Ageism at Work: Older Workers and the Emerging Labour Market

CAG Symposium: Barriers to Employment in Later Life
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Background

- Older workers make up an increasingly large share of the Canadian labour force.
- The definition of “older” worker varies by industry, health status, appearance, etc.
- Older workers take considerably longer than younger workers to find work when unemployed.
Background

- Many older workers want or need to work longer, but this requires employers hiring and retaining them.
- There is an increasing necessity for employers to rely on the employment of older workers.
- There is little qualitative research that investigates the views of older workers and employers.
Study #1

- Older Worker Study
  - Interviews with 30 older workers (aged 45-65)
  - Unemployed for three months or longer and actively searching for work
  - Range of industries
Study #2

- Employer Study
  - Interviews with 26 employers
  - Small and large companies
  - Range of industries
Findings

1. Older Worker Study
2. Employer Study
3. Linking Older Workers’ Perceptions and Employers’ Attitudes
As someone who was employed for a number of years in various different positions, I felt very much respected and valued and treated well. No question at all. But I find that it is a very different picture when, for whatever reason, you are in the job market at that particular age.
Findings: Older Worker Study

- Sensing the “Age Factor”
Older Worker Study
Sensing the “Age Factor”

I had a course that they (employment agency) provided for experienced workers… It made me very much aware of what’s going on out there. I was not realizing it. I never realized that age was a factor.
Findings: Older Worker Study

- Sensing the “Age Factor”
- The “Old” Label
Older Worker Study

The “Old” Label

- It doesn’t matter that we can do the same job as well or better, they look at my grey hair and they see an old man. Perception is everything... I am being judged by my appearance and my date of birth.... I feel like a castaway; like an old shoe that is of no use anymore.
Findings: Older Worker Study

- Sensing the “Age Factor”
- The “Old” Label
- Explicit Confirmation
I phoned up a month after I was told that they were not going to give me the position because I wanted to talk to the person and see why. I was then told point blank that the main factor was my age. Point blank.
Findings: Employer Study

- Positive Age Stereotypes
Employer Study

Positive Age Stereotypes

- I don’t think that our younger and older workers have the same type of approach to work. I think for the older worker, they’re a lot more dedicated to the company and loyal... The turnover rates are much higher with younger workers.
Findings: Employer Study

- Positive Age Stereotypes
- Ageist Views
Employer Study

Ageist Views

- Because of society’s view... society wants young servers. People don’t want non-attractive people serving them and the older we get the less attractive we become.

- It’s not a big deal if older workers have to cancel their curling or whatever and say ok, well we have to do this for the company.
Findings: Linking Older Workers’ Perceptions and Employers’ Attitudes

- Résumés
When we were going through the résumés for the last position I was trying to figure out, as any good employer does, exactly how old some of the people were... With the younger people, they put down they graduated ‘97, ‘96, whatever it is. With the older group, it will say Bachelor of Science, but it won’t have the year.
Findings: Linking Older Workers’ Perceptions and Employers’ Attitudes

- Résumés
- The Job Interview
Linking Attitudes
The Job Interview – Employer

- When you’re sitting down and you invite someone into an interview room... you start watching their physical abilities... if someone’s looking creaky and shaky... you don’t hire them.
Findings: Linking Older Workers’ Perceptions and Employers’ Attitudes

• Résumés
• The Job Interview
• Ageist Discourse
Linking Attitudes

Ageist Discourse – Older Worker

- I got turned down for a job and I asked [why] …and the answer was, and I quote, “they hired somebody more junior”. So in other words, “junior” is a euphemism for “younger”… Obviously they realize that if they were to have said “we hired somebody younger” that’s illegal, so now it seems like it is in vogue to say “more junior”.
Findings: Linking Older Workers’ Perceptions and Employers’ Attitudes

- Résumés
- The Job Interview
- Ageist Discourse
- Training and Technology
They need more training.... Because like I said they’re not as ambitious, and their retention of information just isn’t there because they just don’t really care about technology.
Findings: Linking Older Workers’ Perceptions and Employers’ Attitudes

- Résumés
- The Job Interview
- Ageist Discourse
- Training and Technology
- Gendered Ageism
Linking Attitudes
Gendered Ageism – Employers

• With some of the older women... I mean it’s like they’re dressing in their daughters’ clothes thinking that’s going to get them the job... and it’s the sheer amount of make-up they will wear... it’s kind of a cougar scenario.

• People want to be served by younger pretty staff because they are easy on the eyes... they want to see young, pretty girls.
Conclusions

- Structural Barriers to Employment (both perceived and real)
- Ageist Attitudes and Practices Persist
- Older Workers Actively Manage Ageism
- Improvement of Policies and Practices
  - Employers’ Practices
  - Older Worker Programs
  - Educational Campaigns
  - Encourage “Best Employer” Programs