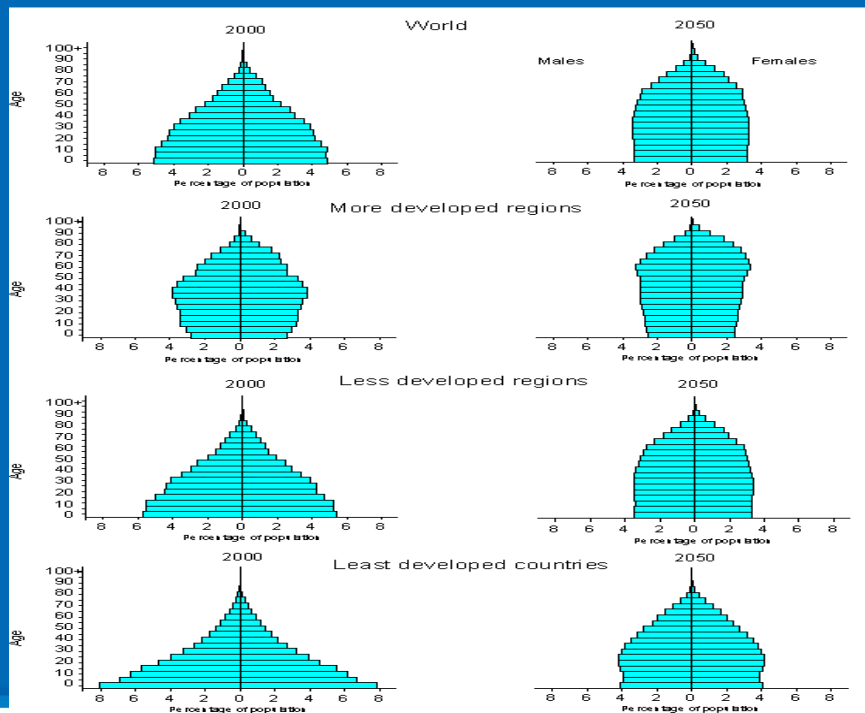


Debunking myths around ageing and work

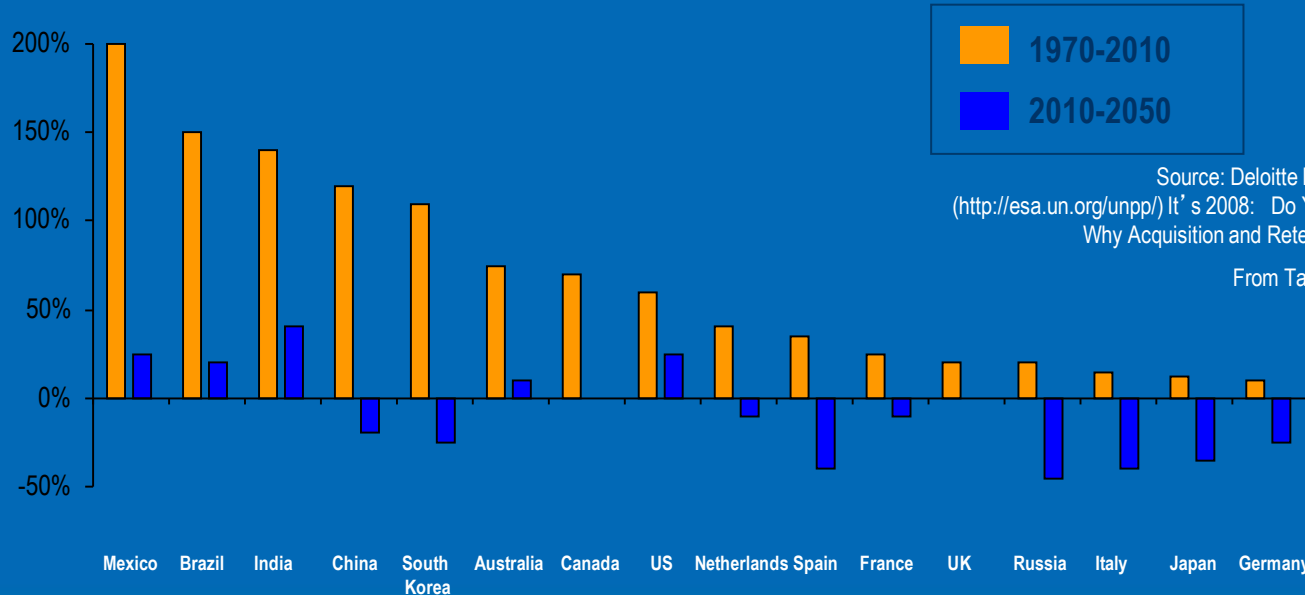
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Population pyramids: age and sex distribution, 2000 and 2050



Screeching to a Halt: Growth in the Working-age Population



Source: Deloitte Research/UN Population Division
 (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/>) It's 2008: Do You Know Where Your Talent Is?
 Why Acquisition and Retention Strategies Don't Work, p.6

From Tamara Erickson Concourse Group

New public policy emphasis on older workers

- Development since the late-1990s has been prolonging working lives to ease pressures on social welfare systems and labour markets.
- Contrasts with the 1970s and 1980s with focus on early retirement in response to high unemployment as industry restructured.

New public policies for older workers

- A range of policy measures are aiming to encourage later retirement, promote skills acquisition and generally improve the employability of older workers.
- These include:
 - Closure of or limits on use of early retirement pathways
 - Increasing retirement ages
 - 'Active' labour market measures
 - Rewards for pension deferral
 - Ending mandatory retirement
 - A more flexible approach to retirement in the form of measures to promote gradual retirement
 - Actions aimed at tackling age discrimination

Consensus on 'active ageing'

- Consensus around the notion of 'active ageing', defined by the WHO (2002) as 'the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age'.
- According to the OECD (1998), this requires:
 - an emphasis on prevention, making policy interventions at an earlier life stage, reducing the need for later remedial action
 - actions that are less fragmented and that are concentrated at critical transition points in life
 - and enabling less constrained choices and greater responsibility at the level of individuals.

Active ageing

Biological

- Regular physical activity
- Balanced nutrition; no substance use
- Awareness and treatment of bodily dysfunctions (check-up medicine)

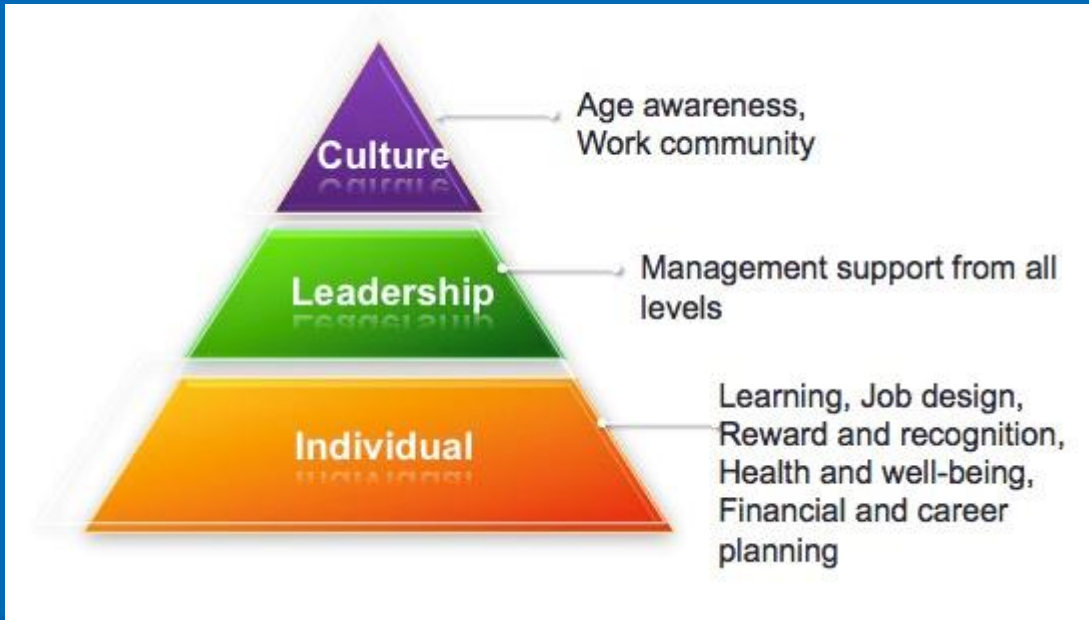
Psychological

- Cognitive training (neuronal plasticity; dopaminergic neuromodulation)
- Personality growth, resilience
- Positive attitudes and motivations

Sociological

- Social engagement, participation ('third age')
- Experiencing autonomy and reward/recognition

Age management pyramid



The role of advocacy in an ageing society

- Governments play a key role as change agents, in that they may both replicate and challenge prevailing institutional norms (Flynn et al. 2014).
- Older worker advocacy firmly rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions about their potential labour force contribution.

Ageism deployed in the cause of older workers

In a speech at an event organised by COTA at the National Press Club in 2019 Emma Dawson of social policy think tank Per Capita made these contentious statements:

Ageism is an entrenched and widespread prejudice.

The root of the problem can be found in the dominant narrative in our political and social discourse that frames ageing as almost entirely a negative experience.

That repeated studies, both here and overseas, have shown that older workers are more productive (they are less likely to spend time at work on Facebook!), more reliable, less likely to leave their jobs every two to five years, and bring experience and complex problem solving abilities to the workforce that have taken years to develop.

Business cases for older workers

Mature workers are reliable, flexible and ready to contribute from day one. As well as bringing a lifetime of experience to your business, mature workers are also great mentors to other staff. Age Discrimination Commissioner, Why recruiting mature age workers makes good business sense, 2016

Unlike their younger and sometimes fickle counterparts, older employees are known for their strong work ethic, loyalty and increased tenure. They can often be the same age as your clients, which means their ability to relate to them and deliver relevant customer service is superior. They also bring to the table a different perspective, experience and strong communication skills, meaning their contribution is valuable and can complement younger members of the team nicely. But it's their loyalty and desire to stay put that can also be a big attraction. SEEK Australia

Contradictions and disjunctions in advocacy

Duncan (2003: 108) argues that ‘the very logic of equality would seem to preclude especial focus on older workers [...] age prejudice differs from other forms of discrimination in that there is no single, clearly defined, oppressed group. Everyone is of an age and can be subject to age discrimination’.

Ageism is ‘the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination directed towards others or oneself based on age’ (WHO 2021, xix).

From this broadened definition the ‘age advocacy’ described above might be considered overtly ageist.

Contradictions and disjunctions in advocacy

Disregarding experiences of age discrimination or arguing that it is widespread may be viewed as ageist if this is contradicted by the evidence.

For those experiencing ageism there may be important consequences.

A recent global systematic review of the impacts of ageism on health found that, across a range of health domains, it was associated with worse outcomes (WHO, 2021).

Are older workers more productive?

Reference to the 'benefits' that older workers offer 'may limit the impact of the diversity message by legitimizing the use of stereotypes, be it positive or negative' Riach (2009: 322).

The very arguments for employing older workers put forward in business cases – concerning commitment, loyalty and experience - risk confirming broader societal perceptions that they are of the past and thus, less able to meet the demands of modern workplaces (Roberts, 2006).

Are older workers more productive?

And such claims lack a foundation in evidence:

Chronological age does not predict job performance (Ng and Feldman, 2008).

Greater variation in job performance between people of the same age than those of different ages (Warr, 1993).

Age and job commitment show little relationship (Hanlon, 1986).

Thus, advocacy may, unwittingly, be contributing to prejudice against both older and younger workers.

Are older workers vulnerable?

AHRC research found that one quarter of older Australians reported experiences of age discrimination (AHRC, 2015).

But the Commission's statistics indicate that of the 2,307 complaints it dealt with in 2019-2020 only 7% were lodged under Australia's Age Discrimination Act and under half of these concerned employment (AHRC, undated).

Large-scale Australian studies have found the incidence of perceived age discrimination against older workers to be rather lower and declining (ABS, 2016; McGann et al. 2016).

Are older workers vulnerable?

Analysis of the national HILDA survey indicated that among those aged 55 and over 22% experienced discrimination in terms of applying for a job, a greater proportion than any other age group, but only 8% experienced it in the course of their employment.

Contrasted with the 15–24 age group, where 6% reported discrimination in terms of job-search, whereas 10% had experienced it during the course of employment, a higher level than any other age group (Wilkins et al., 2011).

Are older workers vulnerable?

Analysis of Australia's General Social Survey 2019 (ABS 2020) indicates that for women experiences of discrimination for those aged 55-69 at a tenth (10%) are far less than that reported by those aged 40-54 (25%), 25-39 (23%) and 15-24 (23%). For those aged 70+, only 7% reported such experiences.

Among men aged 55-69, at less than a fifth (16%), they were less likely than men aged 40-54 (18%) and 25-39 (23%) to report discrimination. Their reported level was similar to men aged 15-24 (16%). Beyond 70, perceptions of discrimination declined sharply (6%).

Improving the public discourse about ageing and work

1. Countering myths concerning labour market age barriers
2. The use of age stereotypes in making the case for older workers' employment
3. Complex interaction of age with other factors in determining people's experiences
4. Public understanding grounded in the notion that generational conflict is inevitable, and
5. Reframing the life course to encourage and support longer working lives.

Countering myths concerning the extent and nature of labour market age barriers

- Primary role of advocacy is to facilitate a properly informed public debate and understanding.
- For instance, notably, findings of studies contrast the extent of perceptions of respondents' own experiences of age discrimination with those of their views concerning its prevalence in society.
- However, research indicates that older people perceiving that it is highly prevalent in society are more likely to withdraw from the labour force.

Avoiding age stereotypes

Advocates draw from age stereotypes and surveys consistently find that employers hold the same age stereotypical attitudes.

Advocates might avoid confirmation bias among employers by arguing that, for most purposes, age and performance show little useful relationship.

Would overcome the problem of advocates being accused of ageism, and consequently of muddling the public discourse.

Recognising that age interacts in complex ways with a range of other factors

Given that people are not one-dimensional, raises questions as to the utility of a focus on age or older workers at all.

Whatever their age, it is how the multiple aspects of a person's identity intersect that impacts on how they experience inclusion and exclusion at work.

Challenging the notion that generational conflict is inevitable

According to National Seniors Australia (2020) early retirement 'would potentially free up some of the jobs that could go to younger workers or workers in their 50s struggling to find employment. Maybe even reduce the official unemployment figures, at a time when it's heading skyward!'

Commonly believed there is a 'lump of labour' that must be fairly distributed, but there is no fixed number of jobs and older and younger workers are better considered as complements rather than substitutes (OECD, 2013).

Reframing the lifecourse

Discarding the traditional three phase notion of the lifecycle (education, work and retirement) in favour of a more horizontally distributed 'age integrated' approach.

Such an approach would 'modify the traditional public policy approach, centred on certain phases of life or certain age groups, by introducing a global approach, giving individuals certain rights, resources and services enabling them to be the authors of their own lifecourses' (Erhel, 2007: 150).

Conclusions

Current Australian advocacy efforts on ageing and work have weak foundations.

Recognising that ageism is potentially experienced by people at all ages, a more effective age advocacy might endeavour to foment a generational dialogue concerning its causes and solutions.

Particularly important during a period of unprecedented economic upheaval, when rates of youth unemployment rose dramatically in 2020 and there is considerable current public debate concerning the societal value of older people.