Perceived age discrimination in the job search process in later life

Ricardo Twumasi *PhD*^{a*} and Cheryl Haslam *PhD*^b

^a Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London, SE5 8AB, UK

^b School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK.

*Corresponding author. Telephone: +44 (0) 207 848 0363

E-mail address: ricardo.twumasi@kcl.ac.uk

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of legislative change to extend working lives and protect against age discrimination on the experiences of older job seekers following a period of economic decline.

Design/methodology/approach

The research was informed by two focus groups. The research followed an inductive and iterative approach, interviewing 27 older job seekers to explore the barriers to seeking employment they faced. Themes from these interviews were then used to create a representative case study video to further highlight, share, and educate people on the barriers to employment that older job seekers face, and the strategies they use to overcome them.

Findings

Perceived age discrimination, change of identity, motivation and insufficient feedback were identified as significant barriers to finding employment. Social support, coping strategies for identity change and detailed feedback were reported as positive facilitators of the search for work. The findings suggest that older job seekers face significant age related barriers to securing employment, which require age specific support to overcome. A statutory requirement for minimum standards of feedback provided to job applicants may increase transparency, and reduce the prevalence of discrimination in the job application process.

Originality/value

This paper adds to the limited literature investigating the psychological impacts of the job search process in light of age related legislative change. With each new protected characteristic there is a lag between change in legislation, and change within employer attitudes and behaviour. This research investigates the impact of legislative change on the

identity, morale and strategies of the older job seeker. The case studies from this research may also reach an audience beyond the traditional academic community offering a voice and new audience to the barriers older job seekers face.

Keywords: Age discrimination, aging, job search, older workers, unemployment

Introduction

The introduction of age equality legislation, removal of the default retirement age, equalisation of male and female state pension age (SPA) and increase of the SPA have transformed the legislative framework surrounding age in the workplace. Research investigating organisational responses to the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (2006) showed that organisations were slow to change age related policy and practice, and that both positive and negative stereotypes towards older workers were prevalent in HR managers (Parry & Tyson, 2009). Egdeell et al. (2018) found that managers tended to take a 'hands off' approach to adapting to the aging workforce.

The aging workforce, combined with a decrease in long term employment within a single organisation highlights the importance of supporting job seekers over 50 years of age. Job transitions are a prevalent feature of our flexible, modern workforce. Over a five year period, two thirds of all people in the UK workforce change jobs, and one in five makes two or more changes (McNair, Flynn, Owen, Humphreys, & Woodfield, 2004). In an analysis of the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus Survey McNair et al. (2004) suggest that the proportion of people reporting career related reasons for changing jobs declines with age, but career progression remains the most important reason for transition until the late 50s, when stress and redundancy become more significant.

While older people are slightly less likely to be unemployed than their younger counterparts (DWP, 2012), older people who are unemployed are more likely to be in long term unemployment. The damage caused by unemployment on the future economic outcomes of an individual, also known as unemployment scarring, has been argued to have a more significant effect on the lifetime wages of older workers than younger workers (Ball, 2011;

Gregory & Jukes, 2001). Ball (2011) suggests that greater financial commitments of older job seekers may mean they cannot afford the luxury of time to find the best employment option, and therefore may be more likely to accept lower quality employment. However, factors such as age discrimination may present further barriers to the employment opportunities of older job seekers.

Background

Research has shown that age discrimination is still a common experience for older job seekers (James, McKechnie, Swanberg, & Besen, 2013; Riach & Rich, 2007; Tinsley, 2012). Wood et al. (2009) argue that discrimination may be influenced by potential employers having limited information available and time to consider a candidate's application, and are therefore more vulnerable to age related stereotypes during recruitment. Empirical research has shown that age related stereotypes influence personnel decisions (Loretto & White, 2006; Ng & Feldman, 2012). As older workers are also more likely to leave the workforce entirely after a long period of unemployment (Adams and Rau, 2004; Hansson, 1997), the retention of older workers is key to maintaining productivity and economic competitiveness. Age discrimination does not exist in a vacuum, and other protected characteristics, most notably gender and ethnicity intersect with discriminatory attitudes. Research has shown that 'gendered ageism' may impact women in the workplace more strongly than men (Lössbroek & Radl, 2018) and this is reinforced by popular culture that depicts older women more negatively than men (Duncan & Loretto, 2004).

Berger (2006) interviewed individuals aged between 45 and 60 (n=30) to examine changes in identity that occur during their search for employment. It was found that once individuals feel they have been labelled as 'old' they become susceptible to identity degradation. The concept

of identity degradation was first used by Garfinkel (1956) who investigated degradation ceremonies: which deprive an individual of their prior identities. Berger (2006) argues that negative experiences related to age, such as being considered ‘old’ or feeling ‘old’ and discovering that age is a limiting factor in the search for employment leads to the degradation of an individual’s identity.

Thomas & Pemberton (2011) found that employers could be seen to ‘pass the buck’ of age discrimination to agencies they used to handle recruitment. By providing strict criteria for applicants to these agencies and only requiring a shortlist of a small number of people for interview, in practice they may reduce the chance of older applicants getting to interview. According to a study carried out in the US, where 3996 firms were sent resumes, matched on all characteristics except for age, younger workers were 40% more likely to be offered an interview than older workers (Lahey, 2008).

Research design and aims

This article addresses the need for further research identifying the barriers and facilitators of searching for work in later life in light of recent policy and practice change in the UK. This study sought to explore:

- Support and resources required by older job seekers
- The barriers to and facilitators of searching for work in later life
- Experiences and consequences of age discrimination
- The influence of the job search process on the careers of older workers
- The impact of legislative changes such as removal of the default retirement age (DRA) and age discrimination legislation

Method

Interview schedule development

The interview schedule was initially developed by outlining the aims of this study combined with the areas for further research identified by the literature review, along with findings from two preliminary focus groups. These focus groups were held to actively engage with users of the research findings. Participants were purposively sampled from existing networks the research team had with agencies, charities and employer groups. The first focus group comprised older workers and recently retired individuals from a range of industrial sectors. The second focus group included representatives of age related charities, human resources (HR) professionals, line managers, employment advisors, health and safety practitioners and union representatives. These focus groups also assisted with recruitment for interviews and identified potential challenges that may arise during the research process. The key points of guidance, which arose from the focus groups prompted the decision to define uncommon terms such as direct and indirect age discrimination and to provide short explanations of changes in state pension age (SPA) and removal of the DRA.

Sampling

The recruitment strategy involved placing adverts on relevant websites; a public radio interview; leaflets placed at four job centres in the Leicestershire area. The researcher also spent 5 days at one job centre branch in Leicestershire, where job centre advisors offered job seekers the option of speaking to the researcher about taking part in the project. An invitation to take part was also sent to three job clubs in South East England.

Procedure

Interviews comprised a mixture of phone interviews (78%) and face to face interviews (22%) depending on location and availability of interviewees. A semi structured interview format was used. A total of 27 semi-structured interviews were completed, which were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. Prior to each interview initial contact with the interviewee was made, as well as discussing an overview of the study aims, an information sheet was handed or emailed to all participants. The mean length of interview was 43.8 minutes ($SD = 18.9$).

Ethical approval

Full ethical approval was granted by the Loughborough University Ethical Advisory Committee prior to data collection. All interviewees gave informed consent. Interviewees were offered the chance to withdraw and were de-briefed at the end of each interview. All personally identifiable details from interviews were anonymised.

Analysis

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and subject to thematic analysis, following an approach for thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 9 (QSR International, Cambridge, MA) was used to organise and manage the data analysis. Each transcript was carefully read to immerse the researcher in what was said, and then re-read so that specific words and phrases could be clustered together and coded. Comments were recorded to identify themes inductively; a process which was conducted iteratively as new themes emerged in previously coded data. Reliability of the analysis was improved through systematic review of the transcribed data, codes and themes generated, by other members of the research team.

Findings

The study recruited 27 job seekers over the age of 50. There were more males (63%) than females (37%). Interviewees were from a variety of different occupational backgrounds, as illustrated in Table 1 which summarises the last industrial sectors interviewees reported working in.

Table 1: Standard Industrial Classification of Economic Activities (SIC) of Job Seeker Interview Sample

Standard Industrial Classification	Frequency	Percent
Accommodation and food service activities	3	11.1
Administrative and support service activities	2	7.4
Construction	1	3.7
Education	2	7.4
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	1	3.7
Financial and insurance activities	2	7.4
Human health and social work activities	2	7.4
Information and communication	2	7.4
Manufacturing	3	11.1
Other service activities	1	3.7
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	6	22.2
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	2	7.4
Total	27	100.0

Age discrimination

Despite the recent introduction of age discrimination legislation, age discrimination in employment was often reported by job seekers as one of the reasons they were unable to find work. Terms such as ‘inflexible’ and ‘overqualified’ were shared as examples of feedback given in rejections of job applications that were felt to have been rejected due to the age of the applicant. While an applicant being over 50 was not always considered a disadvantage for all job roles, job seekers over 50 years old tended to report a specific age range that they felt prospective employers were looking for:

“I feel if I was ten years younger, I’d have a much better chance of getting a job than I have now at 51. They want someone in the age region of 25 – 40” (Job seeker, age 51)

In job adverts or descriptions, particular words such as ‘energetic’, ‘enthusiastic’, ‘flexible’, ‘dynamic’ and ‘graduate’ implied to interviewees that a younger or early career applicant was preferred.

“[...] Young, energetic, enthusiastic, looking for someone with three years of work experience and wanting to move on. You could say that’s a level of the post, but equally if they’re only looking for someone with three years of experience, is that indirect discrimination, how do you classify it?” (Job seeker, age 55)

While the majority of older job seekers perceived age discrimination as a factor in their difficulty finding work, interviewees rarely had concrete evidence of age discrimination, but rather tended to refer to a ‘feeling’ that they were being discriminated against.

“No. I don’t have any evidence of that. Nobody has ever said to me they’re not going to consider me for a job because of my age but then of course they wouldn’t [laughter].” (Job seeker, age, 56)

In order to combat potential discrimination in the job search process interviewees reported a number of age concealment tactics such as removing graduation dates from CV’s and application forms, or only putting more recent jobs on CV’s.

“I have recently taken to leaving off those first 2 jobs and also removed the year of graduation and somebody could potentially assume that I graduated in ‘86 rather than ‘82.” (Job seeker, age 52)

However, interviewees accepted that if a potential employer was interested in their age it was still easy for them to ascertain, regardless of any attempts at concealment. Some interviewees rationalised the possibility of age discrimination from recruiters due to perceptions of the number of years an individual potentially has left in the labour market. This may especially be the case for women, who may still be perceived as having fewer ‘years left’ than men due to historically earlier SPA.

“They [prospective employers] look and think, well she's probably got 5 years at most left in her, but I always think, well you know jobs these days you're lucky if you get 2 or 3 out of an employee, not 5 years.” (Job seeker, age 59)

Whilst SPA is being gradually equalised for men and women, the difference in age discrimination between older men and women was reported as still apparent and a further barrier that female job seekers faced:

“People have got to realise that women of our age i.e. in our early 50’s have got a hell of a lot to give, a hell of a lot more to give and that we’re not, you know, on the scrap heap just because we’re at the age that we’re at.” (Job seeker, age 54)

Some interviewees saw themselves as ‘expensive’ rather than offering the value of experience. This view is illustrated by a quote from a former senior manager who had been searching for work for over a year:

“I’m expensive. I see it more as being about because I’m expensive than about my age, because the salary scale, you know say a salary scale that goes from 38k to 52k and I’m going to be at around 52 because that’s what I was earning, but then clearly someone at the lower end who’s also able to do the job is going to be a lot more attractive.” (Job seeker, age 52)

Insufficient feedback

Interviewees reported having to chase for feedback which tended to result in no response or receiving generic feedback. Insufficient feedback made it difficult for job seekers to fine tune applications and improve their chances of making a stronger application for the next job.

“You don’t gain feedback and that therefore leads you to not be able to tune your future applications or really learn from the experience because you don’t get any kind of response.” (Job seeker, age 50)

“If you apply, I would say once out of 15 times you’ll get a response the rest are either no response at all or maybe the standard electronically generated email back. Sometimes you get to talk to the recruitment agent which is generally a sort of fishing exercise.” (Job seeker, age 50)

With limited feedback from job applications individuals reported focusing on other, possibly discriminatory reasons why they did not make it further into the selection process. The majority of interviewees considered the possibility of age discrimination, and some also considered the barrier of age in conjunction with other protected characteristics which included: race, disability, religion and gender. This is illustrated by the experience of a former senior manager who had been searching for work for over two years:

“There's 1% that send an email to say, your application hasn't been successful, and I tend to follow these applications up as to why they haven't been successful. Although legally companies are obliged not to say: ‘because of your age’, my experience tells me that, if you're over 50, you know, and I wonder, sometimes, whether my surname has something to do with it. My surname is, [well-known Muslim surname], you know. And it seems to be that there's a stigma attached to it. (Job seeker, age 56)”

Recruitment agencies tended to be better with providing feedback compared to direct online application processes. However, this rarely went further than letting an applicant know that they were unsuccessful. Interviewees reported that recruiters tended to be hesitant to give any specific feedback. This was usually due to the large number of applicants for each job.

“[...] a lot of people when you apply say that they can't give feedback, a lot of employers do that, ‘We have too many applicants. We can't give feedback.’ Especially I think the borough

council have said that and I think the civil service has said that so you can't even ask for feedback in some cases.” (Job seeker, age 57)

If an applicant reached the interview stage, they reported a far higher likelihood of receiving some form of feedback, but this tended to be generic, usually referring to ‘other more suitable candidates’ or variations of this phrase. Interviewees reported the extreme difficulty of making it to the interview stage. In some cases, job seekers only achieved one or two interviews many months into their job search.

“I just rarely get interviews so I find that even more depressing than getting an interview and not getting the job. At least if you get an interview then you've got a chance, and if I don't get through the interview then that's partly my fault because at least they've given me the opportunity to sell myself. But when you don't even get an interview it's difficult to know where the goalposts are. I just don't even know, I feel like I'm trying to shoot without knowing where the target is if that makes sense.” (Job seeker, age 57)

Interviewees reported uncertainty as contributing to low mood, reduced health and wellbeing and a lack of hope in the job search process:

“Usually if you sent an application form and after a week you don't hear anything, that's it. I just get more, more depressed. I mean just over the weekend I felt, the whole thing's totally pointless. I just feel I'm totally unemployable now. And that's quite sad. At my age I don't need that. Not yet.” (Job seeker, age 59)

Change in sense of Identity

The navigation of changes in identity throughout unemployment was an important part of the job search process for the majority of interviewees. Interviewees expressed work as an important part of their sense of identity, and beneficial for their general wellbeing. Various strategies to avoid the identity of being unemployed were reported including presenting themselves as being: ‘in between jobs’, ‘self-employed’ or ‘retired’ even if an individual did not have a source of retirement income or actual income from self-employment. This quote from a job seeker who avoided receiving unemployment benefits during his job search illustrates the importance of identity:

“What I don’t know is whether I would actually be better off if I was on unemployment benefits, or what they call job seekers allowance now, than on the tax credit, but the advantage of being on a working tax credit is that I can carry on working and I can say, if somebody asks me I don’t say I’m unemployed I say I’m self-employed. Which sounds better, it feels better as well.” (Job seeker, age 56)

Evidence of identity degradation was identified in the majority of job seeker interviews. Experiences such as being made redundant, applying for unemployment benefits, or visiting the job centre were coded as identity degradation. Many poignant examples of degradation ceremonies were related to the experience of visiting the job centre:

“You know when I’ve been down there, I think they changed my signing in time once and I got there and it wasn’t open and we all had to queue outside, that was a pretty dehumanising experience for me going from being a fairly senior, 39 years of continuous work and suddenly I’m standing outside queuing up outside the job centre.” (Job seeker, age 56)

Interviewees reported losing both social status and social networks connected to their previous employment. An example of this loss of social support and isolation offers an insight into the social stigma of unemployment:

“[...] but the social life and connection side, it’s really very isolated being unemployed. This weird dynamic of being around your former work mates who used to be quite important who I think are still important but you become kind of embarrassed, you've always got embarrassment and socially that's quite hard to manage.” (Job seeker, age 52)

Individuals were able to negotiate more positive identities through various coping strategies including social support from families and friends, and other unemployed individuals through job clubs. Some individuals also changed their work identity through an interim voluntary role while searching for paid work.

Motivation

While financial motivation was the most commonly reported reason for searching for work, other motivations included: belonging to a work social group, contributing to society and general health and wellbeing.

“I would like to find work for self-respect etc. and I get bored and need sort of intellectual stimulus and something like that, I wouldn’t say it was just financial.” (Job seeker, age 55)

Interviewees reported a range of ways unemployment had negative effects on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. The negative health effects of unemployment in

conjunction with the rejections and difficulty of searching for work often made finding employment even more difficult.

“I think when you’re not working it can really have a negative effect on your physical self but equally valid that it affects you mentally and you can become quite depressed and withdrawn and you start thinking, you, your self-worth and self-respect is badly affected I think.” (Job seeker age 54)

Interviewees tended to have low self-esteem and generally a negative outlook towards the possibility of securing work in the immediate future:

“I’m sometimes discouraged from applying because I think the person they want is just so fantastic I can’t measure up.” (Job seeker, age 57)

Job Search support

Interviewees reported generally negative experiences of the Job Centre. The experience of a former managing director provides an illustration of this:

“The first thing I noticed when I got down there [Job centre] was I went through the process of the introduction meetings, had my counsellor assigned to me and she quite clearly said, “There isn’t very much I can do for you, you know what to do.” To which I said, “I don’t know what to do because I’ve never been made redundant”, I’d never been out of work for 30+ years so I had no idea what do.” (Job seeker, age 50)

For highly experienced individuals seeking skilled, professional work the Job Centre offered limited support:

“What I find disappointing is places like this [Job centre] don’t help much. There's no help for professional people. I've been sent to a workshop, where people can't read or write.” (Job seeker, age 56)

Interviewees valued the opportunity to network and many reported finding out about job opportunities through networking. But in many cases being unemployed limited the breadth of an individual’s network as they were not able to keep in close contact with work colleagues, and had limited work networking opportunities. Some interviewees overcame this by attending networking sessions:

“I go to networking sessions because there's statistics around at the moment and evidence to suggest that somewhere around 80 and 85% of jobs are not advertised or they're secured or initiated through a networking opportunity as opposed to looking at adverts, advertised jobs.” (Job seeker, age 52)

Networking and social support opportunities such as job clubs were highly valued and sought after by interviewees. Many were location specific and tended to be based in the south of England.

“I’m not aware that there are any job clubs for my age group in this locality available. There may be another locality that’s not in the East Midlands.” (Job seeker, age 50)

Individuals stressed the importance of a support network of other individuals in a similar position, even in cases where they had not heard of job clubs or similar support networks:

“I feel there should be some sort of over 50 group to meet to discuss that, to say, what should we put on our CV’s that would help. But I don’t think there’s anything like that.” (Job seeker, age 57)

For many interviewees, their current job search was the first time of being unemployed in their career. This was often attributed to the economic downturn.

“I’ve never been unemployed, so to some degree I’m coming into this fresh. I’ve actually worked from the age of 16 to the age of 55 which is 39 years without a break so to actually suddenly find this yeah I’m a bit first of all surprised.” (Job seeker, age 56)

The majority of interviewees lacked the full support and resources they needed to secure work in the immediate future.

“Right now I feel extremely lonely, there’s absolutely no one to turn to. I don’t know what the answer is, I’m well educated, I’ve studied this subject, I spend a lot of time rewriting CVs, I spend a lot of time on the internet probably 2-3 hours a day searching for positions but I suppose [laughs] I’m looking for somebody to suggest where else I might look, what else I might do and even just somebody to talk to but there’s absolutely nothing. It’s soul destroying and I mean I’ve heard of a lot of people who just give up, just accept that it’s a bad time and spend their savings and come back in a couple of year’s time.” (Job seeker, age 50)

When discussing extended working lives, a small number of individuals presented a ‘lump of labour’ argument against longer working lives, suggesting that they considered the labour market as working on a ‘one in one out’ basis:

“I’ve got a mixed view on this really, I mean I think if people are able to do their job then they should be able to continue especially if their welfare may depend upon it. I mean many people depend on work as much for the social life and getting out of the house and meeting people and for a feeling of self-worth so I think it’s important that people aren’t forced to retire. On the other hand, it does mean for people like my daughter who in a few years or even next year might be looking for a job and jobs aren’t there because they’re occupied by older people so I very much have mixed views on this.” (Job seeker, 57)

Interviewees generally had a negative outlook on the possibility of retirement, with many interviewees reporting that they felt the state pension would eventually disappear as a universal benefit:

“Well I know I won’t qualify for my pension until I’m 66, I know that. I’ve been told that and I think it will probably be put back so by the time I’m nearing 66 it will be put back again so I’m not really expecting to get a retirement pension [...] I think they’ll probably disappear, I think they’ll be means tested in due course so that only people who are really really on the point of starvation will get a pension. I think it will be a way of keeping people alive but not actually giving any real benefit.” (Job seeker, age 57)

Job seekers generally wanted to be able to choose retirement, rather than be forced into retirement, or go into retirement as they could no longer find work, due to their age. This quote from a female job seeker illustrates this desire to be valued:

“I'd love to retire but I don't want to retire, I can't afford to retire, and I want to be active, I want to be out there using my brain, I want to be working. I just feel I don't want to go on the scrap heap yet, I'm not finished and I find that quite soul destroying, but that's how I'm beginning to feel, that your past it now. I've still got a lot to give, but people find me unemployable at this age, and 60 should be young now, I'm a young 60, I'm a very young person. I've just kept myself young, I've been very active all my life. And the past few months are beginning to take, I'm beginning to feel the strain of it. Not being able to be out and about and working and socialising with people. I feel I'm losing contact and losing the communication with others, and I find that quite difficult.” (Job seeker, age 59)

Video Case studies

To disseminate these findings, and the experiences of older workers beyond a traditional academic audience, these interviews were collated into a representative case study video. The use of video case studies was driven by feedback from focus groups carried out to inform the development of the research presented in this manuscript, which encouraged the use of non-traditional means to access a wider audience. Jeff's story was created using a creative non-fiction technique using quotes taken from the results section of this manuscript. Quotes that expressed the difficulty of various barriers faced by older workers in their search for work were selected, and the story concludes with a rare, but positive outcome from an interviewee who complained about not being selected for interview. Jeff's Story is available to view here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRcOdFqhP5Y>

Following a documentary format expert responses were filmed to further discuss, and raise the profile of the experiences of older jobseekers. The Jeff's story video was used as a form of video elicitation (Henry and Fetters, 2012) to gather poignant responses to these experiences. The expert response video is available to view here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6AY_7B_Qs0

Discussion

According to research by McNair, Flynn, and Dutton (2007) recruitment is one area of the employment context where age discrimination is able to manifest in its most severe form, as it is easier not to invite or appoint an older applicant than is it to remove an existing older employee. Recruiters have a moral obligation to judge applicants on individual merits rather than age. In addition, there is a business case for operating without discrimination, as equal opportunities for all groups should help more accurately identify the best person for the job, ultimately increasing productivity and economic competitiveness. Furthermore, there are the potentially large financial benefits of avoiding discrimination related litigation and negative publicity. The overwhelming perception of interviewees in this research suggests that age discrimination may be a factor in the selection process. Age discrimination may pervade due to a number of reasons: stereotypical views held by employers; timesaving when reviewing applicants; and a preference for an applicant of a similar age or younger than the recruiter.

There is a strong body of evidence to suggest that age discrimination is a barrier older job seekers face (Chiu et al., 2001; Riach & Rich, 2007; Taylor & Walker, 1998; Tinsley, 2012). The difficulty of proving age discrimination, combined with the difficulty of gathering evidence to support a claim of discrimination, means many older job seekers have potential career paths blocked by this barrier and the perception that age is of key importance in the recruitment and selection process.

The need for feedback

The lack of feedback given in job applications caused unnecessary distress by reinforcing feelings of low self worth and frustration for many interviewees. A possible solution could be to change online applications to have integrated automated feedback systems that informs applicants of areas they scored well on, or could improve on in future. This data could be generated during the selection process, and would also ensure more transparency in the selection process, limiting the influence of age discrimination during shortlisting. If potential applications were rated and this data was used to provide feedback to applicants this could improve the experience of the job application process, and help job seekers improve future applications. Should a minimum standard of feedback be introduced as a legal requirement, an automated process such as this would reduce the amount of time organisations spend responding to requests for feedback, and would help reduce a perception of age discrimination. Such a system could positively influence applicant experiences, and encourage a broader range of applicants as they would be guaranteed feedback in exchange for their time.

A system that guarantees minimum standards of feedback depending on the level an applicant achieves in the selection process would be revolutionary. Interviewees expected to hear nothing, or at best to receive an automated email if unsuccessful at the first shortlisting phase. Most job applications can be divided into three or more main levels of shortlisting, therefore a minimum level of feedback to be received relative to the level of shortlisting the applicant attains could be a reasonable expectation.

Employers are likely to be reluctant to provide detailed feedback to applicants as this time consuming and feedback could make bias in the selection process more transparent. Currently

there is little to be gained from providing detailed feedback to applicants, which would be provided at significant costs to the potential employer. These costs include time, keeping detailed records, and an increased threat of litigation due to the increased transparency of a potentially discriminatory selection process. On the other hand, providing feedback to applicants would be directly beneficial for job seekers and indirectly beneficial for employers, motivating more job seekers to apply to those employers who offer some guaranteed level of feedback.

The need to justify selection decisions will contribute to making discriminatory selection criteria an economically unattractive method to filter or select applications. Some forms of discrimination that may exist in selection process, such as dividing applications by age, may currently be used as quick ways to filter large numbers of applications. For instance, with a job specification that requires a large amount of experience a recruiter may be tempted to filter out all applications below an arbitrary age, assuming that applicants below that age would not have the required experience. At the other end of age discrimination, with a specification for a junior or entry job specification a recruiter may be tempted to filter out applicants above an arbitrary age. If legislation mandated a minimum level of feedback to applicants, it would no longer save any time or money to filter applications based on age. In fact, it would be more costly to use protected characteristics in the selection process, as the recruiter would then need to find and provide legally justifiable reasons for rejecting candidates. Providing transparency in such judgements could be a strong force in combating discrimination in employment.

Transitions in identity

Transitions in identity throughout the job search process may contribute to the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) experienced by older job seekers, which may have made job

seekers more likely to attribute difficulties in the job search process to external factors such as the economic climate, location and age discrimination. Unemployed individuals have to negotiate a variety of problems, especially the stigma of unemployment. This is particularly important in the context of older people, as those over the age of 50 are more likely to suffer long term unemployment than younger people (Tinsley, 2012). Being unemployed and seeking work can profoundly influence an individual's self-image and self-esteem. When job seekers perceive they have been labelled as 'old' by others (for example, potential employers), they begin to define themselves as 'old' (Berger, 2006).

Garfinkel (1956) proposed the concept of 'identity degradation' in relation to "degradation ceremonies" (p. 420). These ceremonies deprive individuals of their prior identity and emphasise a lack of individual power and autonomy. Examples of identity degradation experienced by interviewees in this study included: embarrassing experiences at job centres such as queuing outside; being told to apply for more junior roles than those individuals had previously worked in; and constant rejections from job applications.

Further identity degradation appears to arise when a job seeker downgrades their employment expectations. Downgrading is an important difference between older and younger job seekers, as younger job seekers unemployed for extended periods will not see the same career changes as older job seekers. A downgrade for an older job seeker could be as much as half their previous wage, to a less senior role, however a job seeker earlier in their career cannot experience this reduction in wage due to minimum wage legislation. This is also reflected by research that shows wage scarring is worse for older job seekers (Tinsley, 2012).

In line with previous research (Lin, Hummert, & Harwood, 2004) older job seekers interviewed had a tendency to acknowledge their own physical aging, while denying that their chronological ages are accurate assessments of their inner selves. This provides evidence for the limitations of identifying individuals by chronological age alone rather than functional or psychosocial age.

The importance of networking

Workplace social networks provide individuals with a sense of identity, social support and affiliation with a group. Interviewees reported losing connection to these networks during unemployment, perhaps the very time when these social networks and the support they provide is needed the most. While family and friends offered support, the job centre was unanimously reported as unsupportive, especially for senior professionals.

The most valued source of support reported by interviewees were 'job clubs'. These are voluntary or charity run organisations who meet to discuss job opportunities and the process of searching for work. Job clubs tend to include groups of professionals from a specific geographical area. Job clubs offer moral support, networking opportunities, feedback on job applications, CV's and cover letters from other unemployed former professionals. This peer support was reported as invaluable amidst the constant rejections and negative outlook of the job search process. Job clubs also provided: a positive identity for job seekers; camaraderie during the job search process; the opportunity to take on voluntary roles in running the club; and a sense of belonging to a group fitting with a job seeker's previous identity.

Due to the value job clubs offer job seekers, particularly those who feel unsupported by the job centre, a strong case could be made that job clubs should receive public funding or even

be better linked to job centres. Job clubs for manual and non-professional work may also be important in providing an inclusive service for all job seekers. However, one of the strengths of job clubs is their voluntary nature and perhaps independence from the perceived agenda of job centres is an essential element of their helpfulness. Furthermore, job clubs meeting in neutral locations, separate from job centres may also be advantageous in avoiding any stigma attached to the job centre.

Conclusions

According to Riach (2007) research should aim to go beyond focusing on the consequences of ageism and the economic pressures of an aging workforce and endeavour to understand the social processes that create and allow ageist ideologies to pervade in a workplace context. Removing the consideration of age from the selection process is almost counterintuitive in comparison to the focus on age that is inherent in other situations. In the workplace age may have inherent links to seniority and level of experience. However, problems with prejudice occur when age is used as a proxy to evaluate an applicant's value, rather than considering the attributes that may be commonly linked to age. In this research both positive and negative age stereotypes were evident in the selection process, which supports the findings of previous research such as Chiu et al. (2001) and Shore et al. (2003). Examples of both 'hard' and 'soft' age discrimination as characterised by Stypinska and Turek, (2017) were shared in the research presented. Age is one of the most clearly recognisable characteristics of diversity. Recent research has shown that having a high level of perceived diversity within an organisation can have a positive impact on employee well-being (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2019).

There are a limited number of qualitative investigations into the experience of older job seekers in light of recent changes in age related legislation, specifically carried out during an important time of transition in policy and practice relating to age discrimination in the UK. Furthermore, this research was carried out during a phase of economic decline, which allowed the research unique insight into the barriers experienced by older job seekers during a time of increased labour market competition, reduced job opportunities and high unemployment levels. Research by Hyde and Dingemans (2017) suggests that in countries with stronger employment protection legislation older workers tend to exit the workforce due to enforced retirement rather than redundancy. This suggests that further research considering not only unemployed older individuals, but underemployed individuals may be useful in understanding how to support older job seekers in light of the removal of the default retirement age.

Following the introduction of the Employment Equality (Age) discrimination Regulations (2006) and the Equality Act (2010), recognition of age discrimination in employment and selection has dramatically increased. However, the research presented in this article suggests that older job seekers continue to experience discrimination throughout the job search process and changes in attitudes towards older workers lag behind legislative changes against age discrimination.

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