

Ageism and the Barriers to Labour Force Participation of Older Adults

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Ageism in the workplace creates barriers for older workers and their employment opportunities. Employment and Social Development Canada has gathered experts on this topic to deliver a symposium on ageism in the workplace and solutions that can help to counter this tendency.

In 2016, individuals aged 55 and over, in Canada, accounted for 36% of the working-age population, the highest proportion on record (Statistics Canada, 2017). In a study of 21 countries, including Canada, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006) found evidence that employers in every country held stereotypical views about older workers, and age discrimination was an issue in almost all countries (Armstrong-Strasse, M. & Lee, M., 2009). Ageism in the workplace usually takes the form of negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older workers which undermines their labour force participation. These age stereotypes can affect decision-making processes in the workplace and lead to discriminatory behaviours and actions. In particular, it has been observed that older workers receive fewer opportunities for job training, development and interviews; receive fewer promotions; and often get treated unfairly by their colleagues and supervisors. These various forms of discrimination have a negative outcome on the retention of older workers in the labour force.

Tackling ageism in the workplace will require a new understanding of aging by all generations. Shift in attitudes, continuous learning opportunities and intergenerational exchanges and solidarity have been identified as possible solutions in helping promote the labour force participation of older adults. Radical changes in public discourse (e.g. media, politics, research) on older persons and workers have also been identified as contributing to reduce ageism.

The subject matter experts will present their respective work and policy research as it pertains to various aspects related to the challenges facing labour force participation of older adults and the importance of age-friendly workplaces.

Presenter 1:

Reframing the ways in which we view aging and older workers

Ageism continues to be a socially accepted form of prejudice, one that may inadvertently be perpetuated by older persons themselves. Ms. Spadafora will present both covert and overt ways in which ageism is expressed in contemporary society. She will discuss the need to disrupt and reframe the discourse on aging from one that focuses on problems to one that recognizes the contributions of older persons in the labour force and beyond. Relatedly, Ms. Spadafora will talk about a significant shift in labour force participation from the perspective of the increased number of older persons launching new businesses in later life and some characteristics of this trend. Recognition of the contributions of older workers may mitigate against some of the commonly held stereotypes that manifest themselves in ageist attitudes and behaviours. The increased number of older adults who continue to work beyond traditional retirement age, whether as employees or in their own businesses, compels us to address and

respond to ageism. Finally, Ms. Spadafora will discuss the need to include older persons as part of the solution, empowering them to not be defined by their age.

Presenter 2:

Redirection: Shifting the Work and Retirement Paradigm

Once unemployed, mature workers tend to take a longer time to find employment. For some individuals, it can be very challenging to find new employment in order to remain in the workforce. Yet older adults are interested in later life work opportunities and options. Many older individuals are looking for work and/or considering ways to extend their working lives.

Redirection is a new stage of career development where older adults transfer their skills, experience and knowledge in a new direction and engage in new pursuits. Redirection is an alternative to retirement. It is anticipated that more individuals will continue to work past 'traditional' retirement age. This is a paradigm shift.

Redirection helps to normalize the transition into new work opportunities. Redirection changes the narrative surrounding later life work and retirement. This reframing of this life transition helps individuals and broader society to confront ageism in the workplace.

Presenter 3:

A Quantitative and Qualitative Estimation of Older Workers' Contribution in the Upcoming Context of Labour Shortages

In this paper we provide two relevant analyses regarding the participation of older workers in the labour market. In the first part of the paper, we develop the National Transfers Accounts methodology (NTA) for Canada to generate the age profiles for consumption and labour income from 1998 to 2013. Relying on these profiles, we calculate for each age and each year the lifecycle deficit, which is the difference between consumption and labour income. We then project the upcoming demographic shift to estimate what would be the required participation rate of the older workers in the labour market to avoid a deterioration of the lifecycle deficit between now and 2060. In the second part of the paper, we explore, through interviews, major Canadian employers' attitudes towards hiring and maintaining older workers, taking into account the upcoming context of labour shortages. The interviews aim detecting the presence of ageist attitudes and behaviors in the labour market that may discourage the participation of older workers. In sum, the paper provides quantitative and qualitative insights on the challenge of expected labour shortages in the context of ageing populations.