

Workplace age discrimination starts as early as 45

July 15 2014, by Wendy Frew

When Barbara (real name has been withheld for privacy reasons) took voluntary redundancy from a large telecommunications group in 2001 she was confident of finding work in her chosen field. At 51, she had an impressive CV that included stints as a team leader, project manager and business analyst.

But like many of her contemporaries who took redundancy at the same time, it's been a long, hard road of temporary positions, contract work and months of unemployment in between short contracts. Barbara says she would happily work for at least another decade but now aged 63 – unemployed and living on her superannuation – she despairs that employers will change their attitudes about [older workers](#).

"Having had good performance reviews all along, and some promotions, in my work life up to age 51, I have thought a lot about what has made the difference in my work life since then – whether my skills needed updating; the extent to which my skill set was mismatched with certain [jobs](#) I applied for, or whether I should have been pushier in some areas," says Barbara, who has spent about \$8000 in recent years upgrading her skills.

She suspects her age could have been the reason she could not make it past the first interview for the many permanent jobs she applied for.

"I am not sure I can pinpoint it but there were things like people pulling out a chair for me and treating me as if I was their elderly mother ... In

the past, I always got the job I wanted, but that is not the case now."

Barbara is not an isolated case. Age discrimination in the workplace starts at about 45, says human resources expert Keri Spooner.

"It is not hard to find people who have left employment, for whatever reason, at 45 and have never found another job," says Dr Spooner, who works in the Management Discipline Group at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Once they become unemployed, older workers stay that way for much longer than younger workers, she says.

It's one of the many issues that need to be considered in light of the Federal Government's decision to lift eligibility for the age pension to 70. Discrimination against older workers, skill gaps and a lack of flexibility on the part of some older workers about the kind of work they are willing to do, among other things, complicate the picture, says Dr Spooner.

"As we get older, if any one of us seeks employment that is exactly the same kind of work we did when we were younger, we will fail," she says, adding that older workers need to adapt, change their expectations, develop resilience and build their networks.

"Most jobs come through family or friends.

"It is a hugely emotionally challenging and devastating experience to be laid off, or to feel you are the oldest person in the office. Being interviewed for a job by someone who is the age of your youngest child is hard ... you need to be able to bounce back from these experiences."

In Barbara's case, she found that when she applied for junior positions,

she was told she was over-qualified. When she applied for senior positions, she was often told she was not quite the "right fit".

"The outplacement agency [from her former employer] advised us never to give anyone a hint of our [age](#), which is a great pity because I have held some very senior jobs.

"We've made good progress blending people from different races and cultures into harmonious workplaces. Age is a bigger challenge but ... people have to get used to the idea that a person who is wrinkled or has white hair still has every right to be working and is just as likely as the next person to do a good job."

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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