



Sidelined!

Workforce participation and non-participation among baby boomers in Australia

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Withdrawal from the labour force is not always a choice of baby boomers¹. Many would like to continue working or to work more hours. Recent research from the Brotherhood of St Laurence has highlighted the widespread and damaging nature of involuntary non-participation and under-participation for older people. As Helen Kimberley and Bonnie Simons pointed out in *The Brotherhood's social barometer* (2009, p. 10), 'there is substantial risk of poverty' caused by involuntary non-employment and underemployment. In addition, a longitudinal study we are undertaking in partnership with the Melbourne Institute about the job pathways of disadvantaged jobseekers (Bowman & Clarke forthcoming) highlights the particular challenges facing older workers and job seekers.

Sidelined! reports on a qualitative study that was undertaken as part of an initial inquiry into the contours of mature-age workforce participation in Australia.

Key points

- **Workforce non-participation and retirement:** Participants in this study who were not participating in the workforce or who were underemployed did not regard themselves as retired or semi-retired. Rather they were looking for work, albeit they are not included in the unemployment and underemployment statistics.
- **From stable to precarious employment:** The most common work trajectory exhibited in this study was of stable employment earlier in working life giving way to insecure, low paid, part-time and casual jobs. This pattern correlates with structural change and workforce deregulation over the past 30 years.

- **Responsibility and risk:** The interviewees in this study all began their working lives in what could be seen as a more benign work environment, where employers took greater responsibility for managing risks faced by employees such as ensuring they were trained on the job. Baby boomers are having difficulty in understanding and adjusting to the increasing transfer of risk from the collective to the individual.
- **Underutilisation of accumulated skills and experience:** Large reservoirs of knowledge and experience remain largely untapped by the labour market. Because older adults may lack formal qualifications, their skills tend to be ignored by employers who increasingly require qualifications even for quite basic work.
- **Age discrimination:** Direct and indirect age discrimination in the workforce or in recruitment is a common experience.
- **Hard physical work:** Work-related disability and injury resulting from physically demanding jobs often cause early exit and can restrict work options for mature-age workers. Without the acquisition of other skills or qualifications, job opportunities are often extremely limited.

Background

Concern about mature-age workforce participation has been increasing over the past few decades as the first of the baby boomers approach retirement age. It tends to stem from three main sources:

- the forecast increase in the dependency ratio
- the high level of age discrimination that Australian workers experience

¹ The term 'baby boomers' refers to those born in the postwar years from 1946 to 1965 who, in 2010, were aged 45–64.

- the mismatch between the kinds of jobs that are available and the skills and abilities of older workers.

These three areas of concern are interrelated. The economic imperative is to encourage workers to remain employed as they age, but individual workers who seek to do this may encounter discrimination and discouragement and—in the absence of job redesign—a lack of suitable job options, especially for those with diminished physical capacities.

This study is one of three complementary research elements. First, we contracted the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to undertake an analysis of Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Wave 8 survey (2008) to better understand the contours of participation (see Gong & McNamara 2011). Building on this evidence, we then developed this qualitative study, in which we asked 10 interviewees to reflect on their working lives since leaving school, their current circumstances and their future aspirations. Finally, to set these findings in historical context we briefly reviewed the social, cultural, economic and political landscape over the past 50 years to better understand the changing context of the working lives of Australian baby boomers (see Berrell 2011). Each aspect of the research provides different insights into the workforce participation of mature-age Australians.

Research methodology

Expressions of interest to participate in the project were invited through union, community, employment and older-people organisations. Ten interviews were completed in three main baby boomer cohorts: 45–54; 55–59; and 60 plus.

The 10 interviewees all lived in Victoria and ranged in age from 47 to 71 years. Nine interviews were conducted by telephone and one face-to-face. Semi-structured interviews were conducted around three main sections. The first section focused on gaining some insight into the interviewee's background and current circumstances (employment, family situation, education, housing, etc.); the second section focused on exploring their working life (when and why they left school, employment trajectories, experience, understandings of what shaped their working lives); and the final section focused on future aspirations (retirement, family activities, employment, etc.).

Research findings

Baby boomers are diverse

The stereotypical view of baby boomers as 'successful and self-satisfied' (Hamilton & Hamilton 2006, p. 11) does not hold among participants in this study. Their work trajectories are diverse and shaped by the intersection of individual factors such as gender, education and class with social, economic and political factors that determine the availability and nature of paid work.

Gina² (63) came to Australia from Italy when she was two years old. She is 'a mother of three and a grandmother of seven'. She was brought up in rural Victoria, where she met and married her husband. They had a farm, but with the high interest rates of the early 1980s they were 'forced to sell and come to Melbourne'. When her children were young, Gina worked as an outworker making garments at home and then worked in factories sewing. Gina was not employed at the time of the interview. She said, 'Who would want to employ a 63-year-old woman?' Gina's husband is retired.

Fifty years of change

Baby boomers have lived through periods of social, economic and technological change that have shaped their experiences and expectations about work and family roles and responsibilities. There are now different jobs on different terms from when they first started on their working lives. Many baby boomers find it hard to secure employment because the 'rules of the game' have changed.

Carole (58) is married with adult children. The daughter of European migrants, Carole was born and raised in suburban Melbourne. Although she had won a scholarship, she insisted on leaving school at the end of Year 9, but at her father's insistence she completed a secretarial course. She worked as a secretary but left that job when her second child was born. Having been out of the workforce during the computerisation of workplaces, she lacked the skills to return to administration and secured a job as a care worker in a supported accommodation facility. Subsequently she worked as a cook in a childcare centre but was made redundant when the centre was acquired by a national chain that outsourced food preparation. Since then she has held a series of ever-lower-skilled jobs and at the time of interview was working as a casual sandwich hand while looking for a better job.

² Names and personal details have been changed.

Deregulation of the workforce has led to increasing numbers of baby boomers having access only to jobs offered on a casual, temporary or part-time basis.

Baby boomers want to work

The interviewees in our study are ordinary, working-class Australians. Most of the men have had long periods of stable employment but have more recently worked on a casual—often ‘permanent casual’—or short-term basis. The early working lives of the women tended to be shaped by their family care responsibilities, which in turn have shaped their job opportunities in later life.

Among the 10 research participants, only two had full-time ‘permanent’ jobs, two worked on a casual or short-term basis and one had a permanent part-time job. All of the interviewees, whether employed or not, wanted to work, and often wanted to work more hours; but not surprisingly, this depended on the nature and conditions of the job.

Transfer of risk

Economic and workforce reforms over the past 50 years have been characterised by the interrelated processes of individualisation, financialisation and globalisation. These changes have entailed the uneven transfer of risk from the state to the individual. The increasing casualisation of the workforce reflects a shift in risk from employers to employees, as employers manage wage costs by forcing casual employers to manage uncertainty of time (due to uncertain and irregular hours) and income.

***Trevor** (64) was born in the United Kingdom and came to Australia when he was three. His father was a carpenter. They moved to a country town when he was a young boy and he ‘schooled there and did a plumbing apprenticeship’ and then moved back down to the city to get additional work. Since then he has had ‘maybe eight or so jobs’. His most recent job was driving trucks, which he ‘thoroughly enjoyed’, for five years on a ‘permanent casual’ basis, but he lost that job when he needed time off. He says this ‘was a bit unfortunate ... and I haven’t worked since then’. Trevor is married with adult children. He lives with his wife who works part-time.*

Underemployment or involuntary withdrawal from the workforce increases the risk of poverty in old age because accumulated resources are drawn down prematurely to meet day-to-day living costs. Those who are not home owners face insecure, unaffordable housing. Increasing numbers of older single women

who have experienced financial disadvantage through divorce and separation are at risk of homelessness.

Gender, work and family structures

The financial consequences of divorce, especially for women, can be severe. In part this is because of the disadvantage women experience in the paid workforce and in part because of how the family home is treated in Australian economic and social policy. Home ownership is a key buffer against poverty, especially in older age. Divorce can mean the loss of the family home and a move to private rental, which tends to be expensive and insecure.

***Jocelyn** (58) emigrated from Canada almost 30 years ago. She met her husband, married in Australia and had a son, who is now in his early 20s. Jocelyn worked in the ‘family business’ with her husband, but since her divorce she has had a number of temporary jobs. At the time of the interview she had been working as a medical receptionist for three months. The pay was poor, ‘just enough to cover the rent and pay a few bills’. Not surprisingly, she felt insecure financially and was looking for a better paid, more stable job.*

The credentials trap

Formal qualifications are increasingly demanded for even the most basic of jobs. As a result, baby boomers without formal qualifications are unable to obtain jobs that recognise and utilise their accumulated knowledge and experience. Also, because casual employment or non-participation in the workforce usually precludes access to education and training that is timely, relevant and affordable, many baby boomers become locked into low-paid, insecure and irregular employment, often at ‘entry level’, despite their skills or abilities, accumulated knowledge and experience.

***Mac** (52) lives with his long-term partner on a small farm in rural Victoria but ‘raising beef cattle isn’t very intensive’, and ‘doesn’t keep you nearly busy enough’. He has no children. He left school at 16 but returned a year later to undertake a certificate in agriculture. He then completed further qualifications in horticulture and worked as a greenkeeper for 30 years. Since his last greenkeeping job, he has had several part-time jobs but has found it hard to obtain a job that suits his skills and interests. Despite putting in for ‘20 or 30 jobs’, he believes that employers ‘don’t even bother to read job applications from anyone aged over 50’ and prefer younger workers ‘because they can boss them around’. He was not employed at the time of the interview.*

At risk of poverty

It is important to focus on enabling approaches because people in their late 40s can expect to live for at least another 30–40 years. If they exit from the workforce prematurely and involuntarily, they will have accumulated fewer assets. Furthermore, they will soon exhaust savings in meeting the costs of day-to-day living³. As they move into deep old age they will have very few resources to meet health and care costs and their risk of poverty and social exclusion is increased.

Conclusions and implications

Involuntary workforce non-participation and under-participation in mature age have significant social and financial effects on quality of life in later years, including on health and wellbeing—not least because of the resulting poverty.

The needs of mature-age workers have remained relatively unexamined and unmet, even though this age group accounts for a significant percentage of those who are long-term unemployed or underemployed, or who have exited the workforce involuntarily.

Concurrent with this study, the federal government was introducing a number of initiatives to assist mature-age workers. These include skills assessment and training for those with trade skills; subsidies to employers for the engagement of mature-age workers who had been unemployed for two years or more; and the expansion of the Experience Plus program. However, eligibility for most of the government-sponsored programs is dependent upon formal unemployment status and therefore excludes the much larger number of mature-age workers who are underemployed or involuntarily not participating in the workforce but are ineligible for unemployment benefits.

In addition, the federal government has also established the Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians and appointed an Aged Discrimination Commissioner.

It remains to be seen how effective these government initiatives will be in developing appropriate, sustainable jobs for mature-age Australians; implementing age discrimination policy; recognising and utilising the existing knowledge and experience of mature-age Australians; and enabling their greater participation in gaining qualifications.

A key aim of future research at the Brotherhood will be to examine the outcomes of these initiatives and to inform the development of preventative strategies and policies designed to enable mature-age Australians to obtain and keep decent jobs that contribute to individual wellbeing and national productivity.

References

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About the project

This study is a collaborative project between the In and Out of Work and the Retirement and Ageing research teams at the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

For further information

The full report, *Sidelined! workforce participation and non-participation among Australian baby boomers* by Dina Bowman and Helen Kimberley, is available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website at <www.bsl.org.au/publications>.

The following complementary studies are also available:

Workforce participation and non-participation among baby boomers in Australia by Cathy Gong and Justine McNamara (quantitative report)

Workforce participation and non-participation among baby boomers in Australia: a life-course outline and literature review by Nicole Berrell (research support document).

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³ The current liquid assets test for eligibility for Newstart Allowance is \$3000 for singles and \$6000 for couples.
www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/newstart_ia.htm