capita indicates that, by 2031, up to two and a half million older workers may have been made redundant due to automation. While economists and futurists are optimistic about the impact of artificial intelligence and robots on overall labour demand, the new jobs will be radically different from the old ones and will require different skills. Unless Australia takes immediate action it faces a steep rise in the numbers of unemployed aged over 50. Working longer may not be attainable for many older people and governments will need to be prepared to help them fill the increasing gap between the ages at which they cease work and the age at which they can claim a pension.