

Program 02

Unemployed Good Sense

Rethinking the issue of older men and work

Current suggestions around raising the retirement age to 70 have led to more open discussions on the benefits of having older workers in the workplace, but also about how realistic it is to have a “one size fits all” approach.

In this extended interview with Professor Graeme Hugo from The University of Adelaide, we explore what we know of older men in the workforce, some of the myths and misconceptions around older workers and their ability to change as organisations change and adapt, and how older men in the workforce could be shaping their final years at work, including the importance of a mentoring role.

The program also looks at older men who still wish to be employed but, through redundancy or other reasons, find it difficult to obtain work. Professor Graeme Hugo is ARC Australian Professorial Fellow, Professor of Geography and Director of the Australian Population and Migration Research Centre at The University of Adelaide.

Interviewee

Professor Graeme Hugo

Postscript – This interview with Professor Graeme Hugo was recorded at The University of Adelaide in October 2014. We regret to advise that, following a short illness, Professor Hugo passed away in January 2015.

Discussion Starter

For years experts in economics, demographics, and employment trends have been warning that we need to get away from our blinkered view of employment as it relates to age. In the not too distant future, older men may just be needed to remain in the workforce – or to rejoin it, so that there is a sufficient capacity of knowledge and expertise retained for some organisations and institutions to function properly. T

he fact is, this capacity is not being replaced by younger men at a sufficient rate for older men not to be needed – quite apart from the ludicrousness of losing all the wisdom and perspective older men have gained throughout their careers.

It would seem that our society is in something of a trance – unaware of and falling behind some important realities of workforce capacity. But just as important is the whole issue of men’s health – including mental health. Men who have the capacity to remain engaged occupationally later in life (not all will, especially if their early work lives involved heavy manual labour) if deprived of work, are much more prone to a decline in physical and mental health – which is not without considerable economic cost.

Unemployment is a serious mental health risk factor for older men – including for suicide. And retirement, of a kind that results in loss of social interaction, meaningful activity and challenge, is clearly implicated in many cases of older male depression, and premature death due to physical decline.

A common fallacy of fanciful post-modernism is that men are no longer needed as the major breadwinners in families. Not only is this role for males still central in the economic equation of family life and setting children on a path of autonomous adult life (something happening much later in age than it used to), it is still strongly favoured as the norm by both men and women, as evidenced in contemporary social research.

Many older men have the capacity and need to work, even if that means in more flexible or part-time forms of employment, and perhaps to avail themselves of opportunities for diversified training. Old dogs can learn new tricks, and alongside old tricks, will likely make their repertoire in much demand – especially since too many baby boomer retirements are depleting workforce capacity.

Employers and governments may also need to start thinking creatively about forms of employment that accommodate older men's lifestyle choices, and their desire to remain productive, just not at a break-neck pace. There is much potential for mentoring to come into its own, whereby older experienced men could be drafted into new roles as consultants, advisors, in processes of planning, decision-making, and management for a whole variety of industry and institutional enterprises.

It is simply employing good sense for us all to rethink the issue of older men and meaningful occupation.

Questions

- 1. How could government begin to support older men to contribute their expertise and experience in mentoring roles across industry and our institutions?*
- 2. What kind of additional training and modified working conditions could be offered to older men in the workforce, to encourage their retention, avoid the loss of their experience, and equip them to respond to new challenges of a rapidly changing work environment?*
- 3. Are the health and welfare benefits of continued occupational engagement and meaningful work enough, on their own, for government to initiate changes in workplace policy and arrangements of employment for older men?*

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