

AGEING WORKFORCE and WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

“View from the Ground”

No. 5: Media Commentary on Age Discrimination – Opportunity lost?

Age discrimination in the workplace is the flavour of the month. There seems to be an increase in the number of articles in the newspaper, and an increase in radio discussions on the topic – this is a good thing. But, will it still be an issue next month, and the month after? This is an issue that requires more than talk, it requires action. Real and sustained action if the issue is going to be seriously addressed. I read in the Courier Mail on the first weekend in May that there has been an increase in the number of age discrimination complaints made to the Australian Human Rights Commission. Complaints to the Commission are merely the tip of the iceberg. I would suspect that most people experiencing age discrimination in the workplace would never even consider taking their case to the Commission. These older workers are generally too busy keeping their heads down, trying to keep their jobs. If they were to make a complaint to the Commission and be successful, they would, in all likelihood no longer have the job that was the subject of the complaint, or have a job that has been made untenable as a result of their complaint. This becomes a hollow victory if they end up joining the ranks of the older unemployed, with their chances of re-employment diminished.

The lead article in the Career One section of the same Courier Mail newspaper was titled “Unwanted, Experienced loyal workers over 45 years” and included a photo of two downcast and miserable looking older workers. I turned to pages 4 and 5 for the detail. There was an interesting commentary on page 4, with quotes from Elizabeth Broderick, the Commissioner responsible for age discrimination, stating there had been an increase in the number of age discrimination complaints in the first quarter of the year, speculating that this increase was a result of more public discussion of the issue. As I said, flavour of the month. Age discrimination in the workplace needs to be kept on the agenda, not to raise the number of complaints, but to inform policy and strategy development which leads to non-discriminatory workplaces and an acceptance of older workers as having a legitimate contribution to make to workplaces of the future.

Moving to page 5 of the feature article the heading read “The ageing population will create a plethora of job opportunities.” I thought, great, all of the different jobs being done by, or available to, older workers. But no, to my great disappointment the article was about jobs for everyone else to help the ageing population “look good and live well”! The article mentioned preventative health measures, diet and exercise, living independently and staying out of care facilities. Nowhere did it mention ‘ageing workers’, or mention work for older people as being an important contributor to good health. The article went on to list the jobs that *other people* can do to target those in the age groups of 50+, 60+, 70+, 80+, 90+, and 100+. It mentioned jobs that “cater for Australians of a certain age”. Not one word about the jobs these ‘*Australians of a certain age*’ are doing or could do themselves!

So thank you Courier Mail – great idea, great headline, and some interesting commentary about age discrimination from the Federal Age Discrimination Commissioner, but half of the article focussed on older people as the passive recipients of job opportunities for others. Another opportunity lost!

Linda Eather

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