Supporting the Mature Aged Workforce

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Abstract: This article presents findings from an Australian research project regarding management of the mature aged workforce and ageing demographic issues. Semi structured interviews were used to discuss perceptions of older workers, ageing demography, informal work practices, formal work practices and business development. The sample included 25 employees from three local governments from the Queensland State in Australia. Four main themes emerged from the analysis regarding the current setting. These were: (1) Despite negative stereotyping, respondents had a positive view of older workers, (2) Age management was more of an issue for the outdoor workforce due to declines in physiological capacities associated with aging, (3) The overarching policy framework within the local councils was age neutral; and (4) Informal age management strategies existed at the discretion of the respective managers and section heads. An age conscious and forethought workforce plan was viewed as the next step towards a formal age management strategy. The findings indicate that mentoring, training and flexible work options to retain staff and to retain corporate knowledge may be some of the options for the future

INTRODUCTION

The ageing Australian population has prompted an increased need to extend working life beyond the current official retirement age. As of 2006, 13% of the Australian population was over the age of 65 years while 19% was aged 15 years or younger. By 2051, it is predicted that the proportion of Australians aged over 65 years will double, while only 15% of the population is expected to be 15 years of age or younger (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007a). In 2005, 32% of the workforce was considered mature aged, that is, 45 to 64 years of age (ABS, 2005). Mature aged workers will reach the official retirement age of 65 years within 20 years. However, in actuality Australian workers who have retired within the last 5 years did so at an average of 60.3 years of age (ABS, 2007b). The three most common reasons for retirement included reaching retirement age or pension eligibility, ill health or disability, and retrenchment or lack of suitable work (ABS, 2007c). Industries with a higher than average composition of mature aged workers are likely to be the earliest, and possibly most affected, by labour shortages. These include education, health and community services, and utilities services such as electricity, gas and water supply (ABS, 2005). In addition, almost half of all employed workers aged 50 to 64 years hold a management or advanced clerical position, which compounds the threat of labour shortage as potential retirees will also be highly skilled (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005).

Global ageing has prompted an increased need to extend working life beyond the current official retirement age. As of the year 2000, 13% of the population across all OECD countries was over the age of 65 years, and by 2051 the proportion of adults aged 65 years or older is expected to double (OECD, 2006). While population ageing translates to a shrinking recruitment pool of younger workers, the potential labour shortage crisis is also compounded by early labour force exit of older workers. The average labour force participation rate for citizens of OECD countries aged over 50 years is 70%, and the most common reasons for cessation of working life are early retirement, disability or care responsibilities (OECD, 2006). In her discussion of older workers and lifelong learning,

Tikkanen (2006) notes that there is limited research in the field of human resource management concerning policy and practices for older workers and age diversity. She also highlights the influence of social processes on the management of older workers, for example age discrimination and norms for training and development. Europe is currently at the forefront for research on the management of older workers, and contributions to the literature range from best practices and age management (Ilmarinen, 2006; Martens, Lambrechts, Manshoven & Vandenberk, 2006; Walker & Taylor, 1998), older workers' perceptions of HRD policy (Rhebergen & Wognum, 1997), work ability (Ilmarinen, 2001; Tuomi, Vanhala, Nykyri, & Janhonen, 2004), training and development (Tikkanen, Lahn, Withnall, Ward & Lyng, 2002), flexible work (Reday-Mulvey, 2005), and social processes (Tougas, Lagace, Sablonniere, & Kocum, 2004). However, research and policy on the removal of barriers to continued employment of mature workers and age management strategies are beginning to emerge in Australia (Brooke & Taylor, 2005; Mature Age Strategies Team, n.d.). Sheen (2004) suggested the application of European literature on age management and best practices to Australian settings to improve organisational policy and practices for the ageing workforce. This paper presents a case study of management of ageing workforce issues in three local government member councils in Queensland, Australia.

Research on older workers (Phillipson & Smith, 2005) has identified differential exit patterns for blue and white collar workers. Blue collar workers are pushed into early retirement via ill health or disability, as well as a lack of alternative job opportunities (Reday-Mulvey, 2005). By contrast, white collar workers are able to remain employed until an older age due to improved health and greater opportunities in the labour market for phased retirement, part time work and service roles (Chen & Scott, 2006; Hirsch, Macpherson & Hardy, 2000), and retire when they are financially secure enough to do so. The work of Pillay and colleagues (Pillay, Kelly & Tones, 2005; Pillay, Fox, Kelly & Tones, 2006) suggests that policy aligned to older workers' aspirations may be helpful to retain older workers. For instance, within a sample of 233 local government workers over the age of 40 years, blue collar workers reported an interest in less physically demanding work and early retirement (Pillay et al, 2005). If less strenuous work was made available to blue collar workers, early retirement of this high risk demographic has the potential to be avoided. The dichotomy of blue and white collar retirement patterns demonstrates that retirement decisions go beyond the individual, and are influenced by organisational and social factors as well.

Walker and Taylor (1998) broadly define best practices for older workers as the overcoming of barriers to employment, coupled with an environment that allows all workers to reach their full potential regardless of age. Policy areas for good practice encompass job entry and exit, training and career development, age attitudes, flexibility of work hours, job design and ergonomics (Mature Age Strategies Team, n.d.; Rappaport & Stevenson, 2004; Walker & Taylor). Rhebergen and Wognum (1997) conducted one of the first studies of older workers' perceptions of age appropriate organisational policies within a multinational chemical company. Out of a sample of 225 line workers approximately half perceived age-related organisational policies in the workplace, although the majority of employees did not perceive these policies to be useful. Later studies have shown that the availability of age friendly organisational policies and practices influence employees' decisions to return to work (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008) and delay retirement (Drew & Drew, 2005; Zapalla, Depolo, Fraccaroli, Guglielmi & Sarchielli, 2008), possibly due to an improvement in the efficacy of policy, or self selection in that older workers who access age policies tend to stay in the workforce.

Up to this point, organisational policy and practice has been discussed in terms of organisational provision to older workers. The concept of age management was updated by Ilmarinen (2006) to include both promotion of employees' work ability and achievement of business goals. In brief, work ability represents the balance between employee personal

resources such as competence, motivation and health, and occupational demands (Ilmarinen, 2001). Embedded in strategic management, age management involves an understanding of age structures and strategy within the organisation, as well as accurate attitudes towards age (Ilmarinen, 2006). Age management is therefore both an organisational and social phenomenon, and research shows that the expression of organisational policy and practices is contingent on social factors such as stereotypes, prior experiences with mature workers, and awareness of ageing issues. While only a handful of studies have approached age management or age diversity, the research shows that social processes behind organisational policy and practice are complex.

A qualitative study of 40 Scottish employers from a variety of organisations identified lack of awareness of ageing demographics and age diversity laws, and age stereotyping as obstacles to age management (Loretto & White, 2006). Ignorance of ageing issues led to age diversity being viewed as less important than gender or ethnic diversity. Both positive and negative age stereotypes shaped occupational access, in that older workers were recruited for positions where experience, work ethic and stability were valued, and overlooked for physically demanding jobs. Age biases were also expressed in retirement practices via policies that encouraged early retirement, which were enacted at the managers' discretion. The presence of negative age stereotypes leads to adverse sequelae for older workers, ranging from perceptions of marginalisation and being undervalued (Tougas et al, 2004), to stereotype consistent behaviour such as failure to participate in training programs (Claes & Heymans, 2008; Maurer, Wrenn & Weiss, 2003), intergenerational conflict and intention to retire early (Desmette & Gaillard, 2008).

A qualitative study of four British and Australian organisations in the education, manufacturing and retail industries conducted by Brooke and Taylor (2005) suggested that age stereotypes pervade intergenerational relations. In their criticism of other age groups, respondents' adopted positive stereotypes for their own age group, and discussed the other age groups in terms of a lack of the positive stereotype or negative stereotypes. For instance, older workers reported their work experience as an asset, and criticized the organisation for appointing younger managers whom they perceived to lack experience. However, the basis of intergenerational conflict on age may be erroneous, as a study by Pelled, Eisenhardt and Xin (1999) illustrates. They examined the relationship between different types of diversity and task and emotional conflict in 317 workers from 45 work teams from electronics divisions of major enterprises. It was observed that age diversity of work teams decreased emotional conflict between team members, although in the presence of tenure diversity, age diversity actually increased emotional conflict. Differences in functional background also promoted task conflict in groups. Participants from Brooke and Taylor's (2005) and Loretto and White's (2006) research criticized older workers for their reluctance to adapt to change and undertake training, and state that older workers refer to their tenure and prior experience to explain these behaviours. Therefore, fundamental differences in older and younger workers' functional background and organisational tenure may be at the heart of intergenerational conflict and some instances of age stereotyping at work. Support for age diversity in the decrease of conflict was also observed, as participants noted that younger and older workers complemented one another (Brooke & Taylor, 2005) and that older workers provided stability to the workplace (Loretto & White, 2006). However, an age bias was observed, with older workers strengths seen to compensate for younger workers weaknesses in terms of experience and knowledge, efficiency and accuracy, and mentoring. Age biases were reinforced in Brooke and Taylor's research as participants stated that the early retirement of older workers led to a skills and knowledge gap in the organisations concerned, which was unable to be completely absorbed by the remaining younger workers.

As Loretto and White's (2006) study showed social processes also underpin the implementation of policy and practices. Walker and Taylor's (1999) guidelines for the implementation of age management strategies include positive and supportive attitudes from

HR and management and employee commitment to strategies. Qualitative studies of Belgian HR professionals (Claes & Heymans, 2008) and employees (Martens et al, 2006) indicated that good supervision was an important motive to continue employment, which was also a key factor for enhancing work ability according to Illmarinen (2006). Opportunities to exercise autonomy and learn and develop were also identified as key motivators in retention by participants in each study. Employees from Martens et al (2006) study also stated that work life balance and financial incentives to work encouraged continued employment, while physical and psychosocial stresses associated with work and commuting were seen as drawbacks to continued employment. Claes and Heymans' (2008) participants described several HR practices including job transfer, training, performance appraisal, counselling and skill pooling, while teleworking was identified in Martens et al's (2006) research. Participants from Loretto and White's (2006) study reported strategies including transfer to less demanding work and implementation of technology to reduce physical labour. Identified practices were rarely tied to an age policy framework, although Claes and Heymans (2008) noted that organisations with comprehensive age management policies faced obstacles from unions and the government.

CURRENT STUDY

The study reported in this paper is a component of an Australian Research Council funded linkage project[1] managed jointly by the Queensland University of Technology and the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ). It represents an Australian case study whereby work processes, strategies and policies associated with mature workers was investigated in three local councils in Queensland State. The Local Government of Australia is the peak body for the 73 local councils in Australia, and is dedicated to the establishment and implementation of HR reforms to meet the needs of its workforce and the LGAQ represents the Queensland State. Recent surveys of organisational demographics within the LGAQ have indicated that 59% of Queensland employees are over 40 years of age, and that the LGAQ as a member's representative body has very positive opinion of post retirement employment (Pillay, Kelly & Tones, 2006; Pillay, Kelly, Fox & Tones, 2006).

Three broad research questions were posed to guide data analysis in the current study:
1. What are LGAQ members' knowledge and attitudes regarding age diversity issues?
2. How do LG councils respond to ageing issues through policy and practice?
3. Do LG councils incorporate ageing issues in future business plans?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interviews were used to identify local government workers' perceptions of older workers in their respective councils, and council strategies to support and encourage older workers. The interviews were semi-structured and covered issues such as skill shortages, productivity and efficiency of older workers, communication between workers, formal and informal processes within the council that affect its older workforce, and the potential of older workers in business growth. Interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes per participant were conducted by two research assistants on three council sites. For the purpose of data analysis, interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Research and interview questions were used to inform the data analysis process, which involved determining and coding categories, and presenting the findings in data matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A total of 25 participants from three local councils in Queensland took part in interviews. Participant characteristics are listed in Table 1. Purposive sampling was used with the majority of interviewees being mature aged, in a management or professional capacity and therefore likely to have well informed views and understanding of issues affecting the ageing workforce. However, care was also taken to include the possibly unique contributions of women, manual workers and younger workers in relation to older worker issues.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Characteristics	Council A	Council B	Council C	Total
Number:	10	8	7	25
Position/Area:				
Manager/ Supervisor	2	5	1	8
Professional	5	2	1	8
Administration	3	1	1	5
Outdoor	0	0	4	4
Gender:				
Male	7	5	4	16
Female	3	3	3	9
Age Profile:				
> 45	1	2	0	3
45-65	8	6	6	20
< 65	1	0	1	2

Analysis of the interviewee responses were categorized into three themes: (1) Older workers, (2) Current work practices and (3) Business development. The themes were broken down into categories and subcategories, and presented in Tables 2-4 with extracts from the transcribed data to illustrate the meaning. An interpretive discussion accompanies each thematic table.

RESULTS

Table 2. Older Workers' Work Practices and Attitudes

Category	Sub Category	Example
Work Ethic		I think mature age persons have work ethics that is different from younger people… they are quite prepared to see a task completed before they leave if it is important whereas often younger people take the approach that tomorrow is another day and what I don't do today will get done tomorrow. (8A) Of course they (older workers) are productive - for one thing they turn up to work every day, they are reliable and in the main have a work ethic that is different from a lot of the young ones. (8B)
Knowledge/ Experience	*Improved work processes*	Not only do they have [mature workers] superior skills and they realise the seriousness of the type of work we do, it's just far more organised and efficient… I just think that when you are talking about efficiency, there is a whole raft of experience and maturity that is merged in the work practices and contributes to the work output. (7C)
	Impact of loss organisational knowledge	I'm not saying the business doesn't survive but it becomes very difficult for a couple of years until that knowledge is rebuilt. What tends to be lost is[tacit] knowledge of the job and more importantly the most efficient way to do the job. Also… you lose the history of the job… it's a commodity that is very valuable. (7B)
Maturity	*More harmonious work climate*	I think older people are more calm, have the experience not to panic whereas a lot of the younger folk, when they haven't faced too many crisis and survived - all hell breaks loose… (5B) I think an older person can also bring a calming effect to the workplace through a level of maturity that is not

		always there in our younger counterparts. (3C)
	Ability to work in complex roles	I find that mature age people have the life skills set that can cope with this type of job. That level of maturity and work experience and life experience usually puts them in good stead to manage regulatory, investigative and at the sharp end, legal applications. (10A) I'm in it [work area] has a lot to do with social justice principles and a lot of the young people just don't take that up. So it's not until you get your own life experience that you appreciate it and know what you're doing. I deal with a lot of target vulnerable groups and when you're dealing with these people you can't be a young 'twit' type. (4B)
Limitations of older workers for organisation	*Skills/abilities*	…with ageing comes a lowered capacity to do high levels of physical work and it is this very low turnover rate that is problematic because people that come in to these areas as young fellows, stay for long periods. It is unfortunate, but the longer they stay, the greater those impacts become, certainly it becomes more problematic to manage. (1A) In terms of the outside workforce, the older guys have to find alternatives. They either have to improve their skills so that they can become a ganger or foreman and end up in the office or they need to study up and change career, become a storeman or something. This is just because physically the body can't take it. (5B)
	Attitudes/ psychological	We offer the old literacy stuff we have a Cert III in Road Artisan, we have a study assistance scheme where Council will cover the costs of re-training on successful completion but they won't or its just not in their psyche to do this. (5B)

As shown in Table 2, there were four main categories within the older worker theme, namely; work ethic; knowledge/ experience; maturity; and the constraints of older worker retention. For each category, respondents related the qualities of older workers to their work performance and outcomes. The majority of participants indicated that work ethic, knowledge and experience were specific strengths of older workers, which were linked to improved productivity and efficiency. Aside from the benefits of work ethic, wide knowledge base and extensive experience, the maturity of older workers was also valued, along with related qualities such as life experience and wisdom. These attributes were perceived to make workers more reflective rather then reflexive, and able to engage with problems in a much deeper manner. More the half the interviewees thought that maturity to lead to outcomes such as improved social skills and ability to undertake complex work. These three characteristics represent positive stereotyping of older workers, a phenomenon reported in earlier studies (Brooke & Taylor, 2005; Gray & McGregor, 2003; Gringart, Helmes, & Speelman, 2005; Taylor & Walker, 1994). While positive stereotyping would seem indicative of a positive attitude towards older workers, it may lead to the typecasting of older workers into certain jobs which limit scope for development (Loretto & White, 2006). Given that favouritism of younger workers has been linked to self discrimination in older workers (Tougas et al, 2004), the situation has the potential to be reversed if older workers are favoured over younger workers. In the current study, negative comments about younger workers were often made in the context of positive comments about older workers, as shown in Table 2.

Corporate knowledge possessed by older workers was viewed as indispensable, and some respondents had experienced or anticipated a disruption of operations due to mass early retirement. Brooke and Taylor (2005) reported similar findings in their study, as

participants stated that organisational change had precipitated early exit of mature workers. Almost all participants in the current study indicated that professional and managerial sectors within the indoor workforce were most at risk of skill shortages in the future, especially in engineering and town planning. Shortage in these areas may be also affected by the current boom in the mining sector. While the majority of comments about older workers' work practices and attributes were positive, some negative comments about older workers were also made. Lowered physical capacity among manual workers, classified as the "outdoor workforce" by the LGAQ, was an issue for all the councils, both in terms of occupational health and safety, and lower productivity and efficiency. Interviewees noted that productivity decreased with age in the outdoor workforce which is understandable given the natural physiological decline caused by ageing. In addition, a reluctance to retrain for less physically demanding jobs amongst older outdoor workers was perceived. Comments from outdoor workers suggested three reasons for a reluctance to retrain. The first was negative emotions of frustration and fear associated with a lack of training and development opportunities throughout their working lives, also observed in Brooke and Taylor's (2005) work. Secondly, the outdoor workers reported that they felt competent in and enjoyed their jobs, and were not interested in training. Self belief in competence and disinterest in training may not be specific to manual workers, as Zappala et al (2008) noted a lack of interest in career development amongst a mixed sample of manual and non manual older workers who intended to postpone retirement. Lastly, outdoor workers reported attractive working conditions. The council attempted to accommodate older outdoor workers via a progression through less physically demanding work roles, a strategy also used by some employers interviewed in Loretto and White's (2006) research. However, alternate employment opportunities are few given the narrow skill sets and limited education of some outdoor workers.

Current work processes

There was an absence of organisation-wide strategy or targeted policy for mature aged workers. Managements' discretional responsibility to actively implement strategies to support mature aged workers using a generic policy framework within their respective departments meant that management support of mature workers was imperative for a positive work environment as noted in Claes and Heymans (2008) and Martens et al's (2006) studies. The finding of the interviews converged into two main sub-themes of management discretion and of age neutrality which pervaded current council work practices and employees experiences. These themes are illustrated with extracts from the interviews in Table 3. The categories of management discretion included the discussion of retirement issues, alternate work environments, flexible options and mentoring. Whereas the age neutrality included training and development opportunities, recruitment and retaining mature workers, incentives, productivity, efficiency and communications.

Table 3. Current Work Processes

Category	*Sub Category*	*Example*
Management Discretion	*Discussion of retirement issues*	The Manager would be the first point of call. I guess they could also speak with someone from HR but usually it would be the manager, maybe the supervisor. (2A) What am I going to say, it is hot outside and I think in a few years I will be too hot to do this work. The management would say then you go home. I am happy, I just like to do my job and not bother anyone.(1C) …it (retirement) has to be managed well and there has to be a really clear process in place that eliminates that fear and that loss of self esteem. If someone thinks they will go in two years then I think reason don't matter… I don't think it matters who initiates the processes, but it will take some

		initiative and proactivity on behalf of the organisation to put it there and to get skilled people knowing that they are dealing with that specific group of people who are going to take on a lot of things differently; and at that specific stage in their life and doing their own re-assessment of their life… it gets away from am I doing a good job and becomes much more personal. (2B) Internally as you age your need to score the big goals to climb the ladder diminishes and you get a different set of things that turn you on, your kids or doing something different. However, the workforce today is solely focussed on producing a widget or whatever. So those other bits are not supported really but I don't how you would do that from a business point of view. (5B)
	Alternate work options/ Flexible options	I really think HR and most Managers would support staff who wished to move to another area if there was good reason. Particularly in the outside workforce type areas it's sometimes easier and I think if they don't want to be a truck driver any more and they want to up skill or do something a little bit different they will try and accommodate them if the opportunity exists. (7C) There may not be a specific policy on that (phased retirement) but it is a matter of speaking with the Manager in the area and if it is feasible in that work area, then most needs or requests probably could be accommodated. (6A)
	Current Mentoring Activities	We do have mentor type initiatives across the organisation. This is part of the duties of managers and supervisors to assess their own areas and determine the effectiveness of mentoring strategies within their own area. (1A) I have dropped of a lot of projects that I used to manage and mentor another young fellow in picking those up. I have stayed predominately with the… area because that is where no one else has that knowledge. They will get it, but they just haven't got enough to handle it at this time so I'm happy doing that… He is a smart young fellow who is willing to learn and is happy to ask for help when he needs it. (7A) A lot of these blokes… think they know it all and haven't got a clue… you try to show half these little upstarts they tell you where to go. I've been driving this equipment for over 30 years, I can do just about anything on the machines but they don't want to know, they don't want any advice. (4C)
Age Neutrality	*Training and development*	There is not any specific training targeting mature age workers that I'm aware of… training needs are identified in a couple of ways. During the appraisal reviews a staff member can identify specific training that they would like to undertake… Additionally, a Manager might identify that all staff in a particular area require specific software training or whatever and instigate that as a priority. (7C)
	Recruitment	Again not specifically for mature age workers but all staff have been put through programs to understand recruitment processes and the need for them to be transparent and based on skill… I think if staff were

		asked they would see the recruitment process as pretty age friendly. (2A)
	Overall policy	…the aged workforce is not an area that is singled out in terms of strategy or policy… It is more a generic policy for all staff than specific to mature age people. (1B) Not specifically targeting mature age workers but we do have an extensive policy framework which includes policies related to staff. (5A) I think isolating by age doesn't really fit our philosophy of being the employer of choice. (2A)
	Incentives	Council offers superannuation, good working hours and so on. There are a lot of positives for working here. (4C)
	Productivity/ Efficiency	I think the mature age workers are equally as productive as the younger ones. (6A) Efficiency in my mind is related to work processes and practices and it really depends on the individual concerned. (5A)
	Communication	In this section, yes I think so. I can't speak for other areas but generally I'm not aware of any specific issues that relate to the two age groups not being able to work well together. (9A)

The manager-employee relationship in discussing retirement issues with staff was a contentious issue. Some workers experienced a conflict between personal and professional needs and goals in retirement, and the available options for taking up retirement. From an organisational perspective, factors such as an emphasis on operational standards and physical work demands were viewed as antithetical to transitions to retirement. From an individual perspective, the applicability of personal retirement plans to organisational needs was a key factor. Imperative to accommodating the needs of the mature work and the organisation was the quality of manager-employee relationships. Some forward thinking managers/supervisors cognizant of the effect of aging on future labour supply had negotiated transitional employment arrangement with selected employees. Several others reported a willingness to participate in employee-supervisor retirement discussions, but were apprehensive about the possible outcomes. In cases where a poor relationship with supervisory staff existed, it left no avenue for discussion of retirement issues. Loretto and White (2006) observed that employers waived early retirement policy in favour of retaining valued employees, while they dismissed other older workers under the guise of redundancy schemes. The LGAQ does not have an early retirement scheme however it was apparent in interviewee comments that some managers were perceived to be more approachable on retirement issues than others.

The other sub-themes centered on the vision of management regarding potential options for retirement transition such as alternate employment or flexible options and using mature aged workers corporate knowledge and experience for mentoring were rarely considered by management. Some interviewees were conscious of the need to gradually migrate the outdoor workers to less physically and strenuous jobs. They mentioned the importance of HR planning to consider providing job rotation opportunities, secondments and job sharing, which was also highlighted in Claes and Heymans' (2008) research. Some participants while supportive of the above noted that alternate employments was fairly limited as vacancies are required to be available for implementation of this strategy. Interviewees were all aware of the importance of flexible options, job share and part time work, however these strategies were not targeted for use to attract or retain mature aged workers. Job share was poorly regarded by many respondents due to the disruption of work flow and conflict over work performance. Other options such as casual or contract, home based work, project work were also viewed as beneficial for the employee but not necessarily for the organisational area. As previous surveys within the local government (Pillay et al, 2006) and

other studies (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Drew & Drew, 2005) have concurred, some form of transition policy is highly regarded by employees approaching retirement.

Mentoring was described as an informal work process by the majority of the interviewees. There were mixed results regarding its efficacy as a strategy due to the work type and personalities of the individuals involved, and the lack of a formal industrial relations agreement on what the role entails. Complex or specialised work areas and administration appeared to be more conducive to mentoring In the case of complex work environments respondents saw merit in experienced workers transferring skills to younger workers, which was also noted by Brooke and Taylor (2005) in their study. In the current study, interviewees from administration departments perceived younger workers as more willing to learn from older workers compared to interviewees from the outdoor workforce. Comments regarding mentoring in the outdoor workforce indicated three issues: the overconfidence and lack of skill amongst younger workers, loss of physical strength in older workers which affected productivity, and the lack of a formal mentoring strategy. In a study of mentoring by Billett (2006), it was noted that mentoring relationships were ineffective if the protégé perceives their competence as superior to their mentor. In the outdoor workforce, younger workers may have an advantage over older workers in terms of physical strength. However, some interviewees noted that older outdoor workers' experience led to greater accuracy, efficiency and productivity compared to younger workers, as they caused fewer errors and accidents in their work.

The majority of interviewees acknowledged the absence of any formal policies within the council to explicitly consider age diversity issues despite the rapidly changing demographics.   All participants stated that the current formal policy was either age neutral, or that they were unaware of mature aged policies. So age neutral policies may have served two purposes: the presumably intended provision of equal opportunities and the avenue of 'legal' age discrimination through favoritism of younger employees. Findings mirrored earlier research (Brooke & Taylor, 2005; Loretto & White, 2006), as age discrimination still permeated recruitment and training, due to HR and management personnel discretion in the implementation of policy. For instance, training was offered to younger workers more often than older workers when budget constraints were imposed as the training of younger workers was perceived to be of greater priority. One interviewee reported a contrast to the above, where older workers in one of councils were given the opportunity to learn how to operate a computer. As noted by Claes and Heymans (2008), opportunities to retrain, build confidence and be challenged at work may boost the motivation of mature workers and discourage early retirement. Collectively, the other sub-themes including communication, efficiency and productivity were viewed as age neutral by half the interviewees. A focus on age diversity and viewing employees as individuals represents a positive step towards age management (Ilmarinen, 2006; Walker & Taylor, 1998) and suggests that at least where business processes are concerned age stereotyping may reduced compared to recruitment and training. Many respondents indicated that emotional conflict was not age related, which concurs with Pelled et al.'s (1999) findings on diversity and conflict at work.

Business growth/ maintenance

Table 4. Business Maintenance and Growth

Category	Example
Attract and retain staff	…whatever strategies are in place there will be people that want to leave the workforce and there will be others that wish to remain and I believe those that wish to stay where it mutually beneficial will really value and appreciate the opportunity to continue to contribute and the employer will know that they have still got some great contributions. (2B) In times of high staff shortages I guess they do need to think about what attracts the generation xyz's into the workplace, so you have to

	think about what gets them going. (5B)
Offer flexible options	I think options for home based work would be perfect where the mature age workforce could effectively contribute through project based activity or computer based activity a couple of days a week or whatever. (2B)
Research/ workforce planning	Look I think for most organisations including Councils, managing the mature age workforce will be a major focus toward the future. As I have said, this Council is taking steps albeit small in some areas but we are working to develop a suitable response as part of our overall workforce planning strategy. (1A) Limiting my answer to my area, I think I need to do a lot more work on succession planning. Perhaps that could be developed more fully to offer more incentives for mature age workers, I'm not really sure, HR usually comes up with the strategies for staff. (2A) We would have to analyse work areas to determine if increased flexibility of hours is an option as with any other strategy we might consider – we would have to do our homework first. (2A) But my opinion of the whole thing is organisations across Australia need to re-structure for this type of thing and resource a little bit further so we're a bit proactive there and start asking those questions a couple of years at least before retirement not when the person says hey next June I'm out of here, I'm counting down … I would think two years in any area across Council, just looking at this organisation. (2B)
Training and development opportunities	…it would have to be a continual thing. You can't expect people who have been sitting in the one job for 15 or 20 years to suddenly go off and learn something totally new… if you're not progressively doing that along the way to go and change direction at 60 years of age is hard. (5C) …if people within the organisation had they had a little bit of in-house training on certain things may have well been able to take over that role which would be an incentive to stay longer… I do see a lot of frustration in people who are getting older and are coming to the realisation that they are destined to sit at this desk until they're 60 years old. (3B)
Ways to Improve Mentoring	If it was planned and formally recognised that that was the job. If it was just an add on to your job I'd say it would become a toothless tiger because no-one would take any notice.(4C) … a lot of the younger workforce is pretty bullet proof when they come into Council. I'm not sure they would take kindly to some old codger telling them how they should do things. On the other hand, if it was a fairly specialised area, where specific knowledge was critical to the role, I think it probably would work. I think it would have to be assessed on an individual work area level. (2A) If you had someone who had been a life time client service person and who had exceptional skills because they had spent their entire working life in that area and had seen the best and worst in people they are in a much better position to train or mentor new staff, given they have the skills. (3B) I've worked with young people on and off all my life and I know how to manage them without taking away their confidence. You can teach them to do your job if you've got a bit of patience and you are the kind of person who is a bit flexible. (7A)

The third major theme was centered on growing the local government business, as shown in Table 4. Respondents were asked about their opinions on business growth and strategies for the future. Most of the responses referred to the maintenance and development of current human resources and where possible exploring new resources such as the recently introduced online system or new ways of utilising resources. There was an overwhelming expression of an urgent need for some form of research, review or audit of the current

workforce and practices, with the intention of informed short and medium term workforce planning. These included prioritizing older worker issues, reviewing current policies, and surveying employees for the purposes of acquiring information on skill base, retirement plans and departments with a high proportion of mature aged workers. Internal research on age diversity is regarded as an initial step of age management (Ilmarinen, 2006; Walker & Taylor, 1999), and suggests that the LGAQ is aware of the need for an age management strategy. However, within the interview data, a link was not always recognized between the research and planning phase, and positive attitudes towards the implementation of strategies. As noted in earlier themes, current interventions were haphazard, reactive and often the result of individual departments' initiatives. When asked of possible strategies to ensure a well qualified and experienced workforce, the most preferred strategies proposed by the interviews included the attraction and retention of all skilled staff regardless of age and the broadening flexible work options to include specific project work, research and home based work.

The interviewees also noted that training and development provisions should be extended to older workers, so that they may support business development. Other research offers cautionary advice where the implementation of training is concerned, as focusing on younger workers in training opportunities may lead to self discrimination of older workers (Tougas et al, 2004), whilst forcing older workers to undergo training to adapt to organisational change in late career may encourage early retirement decisions (Brooke & Taylor, 2005). Some councils currently had a greater focus on training throughout working life to prepare for career changes in mature age—adopting the life longer learning philosophy albeit not very successfully. Others focused on the immediate and opted for customized training processes for skill upgrade programs, whereas most councils offered short training in general skills such as IT literacy or the Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. Wider implementation of mentoring schemes was also recommended by interviewees. The concept of mentoring was expanded beyond the current routine training by the mature aged workers to 'corporate intelligence' for building the business. In the context of mentoring as a tool for business development and growth some interviewees reiterated the shortcomings associated with informal mentoring settings, suggesting a need for formalisation of the progress to overcome younger workers' refusal to participate in the scheme.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The increased internal migration, fueled by the booming mining industry and the urban attraction has left the local governments facing difficulty in attracting qualified and experiences employees, like many other organisations. The above, coupled with the rapidly aging demographics has seriously confounded the service delivery of local governments. The study reported here explored age management issues within three local councils. While the findings may not be different to many other organisations in the current climate (Brooke & Taylor, 2005), being a public sector organisation, the LGAQ has its own legacy and culture that is risk averse and resistant to change. Nevertheless, a common message from the interview findings is that workforce planning in general, and the strategies to implement such plan, are either nonexistent or fragmented and informal. Transparent articulation between the policy and practice, and the organisation vision and productivity outcomes were not visible. While age management was yet to come to fruition within the LGAQ, there was evidence that management and HR were in the beginning phases of such a strategy for some councils and many interviewees saw the merits of such a strategy.

Findings indicated that current progress towards work force planning was limited to discussions in the most part and often seen as individual departments or council members view—not an organisational position. Succession planning was raised by many interviewees, and refers to strategies to transfer knowledge from mature aged staff to younger workers, part of which includes planning a transition phase where both ages work in parallel. Opportunities for succession planning identified by interviewees were targeted at

retaining and building the skills of all workers, and mentoring. The timing of strategy implementation within employees' careers is as important as the timing for business needs. Pillay et al (2006) found that if planning for transition employment began more than 6 years prior to retirement, the local government employees' responses to organisational and work role changes were more positive. Mature aged workers were understandably reluctant to engage in retaining when they had less than 6 year until retirement as the opportunity cost would not attractive enough for them to seek transition employment. Forward planning by the human resource development should be seen as part of a long term career development of employees with a view to attract /retain mature aged workers in transition employment. However, in many local councils, the human resources departments were not fairly represented at the senior management levels, thus making it difficult to raise some of the findings noted above to the senior management.

In addition, there were specific issues for indoor and outdoor workforces within the councils. The findings indicated a disparity between indoor (professional, managerial, administration) and outdoor (manual) workers within councils in terms of current mature workforce issues and strategies for succession planning. Specifically, indoor workers appeared to retain the capacity to continue working into retirement age, and reported that mentoring relationships were generally successful, while the opposite appeared to be true for older workers. Flexible work options are likely to benefit both groups, provided the nature of the work was conducive to such a strategy, and the mature workers were willing and able to continue working. However, it was evident that retention, training and mentoring strategies were be required to accommodate the separate issues for each work type. In the current study, inefficiencies in informal strategies were noted due to younger worker's unwillingness to accept their older mentor's advice or competence. Potentially, educational programs tailored towards age diversity and workplace training may improve mentor partnerships in the council to reduce negative stereotyping.

Several limitations were noted for the current study. Generalisability of the results may be limited due to the small sample size and purposive selection to include a large proportion of mature aged workers in managerial or supervisory roles. However the purpose of the current study was to explore age management issues, a topic of significance to older workers, especially managers who would be expected to be knowledgeable on the subject. The inclusion of a large number of mature workers in the study may also account for the positive stereotyping of older workers observed in the findings, as the positive attitudes towards ageing workers may indicate an agenda to promote the status of older workers (Desmette & Gaillard, 2008). Despite these limitations, the findings hold implications for human resource practitioners and researchers. Most importantly, the findings indicate that organisational characteristics and business agendas need to feature in strategic planning for age management in addition to employee goals and needs, as the dichotomy of the indoor and outdoor workforce shows. Secondly, the merits of an age diverse workforce are highlighted in examples where informal mentoring was observed to be effective. Lastly, interviewee responses also illustrate numerous instances of effective and ineffective age management based on supervisor discretion, which confirms the importance of positive relationships between employers and supervisors (Illmarinen, 2006; Martens et al., 2006). Suggestions for further research include the analysis of flexible work options from an organisational perspective, the development of training and development programs that meet older workers' needs, and the fostering of mentor relationships for different occupational settings.

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