



REPORT

# On the front line

Employment services staff perspectives  
on working with mature age jobseekers

Agathe Randrianarisoa | Dina Bowman



The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit <[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)>.

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## Notes about terminology

### Mature age

Definitions of 'mature age' vary considerably. In this study we consider jobseekers aged 45 or more to be mature age. This follows the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2013 *Final report of Access All Ages—Older Workers and Commonwealth Laws Inquiry*, which referred to 'older workers' as individuals over the age of 45.

Where different age ranges are used in other data sources, that is specified in the text.

### jobactive staff titles

Despite the diverse titles of staff among jobactive providers, we have used uniform titles throughout this report:

- Employment consultants are those whose responsibilities are mainly to work with jobseekers but may also include employer engagement, depending on the organisation.
- Business development officers are those in charge of liaising with employers and sourcing employment opportunities. In some instances they may also work with jobseekers.
- Site managers are those overseeing a jobactive provider site. They may be involved in both employer liaison and direct work with jobseekers.

## SUMMARY

*Employment services staff face considerable challenges in assisting mature age jobseekers to get and keep suitable jobs. They have to manage the demands of delivering services in accordance with the employment services contract, including monitoring mutual obligation requirements; an increasingly competitive labour market; and jobseekers who need help to get and keep jobs.*

The mature age unemployment rate is lower than the youth unemployment rate, but mature age jobseekers tend to remain unemployed for longer. The average duration of unemployment for people aged 55 and over is nearly twice as long as for those aged 25–54 and three times as long as for the 15–24 year age group (Department of Employment 2016a). The longer they remain out of work, the more difficult it is for them to get a job.

The latest iteration of the outsourced public employment services is jobactive. Commenced in July 2015, jobactive was designed to

increase the efficiency and effectiveness of employment services and reduce the administrative burden on providers.

Under this new contract, jobactive providers are expected to do more with less. The size of case loads has increased, there is greater emphasis on outcome payments and there is a heightened focus on performance and compliance through quarterly Star Ratings. The proportion of providers that are not-for-profit organisations has declined (Department of Employment 2015c), despite their closer bonds to local communities (Jobs Australia 2015). High case loads are one factor putting increased pressure on jobactive staff.

In this context, this study explored the experiences of mature age jobseekers and the employment services staff who assist them. Importantly, the study developed online learning resources at [www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au) and proposed policy recommendations to respond to some of the challenges identified.

### The study and this report

Previous research on mature age workforce vulnerabilities highlighted multiple challenges facing this age group (McGann et al. 2015, p. 5). Building on these findings, this study aimed to:

- understand the perspectives of mature age jobseekers, jobactive staff and employers
- identify strategies to respond to their concerns
- develop resources to assist jobactive staff to better assist mature age jobseekers.

This report focuses on the perspectives of employment services staff. It draws on 32 semi-structured interviews conducted with jobactive staff in four employment regions in Melbourne with high mature age unemployment. Two complementary reports focus on the perspectives of mature age jobseekers and employers.

## Summary continued

### Key points

Employment services staff want to assist mature age jobseekers, but they are caught between the contractual obligations to deliver jobactive, the needs of mature age jobseekers and employers, and the constraints of a competitive labour market.

Business imperatives, compliance with the contract and enforcing mutual obligation requirements can get in the way of providing quality support to jobseekers. Nevertheless, this study has identified clear areas for improvement.

From our interviews with employment services staff, we identified the following issues:

#### Prompt and flexible services are vital

In a changing and highly competitive labour market, some groups of mature age jobseekers are likely to need early intervention to avoid becoming long-term unemployed.<sup>1</sup> Yet many—especially those who have been made redundant—have been unemployed for months before they are referred to jobactive.

Mature age jobseekers need more support, yet jobactive staff have limited time or professional discretion to assist them. Identifying their transferable skills, developing their (varying) IT skills and providing tailored help requires time. However, with the current caseloads, according to one interviewee, ‘They get a 30 minute session; it’s not good’.

Given their risk of long-term unemployment, mature age jobseekers even in Stream A should be able to access tailored support from employment service providers immediately, rather than having to find work by themselves with only limited support in the first six months.

The next employment service contract should allow for prompt, flexible and tailored responses to particular cohorts such as mature age jobseekers, with smaller case loads, more time to work with individual jobseekers and less emphasis on ticking off compliance. Delays in accessing income support due to a redundancy payment or existing liquid assets should not delay access to meaningful assistance from public employment services.

#### Assessment of needs could be improved

While age is part of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument, the JSCI does not adequately capture the particular challenges facing many mature age jobseekers, especially in a changed labour market.

Mature age jobseekers are often misclassified into Stream A, which provides funding for only light-touch, mainly self-help services. According to the jobactive staff we interviewed, reclassification is a difficult and lengthy process, which delays providing jobseekers with the level of assistance they need.

Staff highlighted the importance of assessing jobseekers’ skills but did not have the time or the know-how to do so and, especially in the case of Stream A jobseekers, lacked resources to refer them to other experts such as job coaches.

#### Jobseeker skills assessment should be complemented by training linked to employment

Interviewees tended to generalise about mature age jobseekers’ limited computer skills and lack of motivation to engage in training. They felt that, in part, jobseekers’ perceived reluctance to undertake training reflected a lack of confidence that it would lead to employment.

Employment services staff need professional development in the identification of transferable skills and career counselling, especially for mature age jobseekers who are changing occupation or industry.

Staff should also have sufficient discretion to access training that responds to jobseeker skills and interests, while ensuring that it has clear links to local job opportunities. In the short term, there should be greater flexibility in using the Employment Fund to assist jobseekers.

The next employment services contract should enable improved skills assessment of all jobseekers, especially mature age jobseekers, with a focus on transferable skills, relevant training and suitable job vacancies. This would require training of employment consultants to help them identify broad and specific skills and so better assist jobseekers.

<sup>1</sup> From 1 July 2018, the department will introduce a range of initiatives to increase assistance to jobseekers aged 50 years and over, including a new [Career Transition Assistance program](#); expansion of the [National Work Experience Programme \(NWEPP\)](#) with incentive payments for host businesses and providers; and a series of [Pathway to Work pilots](#).

## Summary continued

### Understanding and collaborating in local labour markets is essential

In addition to skills assessment and career guidance, interviewees highlighted the need for tools and strategies to build their understanding of local labour markets—where the jobs are, and are likely to be in the future.

Employment services staff require up-to-date, accessible information about local labour markets. The federal Department of Jobs and Small Business<sup>2</sup> could provide lists of mature age-friendly employers by region (based on the now-defunct Corporate Champions program). Building on existing analyses on the Labour Market Information Portal, the department should provide quarterly local labour market overviews with trends in occupations and industries to assist providers in advising jobseekers and approaching employers.

The current contract has not provided sufficient incentive to bring about effective collaboration between jobactive providers. Given limited resources and job opportunities, providers should be encouraged to collaborate rather than compete. The next employment services contract should be designed to foster local collaboration among providers and other services as part of an overall local economic development strategy. This would enable sharing of vacancies that cannot be filled by a jobseeker within a provider's case load.

### Recognising and fostering diversity and inclusive employment

jobactive staff face challenges assisting mature age jobseekers, whom interviewees perceived as a difficult group, often lacking motivation and confidence.

Previous research has highlighted mature age jobseekers' experience of age discrimination when dealing with employment services. This study found that jobactive staff also reported age and gender discrimination from mature age jobseekers. According to some interviewees, younger staff 'didn't know how to deal with' mature age jobseekers, especially those who were angry or frustrated.

Interviewees stressed the need for improved intergenerational understanding and for training in strategies to more effectively support mature age jobseekers.

The next employment services contract also presents the opportunity to include features within a flexible program to meet the needs of groups such as mature age jobseekers. It also could require diverse workforces at providers, to better respond to the complex pool of jobseekers.

### Employer engagement presents challenges

Employment services face a hard task in promoting unemployed candidates to employers. Many employers are reluctant to give older jobseekers a chance, according to interviewees. 'Employers have the ball in their court', as one interviewee put it. jobactive staff outlined five main reasons for the challenge of approaching employers:

- the increase in competition: more applicants for fewer jobs
- mismatch between the low-level vacancies identified by jobactive providers and the characteristics of many mature age jobseekers
- employers' reluctance to recruit mature age jobseekers especially for jobs that require physical abilities or IT skills
- insufficient opportunity for jobactive staff to engage with employers and convince them to take on mature age applicants
- the lack of interest from employers in the wage subsidy Restart, which is designed to encourage them to employ mature age workers.

Our research with employers suggests that the stigma of unemployment is a greater impediment than mature age alone<sup>3</sup>.

Under the current contract, providers have access to a pool of wage subsidies, including Restart for jobseekers aged over 50, but staff had mixed views on its attractiveness to employers. Some jobactive staff we interviewed argued for greater flexibility in the use of the Employment Fund to allow them to offer to pay wages to cover a two-week trial for mature age jobseekers.

<sup>2</sup> This department was known as the Department of Employment until December 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See complementary report drawing on interviews with employers.

## Summary continued

Some staff mentioned positive campaigns to encourage employers to take on mature age applicants, such as the Corporate Champions program. However, these messages did not seem to be reflected in the interviewees' direct experience of employers' recruitment practices.

To overcome these obstacles, employment services staff need more time to understand employers' needs and match suitable jobseekers with vacancies. They may also need training in strategies to promote mature age jobseekers—and related incentives such as Restart—to employers.

### Next steps

This and associated reports highlight the contradictions that limit the effectiveness of assistance offered to mature age—and other—jobseekers.

The current jobactive contract ends in 2020. There is an opportunity in the short term to strengthen support for jobactive staff and mature age jobseekers, in the medium term to inform the development of the next contract, and in the longer term to contribute to a re-imagining of assistance for unemployed workers—whatever their age.

This is one of three reports on mature age jobseekers and jobactive. Other reports focus on jobseeker and employer perspectives. Together the research informed <[www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au)>, This website was designed to shed light on the situation of mature age jobseekers and build empathy, explain the changes to the labour market over the past four decades, and provide tools for mature age jobseekers and those who assist them.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The latest iteration of Australia's outsourced public employment services is jobactive. Commenced in July 2015, it is delivered by a network of contracted for-profit and not-for-profit providers in over 1700 locations. Most jobseekers on income support will have their needs assessed by Centrelink and will then be referred to a service 'stream' (A, B or C) depending on their 'readiness for work'. Unless exempt, jobseekers need to meet 'mutual obligation' requirements (e.g. entering a Job Plan and looking for up to 20 jobs per month) to keep receiving income support (Department of Employment 2016c).

jobactive was planned to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the employment services network, placing more jobseekers in work while reducing the administrative burden on providers (Department of Employment 2015b).

However, what initially appeared to be a positive change has failed to live up to its promise. Under this new contract, jobactive providers are expected to do more with less. The size of case loads has increased, there is greater emphasis on outcome payments and there is a heightened focus on performance and compliance through quarterly Star Ratings. The proportion of not-for-profit organisations offering employment services declined (Department of Employment 2015c), despite their closer bonds to local communities (Jobs Australia 2015). High case loads are one factor putting increased pressure on jobactive staff.

## Employment services: increased administration and higher caseloads

The challenges faced by employment services staff are well recognised, especially in relation to the support for the most disadvantaged jobseekers such as mature age jobseekers.

Under the current employment services contract, jobactive staff are seeing on average over 18 jobseekers a day, according to the *Survey of frontline employment services staff* (SFESS) (Lewis et al. 2016). That study found that jobactive staff had less time to engage with both jobseekers and employers to provide tailored support and source suitable jobs. They also spent one-third of their time on compliance. Furthermore, employment services staff tended to have lower qualifications than community sector staff in

general (Lewis et al. 2016), which may reflect the reduced scope for professional discretion and a focus on policies and processes (Giuliani 2016).

According to the SFESS, over half of jobactive staff considered that their first priority was to help jobseekers find employment quickly in order to cease claiming Newstart Allowance. And more than two-thirds 'felt very strongly that management in their agency would advise clients to take the low-skill, low-paying job' (Lewis et al. 2016, p. 25). The increased number of jobseekers on jobactive providers' case loads reflects the smaller number of providers (reduced from 79 to 44) and employment services sites (down from 1889 to 1719) under the current contract (Jobs Australia 2015). There have also been more people claiming Newstart Allowance (an 11% increase from 2013 to 2016) (Department of Social Services 2016).

The increased time spent on contractual compliance and other administrative matters means that staff have very little time to support the diverse needs of individuals such as mature age jobseekers.

Policy initiatives that recognise the particular challenges of mature age employment, such as the Restart wage subsidy for employers who hire people aged 50+ years, have produced limited results to date.<sup>4</sup> Planned initiatives include the Career Transition Assistance Program, which is to be trialled in five locations from 1 July 2018, ahead of a national rollout scheduled for 2020. While these are welcome, the extent to which they will be integrated into employment services, rather than added on, is unclear.

In this context, providing the support required to find sustainable employment is extremely difficult, especially for those experiencing disadvantage in the labour market, such as mature age jobseekers.

## Mature age jobseekers and the labour market

The world of work has changed considerably since those now aged over 45 first entered the labour force. Technological change, with automation of routine jobs; increased global market competition and the rise of transnational corporations that enable offshoring of jobs; and social change, with more women participating in the labour force, have combined to dramatically change the

<sup>4</sup> By 30 November 2015 nearly 2900 mature age job seekers had commenced in a job with the help of Restart. (Department of Employment submission to AHRC Willing to work inquiry, p. 13)

## Introduction continued

labour market. The past forty years has seen a shift towards fewer low-skilled manual jobs, an increased requirement for post-compulsory educational qualifications and a significant increase in casual, contract, labour hire and part-time jobs (ABS 2011).

Recruitment practices have also changed. The Department of Employment's 2014–15 Survey of Employers' Recruitment Experiences shows that among employers surveyed, 48% of all vacancies were advertised on the internet, by far the most popular recruitment method in Australia (Department of Employment 2015a). The use of social media to advertise was low (5%) but is on the rise. Only 9% of jobs were advertised solely through newspapers and this percentage continues to decrease.

Mature age workers have been hard hit by these labour market and recruitment changes.

Although mature age unemployment is lower than the youth unemployment rate, mature age jobseekers tend to remain unemployed for longer. Their average duration of unemployment is nearly twice as long as for those aged 25–54 and three times as high as for those aged 15–24 (Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016). The longer they remain out of work, the more difficult it is to get a job. Long-term unemployment fuels a loss of self-confidence and, for some, anger at what they experience as an unfair situation (Wickramasinghe & Bowman 2018).

Previous research suggested that this age group is more likely to require tailored support from employment services staff to appreciate their 'perspective, skills, and experience' (McGann et al. 2015). Yet jobactive staff have less time to assist the growing number of mature age jobseekers in a labour market where manufacturing industries are in decline and competition for jobs is fierce.

One of the findings of the ARC Linkage study *Understanding workforce vulnerabilities in midlife and beyond* study was that 'The employment services system ... is not adequately equipped to support mature age jobseekers to find work' (McGann et al. 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, it identified three factors that affect mature age jobseekers who rely on employment services:

- a white-collar support gap, with a tendency to direct jobseekers to 'entry-level' work despite their previous occupations, skills or interests
- unconscious bias due to the age discrepancy between mature age jobseekers and young employment services frontline staff
- a perceived systemic lack of care for mature age jobseekers' circumstances, which was reinforced by strict adherence to protocols and compliance requirements.

In addition, that study suggested that mature age jobseekers were seen as difficult to place and were therefore liable to be 'parked' by employment services.

Building on the findings of the earlier study, the present study aimed to understand the perspectives of mature age jobseekers, jobactive staff and employers regarding employment services, and to identify strategies and develop resources to support jobactive staff to better assist mature age jobseekers.

This report focuses on the interviews conducted with jobactive staff.

## 2 RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a primarily qualitative approach to get a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of jobactive staff. Some Department of Employment quantitative regional data was analysed to ascertain the broad characteristics of mature age jobseekers that jobactive staff assist and the context in which jobactive providers operate.

### Ethics approval

Approval to conduct this research was gained from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's NHMRC-accredited human research ethics committee.

### Geographical scope and recruitment

The study focused on four employment regions in suburban Melbourne with high mature age unemployment. Nine jobactive providers in these areas were invited to participate in the study; eight agreed to participate (five not-for-profit and three for-profit providers).

### Interviews

In 2016, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with jobactive staff during work hours, 30 on site and two by phone. Of the 30 face-to-face interviews, 28 were conducted in a room that had been booked by the site managers, and two in an open plan area. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

The interviews for different staff roles had specific objectives:

- Employment consultants were interviewed to understand the type of support they provide to mature age jobseekers, the main challenges they face and the type of training that would help them to perform their jobs.
- Business development officers were interviewed to understand their role in sourcing jobs and engaging with employers to identify suitable jobs, and to identify the gaps in jobactive staff capacity and the changes at a system level that would be required for them to better support mature age jobseekers.
- Site managers were interviewed to gather information about the jobactive provider site in terms of organisational structure, and number and age of employees, in addition to the themes explored with the employment consultants and business development staff.

The interviews also included four questions selected from the Recruitment Consultants and Services Association Employers and mature age jobseekers survey. This survey, conducted in 2005 and 2015, examined private recruiters' and employers' perspectives on recruiting mature age jobseekers. The questions selected from the 2015 survey explored (1) definitions of mature age; (2) level of agreement with stereotypical statements about mature age workers; (3) level of agreement with anecdotal statements of employer attitudes to mature age jobseekers; and (4) the extent to which job descriptions refer to age, personality or physical ability. We do not detail the responses separately; rather they inform our overall findings.

### Sample characteristics

In total, 32 interviews were conducted at 14 sites, with eight providers and across four employment regions, involving:

- 12 site managers
- 8 business development staff
- 12 employment consultants.

The jobactive sites in this study reflected the diversity of providers. For example:

- all 14 sites were part of larger organisations, with 38 to 93 other sites nationally
- the number of Victorian sites operated by these organisations ranged from 8 to almost 40
- the total number of staff members on site ranged from 3 to 9.

Just over three-quarters of the jobactive staff working at the 14 selected sites were younger than 45 years and 42% were aged under 35. This compares with 65% aged less than 45 in the *Survey of frontline employment services staff* (Lewis et al. 2016, p. 11) which has a sample of 1233 jobactive staff from 32 different agencies across Australia.

Research method  
continued

**Characteristics of the interviewees**

More women (23) than men (9) took part in the study, which reflects the gendered nature of employment services. Most interviewees (75%) had worked in the sector for more than two years, and 40% had a bachelor's or master's degree (see Figures 1 to 3).

Figure 1

**Gender of interviewees**

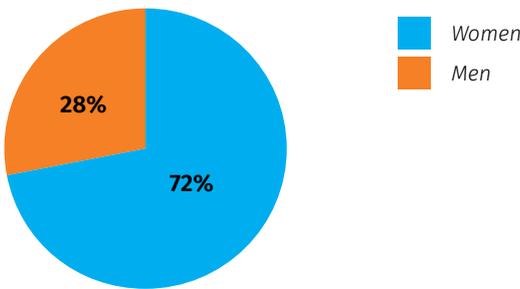


Figure 2

**Highest educational qualification**

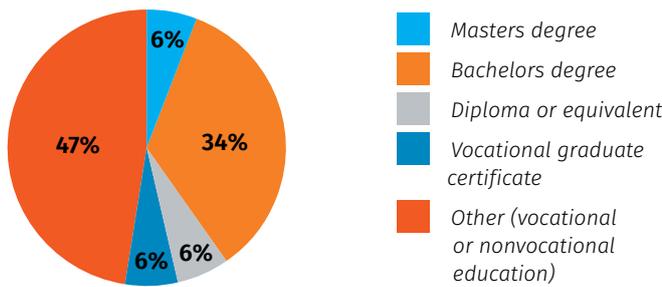
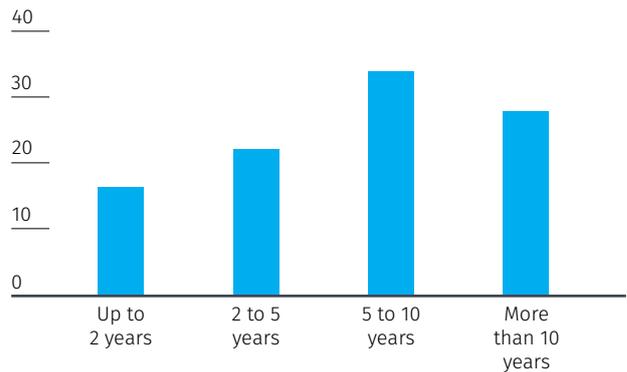


Figure 3

**Years working in employment sector**

**Percentage**



**Analysis**

Firstly, the interview audio recordings were de-identified and transcribed. Then the transcripts were carefully read to identify the key themes. A coding framework was developed to analyse the data thematically. Initial findings were discussed by the research team and were then shared with the Research Advisory Group, whose feedback enabled further refinement.

**Limitations**

The jobactive sites in the sample framework were selected based on their location by the research team. However, the staff members interviewed were put forward by the site managers, which may have led to a bias towards employees with a good track record in dealing with jobseekers in general and mature age jobseekers in particular.

Conducting interviews in their workplace may also have led jobactive staff to consciously or unconsciously temper their opinions about supporting mature age jobseekers. However, the confidential nature of the interview may have reduced this concern.

### 3 CONTRADICTIONARY PRESSURES

One of the department's key performance indicators for jobactive providers is that 'jobseekers find and keep a job' (Department of Employment 2017a). Yet jobactive's focus on short-term outcomes limits providers' ability to recognise the strengths and needs of mature age jobseekers. While the Job Seeker Classification Instrument recognises age and other factors, it does not have a particular focus on the challenges facing mature age jobseekers. As a result mature age jobseekers may too often be classified as Stream A (attracting lower funding and outcome payments), which means there is little incentive for providers to invest time in assisting them. These systemic contradictions compound the challenges facing staff seeking to help mature age jobseekers in an increasingly competitive labour market. We consider each of these issues below.

#### Focus on short-term outcomes undermines ability to assist mature age jobseekers

Under the jobactive contract, 60% of the payment made to providers is based on placement outcomes (Jobs Australia 2016). Providers' performance is also monitored through Star Ratings. Every three months the performance of each site is assessed against those of all other providers nationally (Department of Employment 2017b). Their Star Ratings ranging from 1 (lowest performance) to 5 (highest performance) depend on their 12-week outcomes, 26-week outcomes and Work for the Dole placements. Time to placement, compliance and collaboration among providers are also part of the assessment. Providers with a rating of 2 or lower at the 18 and 36 months points of the jobactive deed (June 2017 and December 2018) are likely to have part of their case load of jobseekers transferred to better performing providers (Department of Employment 2017b).

Thus, jobactive staff must place as many jobseekers as quickly as possible in jobs or in Work for the Dole activities (80% and 20% weightings in outcome payments respectively). A business development officer explained that 'getting [mature age jobseekers] to work as quick as possible' was his goal because there is 'the pressure of the contract, and also the Star Rating'. He did not see age as a specific barrier to work for jobseekers:

*... it's not because you have a barrier [like age] that's going to stop you working ... like everyone else, go to work.*

For this jobactive officer, a barrier was an excuse—and there was no room for excuses. In part this illustrates the way the term 'barrier' as shorthand for specific challenges in the labour market has lost its meaning. It also reflects the constraints of the jobactive contract and the lack of consensus on the definition of mature age jobseekers or the challenges they face.

#### Jobseeker classification understates mature age needs while reducing the incentive to assist them

The stream in which jobseekers are classified affects the level of funding allocated to jobactive providers to help them. Importantly, stream classification also determines the outcome payment the provider receives when a jobseeker obtains work.

The Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) is used to measure a jobseeker's relative difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment and helps identify what level of support the jobseeker requires to find work. The factors identified to assess the capacity 'for a job seeker to find and maintain employment' include 'age, gender, recency of work experience, jobseeker history, educational attainment' (Department of Employment 2016b).

Following their registration with Centrelink and employment services, jobseekers are assigned to one of three streams:

- Stream A is for the jobseekers who are the most job-competitive and require minimal assistance to find work.
- Stream B is for jobseekers who have vocational issues and need assistance to become work-ready.
- Stream C is for the most disadvantaged jobseekers who may have a combination of vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment.

Stream A jobseekers enter into Self Service and Job Activity Phase from their commencement with employment services, which means they get very little support. By contrast Stream B and Stream C jobseekers enter into Case Management Phase<sup>5</sup> (Department of Employment 2016b).

The JSCI has attracted considerable criticism (OECD 2013, p. 154). Interviewees in this study also reported inaccurate and inconsistent streaming, with mature age jobseekers

<sup>5</sup> Initially the exception was to be young jobseekers who are subject to Stronger Participation Incentives, subject to legislative changes being passed.

mostly classified as 'job-ready' in Stream A, disregarding the particular challenges they may have in finding work. 'They're all coming in the Stream A', observed one employment consultant. She added, 'I think a lot of mature aged should be coming as Bs, not As'. A veteran site manager commented that mature age jobseekers:

***should be in Stream B to account for the additional support they require to find a job. Stream As jobseekers cost less to the government because their training rights are limited and the outcome payment is lower as well.***

Some incorrect streaming of mature age jobseekers could be due to the wording of some key questions in JSCI. According to an employment consultant with 12 years experience in the industry, the question 'What have you been doing predominantly over the past two years?' leads to a lot of confusion:

***First of all not all of them understand what this word 'predominantly' means, second it is quite vague and jobseekers would tick the 'work' box even if they've only worked three months per year.***

Several wording issues have been identified and are to be improved (Department of Employment 2016b). However, the accuracy of the streaming may also be affected by the growing number of JSCI assessments done over the phone or online. According to the Department of Social Services (2016), in 2015–16, 50 per cent of the 2.2 million JSCI assessments were automated (Broadhead & Milliken 2016).

Jobseekers may not feel comfortable disclosing sensitive information (such as mental health issues or a criminal record) over the phone, which may lead to misclassification. According to the interviewees, reclassification is a lengthy process and is not easy to do. A site manager explained:

***Once a jobseeker has been classified into a stream by phone/online it takes 6 months for [them] to be reclassified, which hardly happens. So these people remain on the case load of jobactive providers as 'job-ready' whereas they aren't and should be in Stream B or C.***

## Classifications and contracts

As noted, the stream in which a jobseeker is classified influences the level of outcome payment to jobactive providers, which are a combination of:

- the jobseeker's location (within or outside a major city/town)
- whether the wages enable them to come partially or fully off income support payments
- how long the jobseekers have been unemployed
- how long they remain employed (4, 12 or 26 weeks) (Department of Employment 2017c).<sup>6</sup>

Because 60 per cent of jobactive providers' revenues are derived from outcomes (Jobs Australia 2016), there is an incentive to optimise their returns by concentrating on the most rewarding jobseekers.

A relatively new employment consultant explained that there were few incentives to focus on mature age jobseekers:

***Like I said, mature age [jobseekers] have been on the backburner. It's not been my main focus because they don't really put that pressure on us. It's all about placement, placement, placement. Who is young? Who is fit? Get them off the books, get them into this job and get a placement.***

An experienced manager whose site is among the best performers admitted that the efforts of his team were concentrated on the 26-week outcome payments for Stream A jobseekers, which are 'significantly generating revenues'. He added that for this group, 'quantity prevailed over quality of job placements'. In other words, because the individual outcome payments are low for Stream A jobseekers, few resources can be spent on carefully matching a person with a suitable role. Instead, jobseekers are encouraged to adopt a scattergun approach in the hope that they will get a job.

This approach might work for individuals with few barriers to employment, but mature age jobseekers in Stream A can find themselves being 'parked' by jobactive staff, because they are hard to place into work. An employment consultant observed: 'They sideline them. They park them'.

<sup>6</sup> There are three main types of outcome payments in jobactive. The provider receives:

- a 4-Week Outcome payment if a job seeker is placed in a job, remains employed for four weeks and reduces their income support payments by an average of at least 60 per cent
- a 12-Week Outcome payment if the job seeker remains employed for 12 weeks and continues to reduce their income support payments by an average of at least 60 per cent
- a 26-Week Outcome payment if the job seeker remains employed for 26 weeks and reduces their reliance on income support by 100 per cent.

## jobactive staff have limited time to support mature age jobseekers

One reason why mature age jobseekers may be sidelined is that employment consultants are under pressure, with rising caseloads and little time. One of the consultants explained:

*Employment consultants, through no fault of their own, don't have a lot of time, and I think mature aged people actually need a bit of time, and a bit of understanding ... they need to tell their story a lot more than others do ...*

He added, 'They're flat out. They're seeing God knows how many people a day'.

Furthermore, jobactive staff are obliged to do more in less time, as another employment consultant elaborated:

*They get a 30-minute session; it's not good. In that appointment we're meant to make sure their Job Plan's suitable, we're meant to refer them to positions ... we've got on the database, we're meant to scan their job search, calculate their job search for Centrelink — there's a lot you've got to do in 30 minutes ... [The old] contract was 45 minutes, this contract is 30 minutes.*

Nevertheless, all jobactive staff talked about the importance of boosting the confidence of mature age jobseekers. For example, an employment consultant commented, 'There's a lot of prep work and building them up a little bit, giving them pep talks'. But this takes time; and in the current jobactive system time is limited.

Interviewees also identified the need to take time to develop 'empowering' strategies. A relatively new business development officer talked about empowering mature age jobseekers to do their own job search:

*They need to look for their own work as well, it's not just our job. Our job is to refer them, they need to be doing their own job search. But [they need] some skills on selling themselves and being able to say to employers, 'Hang on, yeah I am mature age but I can offer you this and this'. For them to actually be confident in their abilities and not go, 'Okay, well you're just going to choose a younger person anyway, why do I bother?' So I think that would make a massive difference, and that would help them out. I see it with a lot of them, they just give up. It's sad.*

Some jobactive staff referred to employability and confidence boosting programs that had stopped because of reduced funding. Several organisations had delivered such programs 'for people that are job-ready but they haven't quite got over the line'. But they noted these had not been specifically targeted to mature age jobseekers.

## Frontline staff have fewer opportunities to directly engage with employers

As a result of restructures following the new employment services contract, in many organisations the responsibility of engaging with employers has been further centralised in the hands of business development officers (or equivalent roles). This reorganisation appears to have been designed to allow employment consultants to focus on frontline management of jobseekers.

Many organisations now share business development officers across several sites or employment regions. In some instances, these employees specialise in specific industries or employer sizes. Nevertheless, most employment consultants reported insufficient support in sourcing suitable employment opportunities for the jobseekers on their caseloads. One consultant with five years experience explained the difficulty of such a centralised system:

*For this particular contract we don't have a BDC [Business Development Consultant]. We have one between 10 sites. It's ridiculous. So one vacancy will come out and then within 30 minutes the vacancy is closed.*

She added that because the centralised approach increases competition for vacancies, employment consultants are forced to source suitable jobs themselves, even if they lack the skills to reverse market:

*We have one [BDC] in the team. So if you're good at reverse marketing and it's common to pick up the phone then it's your job to also to do that as well. Not every consultant likes that type of work. It's like cold calling. It's hard. It's very, very hard. I actually do it because I'm used to being out on the road so it's my advantage. But for others this would be very, very difficult.*

Nor do these staff engage face to face with employers, as a newer employment consultant observed: 'I suppose if my role wasn't so deskbound, I would meet with employers. Over the phone it's a little bit harder to influence somebody'.

## Contradictory pressures continued

Most of the interviewees reported a determination to assist mature age jobseekers into jobs despite the obstacles. But promoting mature age candidates to employers is 'a daily challenge', according to a business development officer. The hardest part is to have 'a chance to explain, to give the inside of their story, their background'. Even when jobactive staff are granted such an opportunity there is still 'quite a limited chance for them to go through'.

Some employment consultants attempted to avoid the issue of age by only referring those mature age jobseekers who looked younger than their age. For example, a consultant with eight years experience stated:

*I'll still try referring. If I see that somebody doesn't look their age, I will prep them for the interview; and I will try because sometimes ... the age won't matter once they meet the person and they talk to the person and they go: 'I really like that person. They'd be great. They'd fit in really well'.*

In the face of apparent employer reluctance to consider older applicants, jobactive staff reported trying to 'educate employers without being patronising', as an older business development officer put it. He added: 'If they've sort of insinuated something on the phone, I might ignore it, in a nice way, and just send that candidate anyway. There's been times when that candidate got the job'.

### Convincing employers requires specific skills and time

jobactive staff also highlighted how difficult it can be to convince employers to give mature age jobseekers a chance. One interviewee explained that she would contact employers only if she had a good relationship with them:

*Then, you know, as a favour they'll be like, 'Yeah, alright I'll meet them'. But if you've just done a cold call, 'Come on, do me a favour, come and meet the client, I promise', they're going to be like, 'Stop wasting my time, I've got stuff to do'.*

With less time and fewer opportunities to engage with employers to source jobs, jobactive staff have increasingly used labour hire companies to place their jobseekers. Labour hire has grown considerably over the past 10 years as a consequence of employers streamlining and outsourcing their recruitment process especially in industries that typically offer casual and manual work, such as hospitality, construction, personal care and warehousing. Yet interviewees in this study emphasised that labour hire jobs are not suitable for many mature age jobseekers. Indeed, an experienced site manager stated that his staff would not even put forward applications of mature age jobseekers for labour hire warehousing jobs:

*We are not going to give them a mature age jobseeker, because there is a risk of previous injury impacting their ability to work, speed at which they work, factors like that.*

“

jobactive staff also highlighted how difficult it can be to convince employers to give mature age jobseekers a chance.

## Changed labour market doesn't match the supply of mature age jobseekers

Interviewees highlighted the impacts of the considerable labour market changes since current mature age jobseekers first started work. As a business development officer observed: 'It's just industries are dying down, industries closing down ... there were more full-time positions and now it's changed'.

These changes mean that it is harder to assist mature age workers into employment. A site manager with 13 years experience reported the constant 'struggle' for the staff to place jobseekers, compared with a decade ago:

*Back when I first started, seriously I used to get eight placements a week, eight a week that was huge. And ... our targets back then were 20 a month, so I used to blitz it. But today I look at my consultants and I think they're trying, and they try so hard, and they're lucky to get maybe two or three a week.*

The closure of automobile manufacturing facilities has particularly affected workers in the employment regions covered by the study. A business development officer highlighted the combined impact of moving industries offshore and technological change:

*There's a lot of stuff that's going offshore now, so it's just your manufacturing is kind of moving more towards your services, and I'm talking about warehousing and all that sort of stuff. So the industry is beginning to shift quite a bit because most of our manufacturing is going overseas, because one it's a lot cheaper, and two you don't need to have as many people to do one job, and again, the machines that are coming into the country, they're all computerised.*

When asked to respond to stereotypical statements about mature age jobseekers, interviewees tended to agree that 'Mature age jobseekers have outdated skills'. They also tended to agree that 'Mature age jobseekers lack IT skills'.<sup>7</sup>

These attitudes may reflect the type of mature age jobseekers that these jobactive staff assist. For example, an employment consultant with five years experience in the industry explained:

*We've got a lot of people who are ex-factory workers. A lot of them have been working for [the company] their whole lives. They're not going to get a job in the car industry because there's no car industry in Melbourne or Victoria anymore ... They're very difficult to reskill ... I know the government is trying to provide a lot of incentives—but a lot of their skills are outdated.*

## From experienced to non-certified workers

Occupations that previously did not demand formal qualifications now require certificates and licences. This can make it difficult for jobactive staff to refer mature age jobseekers to employers, even if they have the relevant skills and experience. An employment consultant gave the example of jobseekers in administration:

*It can be really hard ... to prove to the employer that a mature age jobseeker has up-to-date experience in administration. They need to have Certificate III or IV or a Diploma in Business or Administration. Most mature age jobseekers don't have these qualifications despite having done over 10 years, 15 years of administration.*

Some industries such as warehousing and construction have adopted a national licensing system to ensure workers performing high-risk tasks have received the same training. For example, in Victoria, all licences of construction workers issued between 1 July 1995 and 30 June 2007 expired progressively up to 30 June 2012 and workers have since been expected to gain formal qualifications through a registered training organisation (WorkSafe Victoria 2017).

Yet jobactive staff reported that many mature age jobseekers had been working for decades without a licence and, despite their skills and experience, could not pass the current licence test, due to their low English and/or literacy levels. A site manager with 15 years experience explained:

*So in the past, you do construction work, you didn't have to have the white card. Or a lot of them that did warehousing work knew how to drive a forklift but didn't have to have a licence. So now that they have the experience, because of their language they're not able to pass the test.*

<sup>7</sup> Sixteen statements about mature-age workers (5 positive and 11 negative) were tested with jobactive staff. The response options varied from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree. These statements were drawn from the Recruitment Consulting and Services Association (RSCA)'s *Employers and mature age jobseekers survey 2015*.

## Contradictory pressures continued

An experienced employment consultant noted that even crane drivers did not need certificates in the past:

***But now they need the licence ... They still have to go through the process of making sure that they know the OHS, all the whole thing. So just because you've done it for 20 years doesn't mean you're going to get it just as easily as someone that's never done it before.***

The requirement of formal qualifications disadvantages mature age jobseekers. Without processes to recognise their informal learning, experienced workers are considered to be unskilled. Those with poor English language and literacy skills are further disadvantaged, despite their on-the-job experience.

### Limited digital skills

A lack of work-related digital skills was identified as a key challenge for most of the mature age jobseekers that interviewees see. Some staff held the view that all mature age jobseekers have very limited skill in using computers. For example, a business development officer commented:

***They don't like computers, full stop ... They just don't feel comfortable looking, they can't deal with the internet, they don't know how to search for jobs, any basic things. If they want to apply online for things, they don't know how to attach things—just basics—and they have a real fear of it. So they say, 'No, I don't want to do that'. That limits them finding work, obviously.***

For some mature age jobseekers, gaining even basic digital skills was a challenge. They needed the opportunity for practice and repetition, which some staff found frustrating. For example, a site manager recounted how staff repeatedly showed jobseekers how to create an email account, but they still came back saying, 'I don't know how to open the email'.

Other staff recognised that learning new skills takes time, as another site manager explained:

***If you are consistent, ask them to write down step by step, and let them do it rather than you doing it for them, then that's how they learn. Because when they make a mistake, they will remember it next time. But it takes you a lot of time ...***

The trouble is that the current system does not allow staff the time required to work with mature age jobseekers to identify skills gaps and opportunities.

### Impact of labour market changes on mature age jobseekers

To some extent, interviewees recognised the personal impacts of labour market changes on mature age jobseekers. For example, having to change occupation or industry can be deeply unsettling, especially if the change is combined with a loss of status and pay. In this situation, a site manager observed that mature age jobseekers could unintentionally appear as 'know-it-alls'. He explained:

***I've had a lot of people ... that have failed interviews because of that. They've just come in and talked about all the changes they want to make, and it's hard for them just to accept, particularly for people that might have been at a senior level in the past and they're transitioning to a different industry or whatever.***



The requirement of formal qualifications disadvantages mature age jobseekers. Without processes to recognise their informal learning, experienced workers are considered to be unskilled.

Additional challenges stemmed from the erosion of the standard employment relationship (full-time permanent work with entitlements) and the rise of subcontracting and the gig economy. Subcontracting effectively transfers various costs and associated risks to the individual (Fair Work Ombudsman 2017). For some mature age jobseekers, the associated technological challenges were daunting. For example, an employment consultant recounted the case of a mature age handyman for whom he had identified an employer wanting to offer him a job as a subcontractor. The handyman was reluctant because he felt overwhelmed by the online processes (email etc.) involved in operating as a contractor, explaining, 'It's over my head'. The consultant observed, 'If the employer decided to employ him under the business, [there would be] no problem'.

The importance of retraining was emphasised by interviewees, but some reported encountering reluctance from mature age jobseekers to take up training opportunities. For example, an experienced employment consultant reported often hearing jobseekers say: 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks'. He expressed some frustration with this attitude, observing:

***We're moving into an environment where there is constant reskilling. It's just a part of any workforce now that people need to reskill, people need to be more adaptable to changing work environments. I think that [the times that] you just got a job and that's what you did for 20 years, they're few and far between now.***

On the other hand, according to our interviews with mature age jobseekers, the training available is inadequate and is often not directly linked to employment (see Wickramasinghe & Bowman 2018).

### **Changed recruitment processes**

Recruitment processes have also changed considerably since mature age jobseekers entered the workforce. And, according to the jobactive staff we interviewed, mature age jobseekers have been slow to adapt to these changes. An employment consultant with almost ten years experience described mature age jobseekers' approach to looking for work as 'trying to put a video cassette in a DVD player' and added, 'They're trying to get a job but using their 70s job searching skills'. Another, younger employment consultant said her 'biggest concern' was that all 87 mature age jobseekers in her case load were looking for work using a newspaper.

At the same time, interviewees recognised the impact of the depersonalised and complex online recruitment channels. For example, a mature age employment consultant with eight years experience observed:

***Now, you have to go online, you can't talk to anybody. There's five different steps of process of getting in, between assessment and group interviews and one-on-one [interviews], and police checks and this and that ... Mature aged jobseekers are having a lot of trouble with all the jobs that are through recruitment agencies because they make you jump through hoops.***

The trend towards impersonal recruitment processes may be amplified by the steady growth of recruitment outsourced to labour hire companies. An older business development officer reflected on the growth in labour hire:

***I had a four-year gap from Job Network and I've come back and I'm thinking, wow, it's not how it used to be ... A lot of organisations that used to hire direct go through labour hire companies.***

A site manager observed that labour hire employers prefer younger workers, even if they have less experience. He added:

***It's about fulfilling the employer's needs, and it's a very fast-paced, here-and-now type industry. When it's labour hire, working with their employers, their clients, they are not looking at career progression ... They are wanting the quick money here.***

In a competitive market, long-term unemployment further disadvantages mature age jobseekers; and 68% of mature age jobseekers on Newstart in the areas in this study had been unemployed for more than 12 months (Department of Employment 2016d). An employment consultant commented:

***Everything is going through a labour hire company and they need someone with the last six months experience on their résumé and a lot of our [mature age] jobseekers don't have that.***

She added that in the current employment services contract there is a focus on organising recruitment en masse through group interviews, which is 'very hard for the mature age jobseekers' to go through.

## Contradictory pressures continued

### Supporting mature age jobseekers within the current Employment Fund guidelines

Responding to mature age jobseekers' particular circumstances takes time and resources. The Employment Fund is intended to provide funds to meet the needs of jobseekers. The Department of Employment describes the fund as:

*a flexible pool of funds. Each Provider receives credits which they can use to claim Reimbursement for goods and services that genuinely support and assist jobseekers to gain the tools, skills and experience they need to get and keep a job (Department of Employment 2017e).*

However, interviewees referred to constraints in accessing funds. For example, a younger employment consultant with three years experience noted that the '13 million dollars in the Employment Fund' are 'sitting there' and the amount will be lost 'if we don't use it'. She raised her concerns about not being able to access this money even if 'you can justify how it's going to help someone get paid employment'.

When interviewed in 2016, a site manager noted that the guidelines were much stricter and more complex than the previous contract: this, he argued, limits jobseekers' access to suitable training:

*We've got pretty strict guidelines as to what we can pay, what we can't pay. Before it was pretty much like if it's for a job, that's it, pay for it, pay for any training course, anything. We've had people go through say a Certificate II, couldn't get a job, did a Cert. III; but now it's a bit more strict on how you go about it. So forklift licences and stuff, we were able to just pay for things, now we have to get a letter from the employer and submit it to the Department of Employment, and it gets complicated.*

jobactive staff also highlighted the restriction of approved funding to training that is accredited: 'We don't have that much flexibility to work around it' commented another site manager.

The particular challenges facing mature age jobseekers with respect to training or retraining were also recognised. As one interviewee put it:

*If someone's spent their life as a bricklayer, they're qualified as a bricklayer. It's hard to get*

*them to qualify as something else without costing them a fortune.*

Interviewees observed that the Employment Fund guidelines limited subsidised work experience trials to Stream C jobseekers, even though many mature age jobseekers in Stream A or B would benefit from them. A business development officer explained:

*We can't actually say to the employer, 'Hey, why don't you try this person out for two weeks, see what you think. We can reimburse a part of your pay for this candidate.' That's been removed. So that sort of funding I think is quite crucial to allowing a mature age worker to, you know, to give that person the best shot in the job ... I think that really helped.*

Some jobactive staff also talked about being unable to cover transport costs such as car registration or car repairs. One employment consultant observed that jobseekers 'couldn't maintain it [their car] on Centrelink [benefits]' and this affected their ability to travel to work. As another explained: 'So you've got a 10-minute drive or an hour bus trip'.

These funding constraints limit the support jobactive staff can provide to jobseekers. 'As far as any extra help, it's not there if the funding's not there', concluded one employment consultant.

While there have been some recent changes in the rules governing the use of Employment Fund monies (published in July 2017), there is still concern that the administrative rules are too onerous and act as a barrier to its use.<sup>8</sup>

The recently announced Careers Transition Assistance Pilots may address some of the issues facing mature age jobseekers who need to change occupations or are re-entering the labour force after some period out of it. But there is a need for greater flexibility in the ways employment service providers can assist mature age jobseekers.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, speech by Ed Husic MP (House of Representatives 2017, Debates, p. 6308).

## 4 STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

jobactive staff are intermediaries, seeking to get people into work and off income support. They need to engage with government (for which they are agents), jobseekers and employers. This is often not easy or comfortable. Interviewees highlighted the challenging nature of their interactions with some mature age jobseekers and the reluctance of some employers to give older jobseekers a chance. At the same time, contractual compliance and routinisation of their work have compromised the ability to exercise their professional discretion.

### Who is the client?

jobactive providers act as delegates of the Department of Employment. They are expected to make decisions for each jobseeker in accordance with social security law and to require them to enter into a Job Plan, and approve or update their plan (Department of Employment 2017a). At the same time they are also expected to engage with employers. Not surprisingly, there can be confusion about exactly who their clients are. For example, a business development officer explained:

***At the end of the day, my job is to work with the clients, which is the employers, and also working with our clients to help them to get a job [...] it's hard because I'm the middleman.***

Another employment consultant who had only recently started working for a jobactive provider expressed her confusion about the role of providers and Centrelink:

***I would love if a Centrelink manager came out on site and told us exactly what it is that they require of us and what it is that they do, because [we are] getting handballs from our office to Centrelink, 'Oh, that's Centrelink's problem', and then [they are] palming it back and saying, 'No, that's their [provider's] job'.***

Staff also referred to the powerful roles of Centrelink and the JSCI, which determine the support that can be provided. For example, an employment consultant observed: 'That's what Centrelink decides, we only ever service people the way we're told to service them'. He acknowledged that 'it could be bad, because they're not getting any extra assistance'. This sense of processing jobseekers was echoed by a site manager who observed that employment consultants 'don't consult, they just process, they button-push'.

These remarks reflect the contradictions inherent in jobactive. The key aim of employment services is to 'promote stronger workforce participation among people of

working age and help more jobseekers move from welfare to work' (Department of Employment 2016a). Yet the services are constrained in how they can assist jobseekers to achieve sustainable employment.

### Working with mature age jobseekers is challenging

Most jobactive staff interviewed reported that some mature age jobseekers could be challenging. They referred to an uncooperative attitude that was manifested in apparent impassivity or aggression. For example, one employment consultant recalled:

***I've had one [person] really, really gone off at me about a month ago. Really gone off. She's the same age as me and—to the point where I nearly had to call the police. But that's the thing, and she's in here today and she's apologised.***

Interviewees attributed this attitude to a combination of factors, including the age discrepancy between mature age jobseekers and some jobactive staff, and gender discrimination towards women staff. For example, a veteran employment consultant with nearly 30 years experience noted mature age clients attempting to 'pull rank' on younger staff members. An experienced female site manager reflected on hostile interactions with older jobseekers, especially older men who she felt tended to judge her by her looks, despite being only 'about five years older than me', and say things like: 'You're like my daughter. How dare you come and talk to me like that? ... How dare you tell me to stop drinking?'

Some younger staff felt intimidated by mature age jobseekers, which affected how they interacted with them, according to an older employment consultant:

***I notice some of them just don't know how to deal with it at all. And they will tend to just do a very 'cosmetic' appointment and 'We'll see you in two weeks', because they really just don't know how to deal with it. And they don't know how to push the person a little bit and [say], 'Okay, well you've come here, you're pretty rude and you don't want to work. But guess what? ...'***

This interviewee added that it is important to 'not take things personally' because 'Often anger is the first reaction to change', which for 'younger people ... is harder if they haven't had that experience or worked in a job where they've been exposed to it'.

Other interviewees highlighted the value of having work and life experiences to empathise and connect with older jobseekers. A relatively new business development officer noted that ‘Some mature aged people just don’t even want to talk’ to an employment consultant in their 20s. She felt that age was an asset when working with mature age jobseekers: ‘Because I’m a little bit older, I end up getting a bit more rapport going with them and let them know we actually are there to help’.

Reflecting on their work with mature age jobseekers, some staff emphasised complying with mutual obligations regardless of the challenges. However, most interviewees mentioned the need for compassion and understanding.

jobactive staff also pointed to some of the systemic and labour market issues that face mature age jobseekers. For example, the time between losing a job and receiving assistance to find another can be ‘soul-destroying’:

***They’ve been retrenched from a job that say they’ve been in for 30 years, and they don’t know anything else, and they’re suddenly told to go and find their own job for three months.***

This delay in receiving employment services support diminishes confidence. As a business development officer pointed out, ‘By the time they get here, they’ve been looking for work for ages, so they’re fairly disgruntled and feel that they can’t [find it]’.

Some interviewees emphasised the importance of early intervention programs, as soon as mature age workers are at risk of becoming unemployed. A ‘pre-mature age program’ could address the risk of mature age workers not being able to continue in their current roles due to personal issues such as reduced physical capabilities or broader issues such as technological change or offshoring.

The challenging attitudes of some mature age jobseekers were explained by some interviewees as a ‘lack of motivation and confidence’ and a feeling of ‘being too old’ to get another chance to work. A site manager reflected:

***I suppose the key characteristic for a lot of our mature aged clients is definitely the low motivation and the stigma that comes around being a mature aged client ... The majority of them have the idea that no-one will hire them because of their age. And I suppose that’s something that you do unfortunately hear from employers.***

Interviewees also noted that mature age jobseekers are exhausted by the struggle to meet their mutual obligation requirements and the little hope they have of finding a job. For example, another site manager reported:

***We get a lot of people coming in that are disheartened and depressed and full of anxiety because they haven’t had a response. ‘Oh I’ve sent 20 résumés and no-one’s gotten back to me’ ... I see a lot of people in their mid to late 50s ... and I ask ‘Why have you been unemployed?’ ... ‘Oh I tried applying, I couldn’t get anything, I was too old, and no-one wanted to hire me, so I just thought what the hell’s the point of sending all these out’—and they’ve given up.***

Staff felt that for some people who had started working as teenagers, the difficulty of finding another job simply made them give up. A site manager with 10 years experience observed:

***They’ve worked from when they were 17; they have turned 50, that’s enough for them. They might have—you know, paid off their homes ... and they are just happy to sit on Centrelink until they are eligible for the age pension.***

In a sense, this kind of assessment lets employment services staff off the hook: because they perceive some mature age jobseekers as happy to ‘sit on Centrelink’, they don’t feel compelled to assist them to get work.

Interviewees also noted some differences between male and female mature age jobseekers. Some reported that lack of confidence was more acute among mature age women. Yet mature age women were also perceived as having an ‘I can do that job, kind of attitude’, as a site manager put it. ‘They don’t have so much that sense of entitlement. It’s more a sense of well, who’s going to employ me?’ added an employment consultant.

A veteran site manager referred to the mature male jobseekers he worked with as socially ‘isolated’ and ‘insular’. He observed that ‘male pride’ disadvantaged these men: ‘Women ask for help when there is a professional problem, whereas men tend to ignore it or fail to articulate problems’. Disillusioned men would often say to him: ‘I’m too old for these jobs, I don’t want to engage in society, I really don’t want to get involved’.

An employment consultant observed that unlike men who have spent longer in the full-time workforce, women may not be ‘tired from working’. Many women had been

in and out of the workforce and were perceived as 'more flexible in terms that they're more open to new learning', as another interviewee put it. This positive attitude may also reflect employment growth in 'female-dominated' sectors (Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016).

According to these interviewees, mature age men are most affected by a contradictory and counterproductive sense of entitlement and resignation. A young employment consultant found this attitude frustrating:

*[Mature age men] are the ones that normally give me the whole, 'I've been working, I've been paying my taxes, you know, I can take money from Centrelink'.*

jobactive staff need to be understanding and responsive while also complying with contractual obligations and mutual obligation requirements. Some interviewees expressed frustration with the challenges of assisting mature age jobseekers and focused instead on requiring them to meet their mutual obligations. For example, an employment consultant explained how she spelled out these obligations:

*[I say:] 'Unfortunately there are certain rules, so if Centrelink are going to pay you an income you have to do this to earn that income. If you're not happy doing this, you need to take yourself off Centrelink and we're all done and dusted'.*

Yet not all jobactive staff felt strong enough to have this kind of tough talk. Some reported feeling 'helpless' when facing difficult or uncooperative behaviour. Others sought explanations for the negative attitudes and behaviours. Most of the staff interviewed appeared to have some empathy with mature age jobseekers; for example a site manager acknowledged:

*... it is a very hard thing for somebody to come through Centrelink. You are dealing with pride, especially for someone of mature age [who has] sort of looked after themselves for how many years now. To have to go to Centrelink isn't a nice thing, it's not designed to be nice for anyone.*

Jobseekers up to age 55 must apply for 20 jobs a month to meet their mutual obligation requirements. However, it is 'definitely an employers' market' (Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016), which makes it increasingly difficult to find jobs for mature age jobseekers. As a site manager with 13 years experience observed, 'It's now just so hard'.

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jobactive staff need to be understanding and responsive while also complying with contractual obligations and mutual obligation requirements.

## Stuck in the middle continued

### Finding jobs for mature age jobseekers is difficult

Five main reasons for the difficulty in finding jobs were identified by jobactive staff:

- increased competition for jobs and a mismatch between vacancies sourced for jobactive providers and the characteristics of mature age jobseekers
- employers' reluctance to recruit mature age jobseekers, especially in certain industries and occupations
- insufficient time and opportunities for jobactive staff to engage with employers
- failure of the wage subsidy Restart to deliver on its promises
- competition between providers, which works against collaborative approaches.

### Competition for jobs is fierce

A highly competitive labour market gives employers a powerful advantage: they can pick the best candidate from a large pool of applicants. As an employment consultant observed, 'It's very competitive. So employers have the ball in their court about who they pick'.

Most vacancies jobactive staff can access are not suitable for the mature age jobseekers they see, according to our interviewees. A relatively new employment consultant observed: 'All the vacancies that are coming through our site' are for 'someone young and fit, that can lift 20 kilograms, that can sit on the forklift'. This staff member concluded: 'Vacancies are not fit for the clientele ... they are all targeted to [prime age] males. It's all warehousing, it's all labouring'. Another with eight years experience agreed about the lack of fit with the mature age cohort: 'The vacancies coming through are ridiculous'.

### Recruitment is affected by discrimination and the 'right person for the job'

When asked 'Do you think employers are now becoming more or less receptive to hiring mature age workers?', most of the interviewees responded 'more'. They mentioned the impact of advocacy and campaigns such as the Corporate Champions program or the Restart wage subsidy. However, this more positive employer attitude towards mature age jobseekers does not seem to be reflected in the interviewees' direct experience of recruitment practices.

The jobactive staff stressed that despite anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation most employers were quite clear about the characteristics of the people they



Most vacancies jobactive staff can access are not suitable for the mature age jobseekers they see, according to our interviewees.

wanted to employ. For example, a site manager observed: 'They have an idea of the ideal person and their age, their sex ... they ask for that, that's what they want'. According to these interviewees, employers state their preferences verbally to jobactive staff. An employment consultant explained:

***Look, I wait for the day where mature aged jobseekers can easily have the same opportunities as the younger ones. I do. Because they've got a lot to offer. A lot to offer. But they just don't get that opportunity because an employer will say unofficially (because they know they can't say it officially in a job ad): 'I don't want anyone over 45 or 50'.***

This discrimination against mature age jobseekers is mainly from employers in 'industries requiring physical work', according to several interviewees. A site manager explained that placing mature age jobseekers 'in process working, meat packing, that kind of thing, events, catering [is very difficult as] it's too heavy. They're not going to be able to do it'. He recounted a situation where he had recommended a mature age candidate who met the criteria for a job in meat packing, but the employer refused, saying: 'Nah, he's 45, out, out'.

The best fit was often employers' most important consideration when hiring staff, especially for small and medium businesses. A site manager explained:

***So employers, I don't think they care whether someone's 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, they just want the best person for the job. I think even the low-level business owners know that recruitment's expensive, losing people is very expensive, replacing people is expensive, that you need to get the right person.***

In practice, a focus on 'fit', narrowly conceived, can reinforce discrimination and undermine efforts to encourage diverse workforces. Even in large companies, finding the 'best fit' tends to prevail over strategies to minimise turnover and implement diverse recruitment policies, according to a business development officer. Some interviewees noted that large retail chains such as Bunnings, Coles and Woolworths were recruiting mature age workers to appeal to their customers. Nevertheless, there was a consensus among interviewees that it was hard to persuade other large companies to take on mature age jobseekers. As a site manager explained:

***Larger companies are the hardest to place people in, whether they're mature aged, [live with] disability, whatever. They've got the highest expectations, you know they get the most applications, the competition is harder.***

According to the jobactive staff interviewed, assisting mature age jobseekers to find jobs in the public sector is also difficult, despite workforce diversity policies. A site manager stated:

***They've got every corporate social responsibility, disability inclusion, diversity inclusion plan under the sun. But actually actioning it, I've seen very little results over my years. The public service is by far the toughest place to place any of our clients into. Whether that's DES [Disability Employment Services] or JA [jobactive], it's always been the toughest place to get into.***

### **Incentives like Restart are insufficient to boost employers' interest in recruiting mature age workers**

Restart is a wage subsidy designed to encourage employers to employ mature age jobseekers (Department of Employment 2017d). While some interviewees were enthusiastic about Restart, others suggested that the subsidy had not delivered on its promises<sup>9</sup>. For example, a business development officer observed that for 'most employers' the wage subsidy does not play a crucial role in their recruitment decision-making; they 'just want the right person'.

Part of the problem may be that employment services staff do not understand the subsidy enough to explain it to employers. A site manager observed that some jobactive staff struggle to outline the advantages of such a program:

***So it's awesome, the government gives you \$10,000 for hiring someone over 50, they (employers) say 'Oh why?' They [jobactive staff] can't explain it. And if you go into 'Oh it's because they're not that good', well that's not how you promote someone to help them get a job. You need to explain it's because they're transitioning into a new industry, it's going to take them a little bit longer to pick up the skills. Not because they're mature age, but because they're transferring from a completely different industry, and this is the subsidy.***

<sup>9</sup> The planned evaluation for Restart is yet to be released.

## Stuck in the middle continued

However, interviewees again highlighted employer concerns about getting the right person for the job. A site manager stressed that a misfit could actually cost the employer: 'You can get \$10,000 for someone, but if they're not the right fit, they're going to cost you money'.

Employer concerns about physical fitness for manual work and the risk of taking on a mature age worker who could be injured also overrode any incentive, according to some jobactive staff. As one interviewee put it: 'Employers will turn around and say "I want somebody who can actually physically do the job. I don't really care about the money"'.

Another reason for the low take-up of Restart was that 'employers don't like to commit, especially for non-skilled jobs, they just want you to work casual for them', as an experienced site manager observed. Employers now have to wait twelve rather than six months to receive the subsidy. Another site manager explained that employers do not want to risk investing time in a candidate who might not be a good fit:

***Instead of six months, now I have to wait and commit myself to somebody that I'm not quite sure whether that person will fit in the role, because yeah, you can assess, but it has to be a 12-month journey.***

Yet this interviewee and others acknowledged that the extension to 12 months also reduces the likelihood of employers letting the mature age jobseeker go at the end of the period and hiring someone else to benefit from another wage subsidy. Some employers even considered re-hiring the same workers, according to another site manager:

***I had an employer call me and say, 'I'm interested in this Restart, everyone I employ happens to be over 55, or whatever it is, anyway. Can I sack them all and rehire them and get Restart?'***

Several site managers referred to the administrative burden of subsidies like Restart. As one put it, 'there is a hell of a lot of paperwork required from the employer's perspective'. Another commented:

***Every three months they've got to supply payslips, do a tax invoice and then got to wait for them to process it. I think a lot of people can't be bothered, they get busy.***

This site manager added that the fixed requirement of 15 hours worked per week might deter employers: if the number of hours falls for any reason 'the employer doesn't get anything'. In addition, as low-skilled jobs are mostly sourced by labour hire companies, 'not many of those wage subsidies get to term and get to be paid at maturity', according to another site manager.

Smaller businesses could be more interested in the wage subsidy, as the \$10,000 'does make a difference on their bottom line' according to one site manager. However, another felt that small businesses might struggle more to comply with the administrative requirements because 'it's just too time-consuming'.

### Competition rather than collaboration prevails

In the current contract, collaboration among providers is rewarded through a 'Collaboration bonus' (Department of Employment 2017b). This is a performance measure related to Star Ratings that provides a 10 per cent bonus payment on 12-week outcomes that have been achieved through collaboration (Nous Group [2016], p. 7). Interviewees did not seem to consider it sufficient for them to share the vacancies they cannot fill. Of the 14 sites visited for this study, only one reported actively participating in regular meetings with other local jobactive providers to share vacancies and place as many jobseekers in work as possible.

When asked why collaboration among jobactive providers was rare, interviewees gave one main reason: the intense competition among providers under the current jobactive contract. A site manager explained:

***We see other providers as our competition, and they are, so it's kind of foreign to us to think, let's work together, because we don't work together, we compete against them.***

Another stressed the potential risk of stronger collaboration:

***But why would we want to give a vacancy to a competitor, that they can place someone in? Yes it's beneficial for the client and ... yes we want to help people. But why would we give it to a competitor when that's going to help boost their performance and then reduce ours, and put our staff at risk?***

Some jobactive providers prefer to let vacancies expire rather than sharing with their counterparts, as another site manager explained:

***Coordination across the board would be fantastic, if it was just uniform and everyone just helped each other ... we've probably got vacancies right now that we can't fill [from] our case load, they're just going to disappear ...***

## 5 LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR JOBACTIVE STAFF TO SUPPORT MATURE AGE JOBSEEKERS

The research highlighted the need for providers to be resourced to strengthen the training and knowledge of jobactive staff.

More precisely, jobactive staff identified four things that would assist them to support mature age jobseekers:

- intergenerational awareness
- understanding local employment growth sectors and identifying jobs
- identifying transferable skills
- strategies and tools to promote mature age candidates to employers.

### Intergenerational awareness

jobactive staff highlighted the need to improve intergenerational understanding. Some staff could be 'a bit intimidating' and 'quite condescending' towards mature age jobseekers, as an employment consultant reported. Another talked about her role in drawing the attention of younger colleagues to the issues mature age jobseekers are facing:

*In order to build mature aged jobseekers' confidence, younger consultants need to understand how it used to be and how it is now to try and empathise. Put yourself in their shoes and then that way when you have all that information you're able to start to build their confidence.*

At the same time some staff identified a need to learn how to manage negative or hostile attitudes from some mature age jobseekers towards younger team members.

### Understanding local employment growth sectors and identifying jobs

Some jobactive staff wanted to understand more about local labour markets and sectors of job growth. For example, a site manager who had worked for several not-for-profit and for-profit providers observed that people who start working in employment services get 'zero labour market training. They'll only get it if their direct manager decides to give it to them'. Because of this and because few have a 'commercial recruitment background or HR background', they are ill equipped to understand relevant labour market trends or opportunities.

### Identifying transferable skills

The staff also talked about their need to learn how to identify jobseekers' transferable skills. In some organisations, jobseekers are referred to a psychologist to assess their skills but some interviewees were eager 'to learn that and be able to do that rather than referring on' (employment consultant). An understanding of transferable skills combined with a greater knowledge of labour market trends would help employment services staff to better assist mature age jobseekers.

### Strategies and tools to promote mature age jobseekers to employers

Finally, most jobactive staff wanted to learn how to successfully promote mature age jobseekers to employers. Specifically, they needed to consolidate their knowledge of how to cold-call an employer and promote a mature age jobseeker. A employment consultant with 15 years experience explained that in her organisation they 'do have training in reverse marketing, but it's pretty general'. She needed to know how to pick up a phone to a stranger and say, 'Hey I've got this guy for you, have you got a position?'

The four learning opportunities for employment services staff outlined in this chapter have been partly addressed in online resources developed as part of this research project at <[www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au)>.

This website was designed to shed light on the situation of mature age jobseekers and build empathy, explain the changes to the labour market over the past four decades, and provide tools for mature age jobseekers and those who assist them.

## 6 IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

jobactive staff are caught in the middle between jobseekers, employers, the Department of Employment and Centrelink. They are ill equipped to provide the tailored support mature age jobseekers need (Lewis et al. 2016; McGann et al. 2015), particularly in a highly competitive job market.

Nevertheless, this study has identified clear areas for improvement. Some, such as the gaps in training for jobactive staff, could be addressed within the current employment services contract. Others, such as increased incentives for collaboration between providers or an early intervention scheme for all occupations at risk, could become the key features of the next contract which is due to start in July 2020.

### Prompt and flexible services

The next employment service contract should allow for more flexible and tailored responses to particular cohorts such as mature age jobseekers, with smaller caseloads, more time to work with jobseekers and less time required for compliance.

Some groups of mature age jobseekers need early intervention to avoid becoming long-term unemployed. In addition, the JSCI should be reviewed to capture the particular challenges facing mature age jobseekers.

Given their risk of long-term unemployment, mature age jobseekers even in Stream A should be able to access tailored support immediately, rather than having to rely on finding work by themselves with only limited support from Employment Providers in the first six months. Delays in accessing income support due to a redundancy payment or existing liquid assets should not delay access to public employment services.

### Skills assessment complemented by training linked to employment

The next employment services contract should also require more detailed skills assessment of all mature age jobseekers, to identify their transferable skills and enable better matching with relevant training and with job vacancies. Careful assessment of computer skills is particularly important for this age group. Staff should also have sufficient discretion to access training that responds to jobseeker skills and interests, while ensuring that it has clear links to local job opportunities. In the short term, there should be greater flexibility in using the Employment Fund to assist jobseekers.

### Recognising and fostering diversity and inclusive employment

Staff in employment services also need access to professional development especially in relation to the identification of transferable skills and career counselling.

The next employment services contract also presents the opportunity to include, within a flexible program, features to meet the needs of groups such as mature age jobseekers. Providers could also be required to have a diverse workforce, to provide a better match with the complex pool of people they serve.

### Employer engagement

Employment services face a hard task in promoting unemployed candidates to employers. Our research with employers suggests that the stigma of unemployment is a greater impediment than mature age. Employment service providers need time and resources to engage with employers and understand their needs so as to match suitable jobseekers with vacancies. Staff also need to learn more about strategies to promote mature age jobseekers to employers and about the range of incentives that are available to employers (such as Restart).

### Local labour market intelligence

Employment services require up-to-date, accessible information about local labour markets. The federal Department of Jobs and Small Business could provide lists of mature age-friendly employers by region (building on the now-defunct Corporate Champions program). Through the existing Labour Market Information Portal, the department could provide quarterly local labour market overviews with trends in occupations and industries to assist providers in advising jobseekers and approaching employers.

### Fostering collaboration

Given limited resources and job opportunities, employment service providers should be encouraged to collaborate rather than compete. Under the current contract, even though there is a collaboration bonus, competition is encouraged through the Star Rating system.

The next employment services contract should be redesigned to foster local collaboration among job service providers and others as part of an overall local economic development strategy. This would enable sharing of vacancies that cannot be filled by a jobseeker on a provider's case load.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This report has considered the perspectives of employment services staff who are faced with a difficult task of assisting jobseekers, engaging with employers and monitoring mutual obligation requirements. In a competitive and changing labour market, they are stuck in the middle with big case loads, too little time and too few resources.

The changes proposed could make their task easier and perhaps more effective; but a broader focus on economic development is required to address unemployment and create opportunities for mature age and other jobseekers.

Underemployment is growing and an increasing number of people in receipt of Newstart Allowance are employed, but cannot get enough work to make do. In the short term it is important to increase Newstart Allowance to a level that is adequate for people to live decently while looking for work. In the longer term, a policy priority is to review Australia's social security system taking into account the changed nature of work, which, for many, no longer provides economic security.

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