
Job Search Strategies for Older Job Hunters: Addressing Employers' Perceptions

Kevin J. Gibson

University of Toronto

Wilfred J. Zerbe

R. E. Franken

University of Calgary

Abstract

This study analyzed responses from 651 employers to the question: "What is the major reason why the mature unemployed so often have difficulty finding work?" Five major barriers that limit the re-employment opportunities of older job hunters were identified from employers' responses: 1) the older job hunter is perceived as being unqualified to perform the duties associated with contemporary employment; 2) the older job hunter is perceived as being more expensive to employ; 3) the older job hunter is perceived as being difficult to integrate into the corporate culture; 4) the older job hunter is perceived as being the victim of discrimination; and 5) the older job hunter is perceived as lacking appropriate job-search skills. Each of the barriers to re-employment is described in terms of the accuracy of the claim, and possible mechanisms for overcoming each barrier are discussed. It is concluded that regardless of the accuracy of employers' perceptions it is ultimately the responsibility of the older job hunter to address employers' concerns.

Résumé

Cette étude a pour but d'analyser les données recueillies parmi les 651 employeurs qui ont répondu à la question: "Quelle est la raison qui cause le plus de difficultés au chômeur d'âge mûr qui cherche du travail?" Selon les réponses des employeurs, il existe cinq importants obstacles limitant les possibilités qu'envisage le chômeur d'âge mûr en quête d'un nouvel emploi. 1) le chômeur d'un certain âge est perçu comme étant une personne qui ne possède pas les qualifications nécessaires pour remplir les fonctions reliées aux positions contemporaines. 2) le chômeur d'un certain âge est perçu comme étant une personne plus coûteuse à engager. 3) le chômeur d'un certain âge est perçu comme étant une personne qui ne s'intégrerait pas facilement dans la culture corporative. 4) le chômeur d'un certain âge est perçu comme étant une personne victime de discrimination; et 5) le chômeur d'un certain âge est perçu comme étant une personne qui ne possède pas les compétences nécessaires pour chercher un emploi.

Chaque obstacle au ré-emploi est décrit par rapport à l'exactitude de l'énoncé et certains mécanismes permettant de surmonter chaque obstacle sont examinés. L'étude conclut qu'il en revient finalement au chômeur d'âge mûr de se pencher sur les problèmes des employeurs sans s'attarder sur l'exactitude des perceptions de l'employeur.

Unemployment can be a stressful event for any individual (Ivancevich & Leana, 1987). For older individuals, who face age-related barriers to re-employment, the threat that unemployment will be a stressful event is especially likely (Rife & First, 1989). At first glance, differences in unemployment between older and younger workers seem minor. The rates of unemployment among younger and older individuals, for example, show very similar patterns. Older workers, however, face very different

prospects for re-employment. In 1976 the average duration of unemployment for workers under 45 was 13.2 weeks, peaking in 1983 at 20.7 weeks. For older workers the average duration in 1976 was slightly longer at 17.3 weeks, but it peaked dramatically higher than the rate for younger workers, in 1985 at 29.7 weeks. Since 1985, figures have improved much more slowly for older workers: in 1990 the average duration of unemployment was 14.6 weeks for younger workers versus 22.5 weeks for older workers (Statistics Canada, 1990). In addition, the likelihood that many more older workers than younger workers will leave the workforce in the face of re-employment problems suggests that these figures may underestimate the true severity of the problem.

Considering the importance of the issues of age and unemployment it is surprising that very few Canadian studies have dealt with these important issues (Shaw, 1985). The objective of this study was to identify and assess the accuracy of employers' perceptions of the major employment barriers facing the mature unemployed in Alberta. We argue that some of the major limitations to re-employment facing the older job hunter are employers' beliefs and attitudes. It is therefore important that older job hunters be aware of those attitudes and that they have some clearly articulated strategies for addressing employers' concerns.

METHOD

Procedure and Sample

A total of 2,200 questionnaires were mailed to a cross-section of organizations in Calgary. The person responsible for hiring, typically the owner or personnel manager, was asked to complete the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were returned from 811 firms, representing a 37% response rate. Organizations in the sample ranged in size from 1 to 13,000 employees (the median was 12 employees) and included firms in all industrial sectors. An examination of the distribution of industry type and organization size among returned questionnaires revealed no evidence of a response bias.

Measures

As part of a larger project assessing employer perceptions of younger versus older workers, respondents were asked to rate workers on a set of attributes. Results for these other measures are reported elsewhere (Gibson, Zerbe & Franken, in press). Following these scales, respondents were then asked to respond to the question: "What is the major reason why the mature unemployed so often have difficulty finding employment?"

Categorization of Responses

Responses to the question of interest were obtained from 651 respondents. If an employer's statement consisted of a number of discrete responses then each response was categorized independently of the employer's other responses. This procedure resulted in 1,167 discrete responses.

Three raters categorized the responses. The first and second raters identified unique categories from a sample of the responses. These categories were compared and 31 narrow category groupings resulted. Each of the three raters then placed all 1,167 responses into one of the categories. Average agreement among pairs of raters was 84%; all three raters agreed on 76% of categorizations. All disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Following this initial sorting the categories were examined for redundancy and similarity. By combining obviously redundant and conceptually similar categories (e.g., "young-easy to train" and "old-hard to train") a final set of six categories resulted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 provides a summary of the number of responses for each of the six categories. The sixth category represented neutral, positive, and no comment responses. Twenty employers indicated that they "didn't know why older workers had difficulty finding employment." Fourteen employers indicated that there was "no problem" or that they were "not aware that a problem existed." Twelve comments were positive (e.g., "older employees are superior to younger employees"). Finally, there were 40 "no comment" responses. Each of the five remaining categories is described and discussed in turn below.

I. Worker Qualifications

1. Lack of Education, Training, and Abilities

The older job hunter is seen as technologically obsolete. More than half of the responses in this category concerned the perception that older job hunters "have a poor education," "lack the appropriate training" and are "stuck in their trade." Older job hunters are particularly likely to be viewed as being "unfamiliar with new technology." For example, respondents stated that older job hunters were "not up to speed on current computer usage."

Previous researchers (Hoos, 1983) have noted that technical obsolescence is a serious threat for workers in almost all fields of endeavour. This problem is especially acute for the older worker (Bornstein, 1986; Flaim & Sehgal, 1985). Barret (1985) notes that older workers are over-represented in manufacturing and smokestack industries and that these

TABLE 1
*Employers' perceptions of the barriers that limit
 older job hunters in their search for re-employment*

	<i>Number of Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
I. Workers' Qualifications:		
<i>Lack of Education, Training and Ability</i>	194	16.6
<i>Negative Dispositional Attributions</i>	164	14.0
	<u>358</u>	<u>30.6</u>
II. Employment costs:		
<i>High Wage Expectations and Market Competition</i>	192	16.4
<i>Low Training Investment Return</i>	100	8.6
<i>Increased Benefit Costs Associated with Poor Health</i>	63	5.4
	<u>355</u>	<u>30.5</u>
III. Adaptability to Corporate Culture:		
<i>Unable to Adapt to New Environment</i>	135	11.6
<i>Difficulties Associated with Managing A Heterogeneously-Aged Work Force</i>	72	6.2
	<u>207</u>	<u>17.8</u>
IV. Age Discrimination	111	9.5
V. Poor Job Search Skills	50	4.3
VI. Other	86	7.4
	<u>1167</u>	<u>100.0</u>

industries are declining. Manufacturing and smokestack industries together accounted for one-third of the rise in unemployment in Canada between 1979 and 1984 and nearly every indicator suggests that these industries will continue to decline (Barret, 1985). It is, therefore, very likely that we will see a large number of mature workers being displaced from their current positions, and it is also very likely that these workers will lack the qualifications that employers are seeking in new employees.

2. Negative Dispositional Attributions

Respondents' perception that older job hunters lack suitable qualifications for the current job market is to a large extent accurate. In citing this barrier to re-employment, however, respondents often place the blame for this limitation on the older job hunter (e.g., "they are afraid of new technology" or "they have failed to keep up"). An alternative explanation for this limitation, however, can be related to factors external to the older

job hunter. Morrison (1982), for example, argues that organizations adopt cost-effective strategies that tend to emphasize capital mobility at the expense of worker mobility. It is very unlikely, therefore, that older job hunters will have received appropriate skills upgrading from previous employers to optimize their current market value.

II. Employment Costs

1. High Wage Expectations and Market Competition

Respondents perceive the wage expectations of mature job hunters to be higher than those of younger job hunters. Respondents stated that older job hunters' "expected salary is higher than is justified by the job" and that "they will not accept a position that is lower-paying than their previous position." Respondents argued that "there are many young, well-educated people competing for jobs who do not request high starting salaries."

Previous research does provide evidence that the average earnings of older workers are higher than those of younger workers (Suzuki, 1976). Most workers receive substantial wage premiums corresponding to their seniority, skills, and training that are only valuable to their present employers. Because most older workers who are forced to change jobs had more seniority on their previous jobs, their drop in earnings on new jobs is greater than the drop for younger workers in similar situations (Akyeampong, 1987; Sandell, 1987). It is likely that older job hunters will seek such premiums from new employers; therefore, their wage expectations will be higher (Sandell, 1987).

2. Training Investment Return

Compounding the initial perception that older workers do not possess the qualifications required for the job is the perception that older job hunters are not very good candidates for the recovery of training investment. Employers perceive that "training is very expensive" and that "training investment is maximized by hiring younger applicants." Respondents stated that older job hunters are "resistant and fearful of change," "unable to make dramatic career changes," and "slow to learn." Older job hunters are therefore judged to be poor candidates for training success. Younger job hunters are seen as "easily and quickly trained" and once trained their "expected tenure with the organization is longer than that of older job hunters."

The argument for not hiring older job hunters becomes extremely potent if one accepts the idea that most older individuals are not capable learners, and that even if they are successfully trained their expected tenure with the organization is too limited to realize an acceptable return on the training investment. Previous research, however, has consistently

shown that the average decline in psychological competence is typically of small magnitude until the 70s are reached (Schaie, 1983, 1988; Schaie & Hertzog, 1986). In addition, the proportion of individuals who maintain their level of functioning on specific abilities is quite high. Schaie (1989), for example, provides evidence that, depending upon the age group, 60–85% of older individuals in their study remained stable or improved on specific abilities. The incidence of significant decrement in their subjects was quite limited until age 60, affected less than a third of the study participants until age 74, and even by age 81 affected only 30–40% of the persons studied.

Consistent with the evidence on psychological competence, effective training programs have been found to provide substantial benefits for the mature individual (Baltes, Dittman-Kohli & Kliegl, 1986; Willis & Schaie, 1986; Dunn, 1985; Bornstein, 1986). Further, while older job hunters may have a shorter working life ahead of them, their expected tenure with the company training them is often as long as that of younger job hunters (Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Bluedorn, 1982; Sandell & Baldwin, 1990). In addition, the relevant comparison is not years of remaining employment but years expected with the firm producing the training, in relation to the expected life of the technology being implemented (Morse, 1979). Sandell and Baldwin (1990) suggest that to the extent that turnover rates are higher for younger workers, it is possible that firms can expect to receive more years of upgraded service from older employees than from younger employees.

3. Health

Respondents reported that down-time fringe benefits are more expensive to maintain for older workers due to "increased absenteeism" and "greater health problems." The high cost associated with absenteeism including lost productivity, down-time fringe benefits paid to the missing worker, and replacement work force costs is well known (Doering, Rhodes & Schuster, 1983). A survey of Canadian workers (Levesque, 1988) indicates that extended absence from work due to illness is more prevalent among older workers. From 1979 to 1986, 9.4% of paid workers between the ages of 45 and 64 were absent for two or more consecutive weeks due to illness, compared with 6.4% of workers in the 25–44 age group. Younger workers, however, were more likely to have time-loss due to injury (Haggard-Guenette, 1988). From 1982 to 1986, 5.6% of paid workers between 25 and 44 missed work due to injury, compared with 4.9% of workers in the 45–64 age group.

III. Adaptability to Corporate Culture

1. Unable to Adapt to New Environment

In addition to the cost of hiring older job hunters, in terms of wage expectations, qualifications, and training investment return, respondents were also quite concerned about the affect that hiring an older job hunter would have on the existing work force. Respondents expressed considerable concern that "older workers are not able or willing to change their established way of doing things" and "are unable to accept a new way." Older job hunters were described as "set in their ways," as "unable to break old habits," and "fearful of change and new ideas." Older job hunters are perceived as "resistant and questioning of organizational policies and practices" and therefore disruptive to the organization's culture. One characteristic of younger job hunters that is especially valued is their "receptiveness to new ideas."

2. Difficulties of Managing a Heterogeneously-Aged Work Force

Another concern of employers is that the older job hunter will not fit in with the other (younger) employees. There seems to be a perception that the insertion of an older individual into a homogeneous workforce will be unsettling to the existing employees. Respondents stated that "older individuals tend to be bossy towards younger staff" and that "older individuals do not like to be supervised by individuals younger than themselves." Respondents also stated that they "want a young staff which will grow with the organization." Respondents stated that by hiring an older worker they are "blocking the opportunity to advance younger staff."

IV. Bias

About ten per cent of respondents identified employer stereotypes and misperceptions as barriers to re-employment. Those respondents stated that "public attitudes," "stereotyping," and "employer bias" were responsible for the limited opportunities faced by older job hunters, and that "we stereotype older individuals without giving them an opportunity."

Employers' perception that negative stereotyping is a major limitation facing older job hunters in their quest for re-employment is probably quite accurate. A growing body of research has documented the ubiquity of age stereotyping in our society (Butler, 1969; Covey, 1988) and in organizational settings (Gibson, Zerbe & Franken, in press; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976; Singer, 1985; Yankelovich, Skelly & White, 1985). Previous research also provides evidence that age stereotypes have a negative impact on hiring decisions (Cleveland & Landy, 1983; Gibson, 1991).

V. Job Search Skills

Respondents perceive that older job hunters need training in job search skills. Respondents stated that older job hunters "have not kept up contacts with individuals who could aid them in their search for employment," "they lack initiative in the job search," "they are unaware of jobs that may be suitable for them," "they have poorly prepared résumés," "they are scared to ask for a job," "they don't know how to market themselves," "they are inadequately prepared for interviews," and "they have low self-esteem or confidence" (i.e., they present themselves poorly).

These perceptions are supported by previous research (Dunn, 1985; Gordus, 1986; Hasen & Gera, 1982). In a study prepared for the Economic Council of Canada, Hasan (1982) indicates that a less extensive job search is undertaken by the mature unemployed since they contact fewer employers directly and make less effective use of unemployment agencies. Dunn (1985) found that only 2% of older workers participate in Job Finding Clubs offered by Canada Employment Centres despite their "remarkable success rate." The Employment Transition Program (Gordus, 1986) identified a number of variables as being significant problems for older job-seekers, including the probability of little experience in recent job search and the high probability of low self-esteem.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the toughest challenges that will confront older job hunters in the 1990's will be overcoming employers' stereotypical beliefs regarding their qualifications. The older job hunter must realize that in order to be competitive in today's labour market it is necessary for their skills and abilities to be up-to-date. Older job hunters need to undertake a realistic appraisal of their skills. Accurate self-appraisal by the older job hunter can highlight strengths, enhance confidence, and identify deficiencies. The key to optimal re-employment for many older job hunters, in terms of the time spent seeking employment and the quality of the position obtained, is early entry into retraining. Older individuals must be made aware that training is a life-long endeavour. If their skills are found lacking, they should seek immediate retraining. Older job hunters spend an average 22.5 weeks seeking re-employment (Statistics Canada, 1990). For many older job hunters much of the time spent seeking re-employment could be better spent on retraining. Currently, older job hunters in Canada make less use of retraining programs than do younger job hunters although older job hunters are as likely to benefit from retraining as younger job hunters. Only 7% of older job hunters undertake some form of training while for their younger counterparts, the corresponding proportion is 17% (Akyeampong, 1987).

There are at least two positive consequences that retraining can provide for the older job hunter. The first is that the net unemployment duration may not be significantly increased. More qualified applicants, who have demonstrated a willingness to develop their skills, should find an employment opportunity quite quickly. The second consequence is that the older job hunter may accrue additional benefits, in terms of starting wages and entry position, by enhancing their qualifications.

Older job hunters whose skills and abilities currently meet labour market standards must be aware that many prospective employers will be sceptical of their credentials. It is, therefore, incumbent upon these individuals to demonstrate explicitly to potential employers that their credentials are as up-to-date as those of younger candidates who may be vying for the same position.

Many older job hunters have never before been unemployed, let alone subjected to in-depth job interviews or forced to compete for a job in a highly selective labour market. Successful job search depends upon an understanding of several types of behaviour (employer-search behaviour, productivity signals, and the establishment and utilization of certain types of networks). Effective job search skills are extremely valuable. In fact, some economists consider such skill human capital in the same way that they assess formal education (Gordus, 1986). The older job hunter, therefore, must be made aware of the importance of obtaining effective job search skills.

Older job hunters, also, need to have realistic expectations regarding their earnings prospects. Previous research has found that older job hunters who have realistic expectations about their earnings prospects spend less time looking for jobs that pay them what they earned on their previous jobs (Gordus, 1986; Sandell, 1987). Older job hunters need to appreciate the nature and causes of pay penalties associated with changing jobs and should focus on the possibility that promotion and merit increases can compensate for low entry-level wages.

Older job hunters must also express in realistic terms both the length in years of their intended tenure with the organization and their interest in retraining and career development. Once employed, it should be made clear to their new employer that they want to keep their skills fresh, keep up with new work requirements and processes, and have equal access to training and promotion opportunities. Finally, the older job hunter who has a history of health problems is in a disadvantaged position in terms of gaining re-employment. The older job hunter in good health, however, should make every effort to communicate this to a potential employer.

In conclusion, older job hunters need to be made aware of not only the fact that employers may have reservations about hiring older job hunters, but of the specific areas where employers are most likely to be con-

cerned. Only by being aware of the specific reservations of employers will the older job hunter be able to implement effective strategies to dispel those reservations.

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Authors' Notes

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All correspondence should be sent to Kevin J. Gibson, Canadian Research Network, Centre for Studies of Aging, University of Toronto, Suite 305, 455 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2G8.