

Dispelling misconceptions toward older workers

May 14 2015, by Eyal Gringart



Our research has shown that many employers possess negative stereotypes in relation to older workers, which seem to be at the heart of employment discrimination against them. Credit: Jase Curtis

One of the key economic challenges outlined in the recently released Intergenerational Report was the need to increase the workforce

participation of older Australians.

The need for people to work longer is a result of both increasing [life expectancy](#) and the demographic bulge of the [baby boomer generation](#).

Both of these factors will, over time, result in a higher proportion of Australians drawing on government services relative to the number of taxpayers, leading to serious strain on the federal budget.

So far government policy aimed at tackling the problem has included an initiative to pay employers to take on older workers.

While such top-down approaches have their place, we must also address the underlying reasons that employers are reluctant to hire older workers.

The likelihood of success in facing challenges related to the inevitable ageing of our population would increase markedly if top-down approaches worked in concert with scientifically informed methods.

Our research has shown that many employers possess negative stereotypes in relation to older workers, which seem to be at the heart of employment discrimination against them.

So if we are really serious about increasing the proportion of older Australians in the workforce, we must work to address the challenges posed by such [negative stereotypes](#).

Trial promotes positive attitude amongst employers

I have developed and successfully tested an effective way with which to address stereotype-based behaviours in this context via a randomised controlled trial.

The intervention is aimed at promoting positive attitudes toward older workers among employers and to increase the likelihood of their hiring.

The intervention could compliment relevant policies to better address issues related to [older adults](#)' employment as it taps employers' internal motivation rather than dictates to them how they should behave.

Hence, non-discriminatory practice becomes the conscious intention of hiring decision makers, which is congruent with their moral values and work objectives. A brief explanation follows.

Having made employers aware that discriminating against older workers was incongruent with their own values as well as potentially counterproductive, employers were asked to make a public commitment that they refrain from age discrimination and believe in fair go.

In addition, employers were provided a fact sheet listing common misconceptions about older workers against empirical data that refuted them.

Having participated in the intervention, employers expressed more positive attitudes toward older workers compared to those who did not participate and reported that they were likely to hire [older workers](#) whilst those who did not participate stated that they were less than likely to do so.

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Dispelling misconceptions toward older workers (2015, May 14) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-dispelling-misconceptions-older-workers.html>

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