

Light of the ageing population

In light of the ageing population the Australian Government has recently raised the pension entitlement age to 67, with further increases likely in the future. The mantra has become 'Live Longer - Work Longer' (OECD 2006, Australian Dept. Treasury 2007, CEDA 2007). Yet such statements ignore both the barriers that older workers face to employment, as well as the impact that working longer will have on the physical and emotional well being of an ageing workforce (HREOC 2009, Encel and Studencki 2004). Individuals, faced with longer periods of retirement than previous generations, may have a financial need to continue working beyond traditional retirement age. Past trends toward early retirement indicate that many workers may not wish or be able to delay retirement (Patrickson and Ranzijn 2004). Government policy, employer policies and practices, and individual needs and intentions are not currently working in unison (Walter et al. 2008).

Research Question/Aim

An investigation of employer response to the ageing workforce, to explore how government policy and employer policies and attitudes can help overcome the employment barriers faced by older workers.

Potential Sub-Questions/Areas for Investigation include:

- The level of awareness among employers (managers) of potential labour pressures due to the ageing workforce and whether these challenges are seen as business issue
- The degree to which workforce planning for the future is being carried out by employers, age profiling, retirement planning, future skills needs, age diversity policies
- Awareness of the types of changes employers may have to undertake to accommodate older workers and their willingness to do so
- Current policies and practices relating to older workers; whether these have been successful or unsuccessful - examples
- Experiences, positive and negative, and possible organisational constraints employers may have encountered in relation to employment of older workers
- Employer attitudes to employing older workers, specifically someone older than themselves; supervisory issues; differences between senior managers and line manager attitudes and practices; role of recruiters - internal and external

Research Motivation & Significance

Issues surrounding the employment of older workers have been topical for some time due to the ageing of the population. Governments face fiscal pressures to fund

increasing health and aged care and pensions. As the workforce ages, mature-age workers (45+) will become an increasingly important part of the labour force and will, in turn, influence the Australian workplace and work practices (Mercer 2008). With the baby boomer cohort reaching retirement age and fewer younger workers entering the workforce, organisations will face labour supply shortages and increased global competition for skills. The labour force participation of older workers is currently relatively low compared to the rest of the Australian workforce and compared to many other OECD countries, making it an important group for policy makers who have highlighted the importance of raising participation rates and improving skills utilization (Abhayaratna and Lattimore 2006, ABS 2009). Employers will have to find ways to recruit and retain mature workers in order to capture and benefit from their talent and experience (Mercer 2008, McKinsey & Company 2008).

There is a significant body of research relating to older workers and employment from the individual perspective and a number of government inquiries have signalled it as a pressing issue (Australian Dept. Treasury 2007, Australian Productivity Commission 2005). However, there has been less research into how organisations might deal with these issues and why employers continue to be reluctant to employ older workers.

Discrimination on the basis of age is well documented (Encel&Studencki 2004, HREOC 2009). Employers do not appear to have felt a need or do not perceive a business case to respond to the challenges posed by the ageing workforce (van Dalen et al. 2009, Armstrong-Stassen 2008, Loretto and White 2006, Taylor and Walker 1994). The urgency has perhaps been mitigated by the current economic downturn but many analysts have called for proactive planning for the longer term (Mercer 2008, Ernst & Young 2006). The effects of workforce ageing are more likely to be felt in those sectors already experiencing skills shortages such as health care and education.

There is thus a need for research to increase understanding of employer perspectives on older workers and how employer policies and practices and government policies could help remove barriers to employment of older workers, at the same time enabling organisations to overcome future labour market pressures by retaining their valuable older workers and actively recruiting from the pool of skilled older workers in order to maintain their competitiveness and ensure future economic growth.

Proposed Research Design & Methodology

Introduction

The proposed research falls within the management discipline of work and organisational studies and will be approached from a constructivist-interpretivist epistemological position (symbolic interactionism). The type of data to be collected is unstructured, involving attitudes and perceptions, lending itself to an interpretive qualitative approach in order for meaning to be constructed, rather than to a quantitative measurement survey. Case study methodology, with primary data collection using focus groups and semi-structured interviews, is proposed to allow a holistic study of the

phenomenon in its organisational context (Yin 2003). The researcher seeks to develop expected as well as unanticipated patterns among many variables. The research design is thus emergent rather than prescribed (Creswell 2009, pg. 175). Such flexibility allows modification of the initial plan and interview questions (initially informed by prior literature and findings of pilot focus groups) to take advantage of opportunities which arise from the experience of the interviews and growing understanding of the data. It may be useful to collect some quantitative data but the findings will be informed by a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology (Crotty 1998).

Epistemological Position and Theoretical Framework

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm provides the primary foundation and anchor for qualitative research methods (Ponterotto 2005). This approach produces inductive, subjective knowledge and accepts the existence of multiple different realities. A qualitative approach is well suited to research that is exploratory or descriptive, that accepts the value of context or setting (naturalistic) and that searches for a deeper understanding of participants' 'lived experiences', based on their personal experiences and interpretations, of the phenomenon under study (Dilthey 1985 as discussed in Marshall and Rossman 2006, Easterby-Smith 1991).

Increased understanding of employer perspectives regarding older workers is essential to meeting government policy initiatives to extend working lives and for organisations to secure necessary skilled labour in the face of global competition and the ageing workforce. It is also key to the ability of individuals to be able to meet their needs for participation in quality paid work in later life. It is still not well understood why, despite anti-age discrimination legislation and espousal to age diversity and equality by organisations at policy level, older workers still face significant barriers to employment or why organisations are not yet responding to the challenges posed by the ageing workforce (Loretto and White, 2006). The complexity of attitudes and perceptions towards older workers, based on stereotypes which are socially constructed by individuals in the workplace, makes a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which espouses a hermeneutical approach and seeks an understanding of social reality through the perceptions and voices of the participants, best suited to answer this research question (Crotty 1998). The positivist paradigm is inappropriate in this case as it produces deductive, non-contextualised knowledge which will not adequately address the 'how' and 'why' of the research problem.

An overview of the ontological and epistemological foundations of a qualitative constructivist-interpretivist research approach is tabulated in the supporting documents

A distinguishing characteristic of constructivism is the personal involvement of the researcher in seeking to obtain empathic understanding (as opposed to quantitative explaining) and the construction rather than discovery of knowledge ('researcher as key instrument' Creswell 2009). The researcher's values are thus inherent in all phases of the research and any personal biases and perceptions must be acknowledged and care

taken that they do not unduly influence the research process. Research findings in the form of socially constructed truths are subject to re-interpretation and negotiation through dialogue between the researcher and research participants. All interpretations are located in a particular context and time. Different people may construct meaning about the same phenomenon in different ways. There is no one true or valid interpretation (Crotty 1998). The researcher focuses on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researcher brings to the research or that writers express in the literature (Creswell 2009 pg. 175). This demands reflexivity of the researcher in terms of the reciprocal influence she and the research process have on each other.

The goals of constructivism-interpretivism are both idiographic and emic (Ponterotto 2005). The research focus is on understanding constructs and individual behaviours within a specific socio-cultural context and is thus not widely generalizable beyond the context of the specific cases investigated.

Methodology for Data Collection - A Case Study Approach

The complexity and inter-relatedness of the issues under study are ideally suited to a case study approach, which allows identification of the full range of influences associated with a phenomenon in its natural setting or context by probing deeply into a situation, using data from multiple sources, and the reporting of multiple perspectives in a holistic account (Patton, 1990, Yin 1984). An instrumental case study is pursued in order to provide insight and help advance understanding about a particular phenomenon that may be generalizable to other phenomena (Creswell, 2002, Stake, 2000).

Organisations for study will be purposefully selected. The collection and analysis of data will be guided by the literature and new theory may emerge from the case findings. A deeper understanding of employer perspectives on older workers could be used to inform ageing workforce policy and practice. Researcher reflexivity will extend to being critical about the use of theory, continually questioning what and how we 'know' and remaining open to alternative ways of understanding. This research could be viewed through the theoretical lens of human capital theory, identity theory, discrimination literature, policy thesis or the life course perspective.

The primary methods of data collection will be focus groups and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by analysis of recruitment and diversity policy documents where available. These methods have been used in literature related to my topic (Loretto & White 2006, Taylor 1994). Case studies employ an ideographic writing style which is very descriptive and detailed in presentation (Pontoretto 2005).

The study aims to include two to four cases with interviews at different hierarchical levels within the case organisations. A possible candidate for this study is the ageing nursing profession which is experiencing severe skills shortages and where physical

demands of the work and traditional inflexible shiftwork patterns make it relatively less attractive for older nurses to continue working past traditional retirement age or to re-enter the nursing profession after a career break. Other potential candidates for study include past Diversity@Work Award winners which are companies that have implemented policies to encourage mature-age workers to their workforce. A contrast could be drawn between public and private sector organisations. Interview data will also be collected from employer groups, trade unions and recruiters in the context of the organisations identified for study.

Focus Groups

Focus groups can be a quick and convenient way of collecting data from several people (typically 6-12) simultaneously (Kitzinger 1995). They allow for varying levels of interview structure and researcher involvement and provide access to the consensus or diversity of experiences among a group of participants where interaction is part of the method (Morgan 1996). Participants are encouraged to talk to one another and explore issues of importance by asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on other participants' experiences and viewpoints. Focus groups allow access to attitudes and decision-making that may not be revealed using more conventional data collection techniques due to informal forms of communication such as jokes, teasing and arguing (Kitzinger 1995, Marshall and Rossman 2006, Berg 2009). Thus the researcher is able to examine what participants think about issues related to the study and why they think that way. Group dynamics can take the research in new and often unexpected directions. While individual voices may be silenced, group work can also actively facilitate the discussion of sensitive topics where less inhibited members broach topics that shyer participants may have avoided. Confidentiality may be difficult due to the presence of multiple research but participants can also provide mutual support in expressing feelings that are common to their group but which they consider to deviate from mainstream culture or the assumed culture of the researcher (Kitzinger 1995).

Compared with individual interviews, focus groups offer the researcher less control over the flow of discussion. The number of questions that can be addressed is smaller and results are harder to analyse. Participants' comments must be interpreted within the particular social environment created by the focus group and care must be taken to avoid lifting comments out of context or out of sequence. The researcher must also be alert to the problem of the false consensus effect - the tendency of participants to adopt the opinions of a strong group leader (Ogunbameru 2003).

Recording focus group data can be a challenge since more than one participant may speak at any one time. Recording (audio/video) could be supplemented by having additional researchers present to assist with note-taking to capture nonverbal behaviour, group dynamics and emergent themes (Kitzinger 1995).

The aim in this study is to use focus groups as an early pilot to gather preliminary data, to aid in the development and refinement of interview guidelines, to foreshadow

research problems and highlight gaps and wastage in data collection. Pilot interviews also help in understanding oneself as a researcher (Marshall and Rossman 2006).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be carried out at various levels of management in the case organisations (triangulation). The interview protocol will be informed by data from the pilot focus groups and will serve as a 'loose' guide, with general open-ended questions designed to open up conversation about the topic. Semi-structured interviews capture the views of informants expressed in their own words and allow the researcher to collect rich experiential data to be collected. They also allow the interviewer to probe responsively for further information or clarification (Berg 2009).

Analysis and collection of interview data should iterate, such that as interviews are conducted they are examined prior to additional interviewing to identify questions that might need refining and to identify new experiences shared by the interviewee that may need to be probed further in subsequent interviews. This process also helps to identify other potential interviewees and allows the researcher to reflect on her role and any behaviours or preconceptions that may need adjustment. Interviewing is not an impersonal data collecting tool but involves active interactions between researcher and participant leading to negotiated, contextually based results (Fontana & Frey, 2000 in Watt 2007).

The number of interviews over two to four cases is expected to be in the region of 20 to 40. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Some notes may be taken during the interview but excessive note-taking can detract from the development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee (McCracken 1988). Early analysis of transcripts and field notes will be performed manually with emergent themes and ideas presented in the form of concept maps. More detailed analysis of interview transcripts will be carried out using software such as NVivo or AtlasTi.

Methodological Rigour and Research Quality

Qualitative research is often criticised for lacking scientific rigour; specifically that it is merely an assembly of anecdote and personal impressions - a large amount of data about a small number of settings - strongly subject to researcher bias, and lacking reproducibility and generalizability (Mays and Pope, 1995). As discussed in Pontoretto (2005), Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the traditional concepts of reliability and validity do not apply to qualitative inquiry, which is not concerned with the 'truth' or 'falsity' of an observation with respect to an external reality as it does not accept the realist assumption that there is a reality external to our perception of it. They argue that qualitative research should be judged rather in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Strategies to protect against bias and enhance reliability include systematic and self-conscious research design, data collection according to well-established protocols, recorded and transcribed as closely as possible to the original, and treated in a manner that does not include changes to interpretation. Validation strategies include spending prolonged time with the research participants and the use of triangulation, collection of data from a wide range of different, independent sources. Obtaining feedback from participants to see if they regard the findings as a reasonable and reliable account of their experience enhances the credibility of the research. Confirmability and trustworthiness is ensured by maintaining meticulous records of interviews and observations, providing an audit trail which allows the reader to follow the path and key decisions taken by the researcher, to assess the biases or subjectivity inherent in the work and by the researcher's own reflexivity. Ultimately the quality of a qualitative study rests on the plausibility of the findings and should include an account of 'negative' or 'deviant' cases, in which the researcher's explanatory scheme appears weak or is contradicted by the evidence (Mays and Pope 1995). A feature of a qualitative report is its 'thick description' which integrates descriptive and interpretive commentary (Ponterotto 2006).

The criticism of limited generalizability does apply to qualitative research in that the findings cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty as quantitative analyses. However, qualitative research aims to provide a complete detailed description of a particular situation in its context, not to test whether the findings are statistically significant or due to chance. The hallmark of qualitative research is one of particularity rather than generalizability (Creswell 2009, pg. 193). Generalization is analytic rather than statistical, generalizing to theory rather than to a population.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for the proposed research will be sought from the University of Sydney's Ethics Approval Committee, which reviews ethical aspects of research involving human participants.

The study will aim to have minimal impact on the participant's daily lives, be based on informed consent, protect the participants' privacy by ensuring anonymity and respect information given in confidence and the right of the participant to withdraw from the study at any stage. The researcher must be constantly aware of her role and avoid any potential clash between personal and professional interests or overstepping the boundary of personal privacy or confidentiality (Easterby-Smith 1991).

Conclusion

The proposed research into employer perspectives on older workers will be conducted using a case study methodology underpinned by a qualitative constructivist-interpretivist epistemology. Data will be collected via focus groups and semi-structured interviews at different hierarchical levels within purposefully selected case organisations. Related

documentation will be collected and analysed where available. Interviews will also be conducted with recruiters, employer organisations and employee representative groups within the context of the case organisations. Measures have been discussed to enhance the quality and rigour of the study. Data analysis will be concurrent with data collection and the design is emergent to allow flexibility to respond to opportunities that arise as the research progresses. Computer software will be used to facilitate sorting and arranging data.

Increased understanding of employer perspectives on employing older workers could contribute to practice and inform policy on issues surrounding the ageing workforce.

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