

# Session 1 – Elaborating older workers' employability: Personal and institutional factors



Stephen Billett, Griffith University, Australia

## Case .....

Understanding the prospects for older workers' employability and, more so, re-employment is premised of two sets of inter-related factors:

Personal facts – i.e. those relating to the older worker

educational level, gender, occupation, work history

Institutional factors (Searle 1995) – i.e. those relating to the societies in which they live and work

work opportunities, societal sentiments, government policies, access to CET,

Elaborating these factors and their relations can inform the kinds of policies and practices required to enhance older workers' employability and re-employment.

This case is supported by empirical studies in Australia and Singapore, and reviews of relevant literature.

# Progression

## Premises

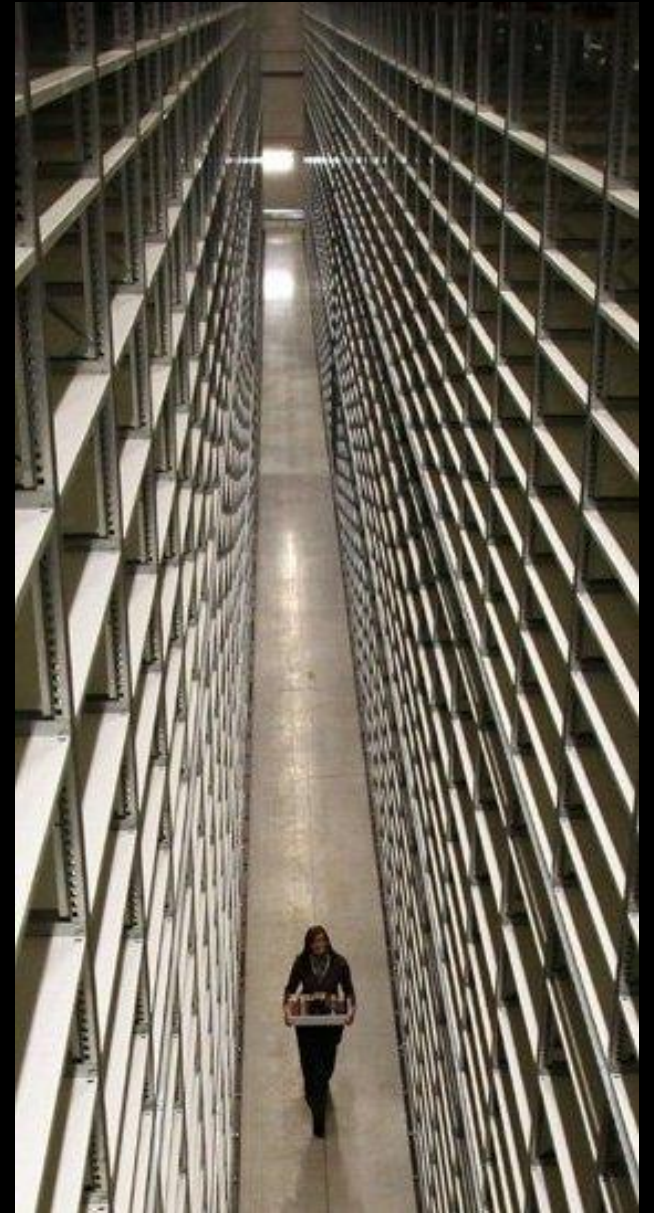
Factors associated employability and re-employability of 'older' workers

Personal factors

Institutional factors

Societal sentiments

How to proceed



# Premises

As working populations age, issues of older workers' employability and lifelong learning arise for national economies, enterprises, communities and these workers.

No consensus about at what age workers become 'older' – (government definitions differ across jurisdictions, and are changing)

What constitutes an 'older worker' is often defined occupationally – some occupations are less 'age-tolerant' than others

Employability – ability to secure and sustain employment and advance work life trajectories (e.g. promotion, broadening skills base)

Re-employment – ability to be re-employed after some break in or loss of employment.

These issues and factors differ across times and countries

They also play out differently for older workers than unemployed older persons

# Personal factors shaping employability

Older workers' employability not just dependent upon age.

Other factors include:

- the kinds of work they undertake (i.e. their occupations)
- their worklife history and status (i.e. their employment status)
- their level of education
- their occupational capacities (i.e. whether their skills are in demand)
- their gender; and
- personal attributes and interests (i.e. their intentionalities)

A dentist in her mid-70s is likely to be highly employable, whereas a manual labourer or even an airline pilot in her late 50's may struggle to be re-employed.

# Institutional factors shape the prospects for employability

The factors relate to age (and gender) include:

work opportunities – kinds, scope and nature of work opportunities available, kinds and scale of enterprises

societal sentiments - views in particular societies about work, age, gender, occupations

occupational requirements - age-tolerance

government policies and practices – equal opportunity, re-employment, access, support, social welfare/pensions

workplace/occupational policies and practices – employment options, in-house training, work undertaken, who has responsibilities for employment access to CET /LLE – access to structures educational opportunities

# Societal sentiments

Shape how governments privilege, support and fund initiatives, how communities engage with them and individuals exercise interest and commitment.

Being older is often viewed negatively, often by claims about abilities to work and learn.

Maturation not a process of mental and physical decline as often projected and accepted.

These sentiments act against older workers' employability and re-employability.

i) employers often perceive older workers as less capable than younger workers in terms of physical ability, capacity for learning and adaptability to change, but superior in commitment, reliability and corporate knowledge;

ii) these perceptions can lead employers not to employ, re-employ or support their ongoing development;

iii) some mature age workers accepting negative stereotypes about age; and

iv) some mature age workers experiencing positive employer support.

# So what.....?

Need to sustain 'older' workers' employability over lengthening working lives.

Age, per se, may not be the key factor in older workers' employability

their educational level, occupation and work history also important

Significant differences in institutional factors across nations, occupations and communities.

Societal sentiments are central to government action, workplace practices, educational provisions and how these workers view themselves.

Gender is embedded in these issues, albeit shaped by personal and institutional factors.

Workplaces need to engage older workers as they do younger workers, on the bases of their attributes and capacities, not on ill-founded assumptions and prejudice.

Initiative premised on government and employer imperatives will be insufficient. Need to promote positive societal sentiments and engage these workers as important not last resort employees.