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Older workers and organizational change: corporate memory versus potentiality

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the recent work of Sennett and others who considered the position of older workers in dynamic economies subject to rapid change, this paper aims to examine the perceived fit between employees of different ages and their employing organizations in four Australian workplaces.

Design/methodology/approach – Analysis of qualitative data, collected among workers and managers in four Australian organizations, was performed.

Findings – Results suggests that potentiality tended to be prized as an asset over corporate memory. While managers were frequently paternalistic towards their older employees, ageing human capital was often devalued as managers tried to balance operational budgets and organizations sought to remain responsive to changing market demands.

Originality/value – The paper discusses the implications for the prolongation of working lives.

Keywords Older workers, Australia, Qualitative methods, Case studies, Organizational change

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

While public policy makers in most industrialised nations have recently been promoting the cause of older workers in an effort to counter shortfalls in labour supply and escalating costs of social welfare due to demographic change, evidence points to ambivalence among employers (Henkens and Schippers, 2008). After decades of early retirement, to a large extent a consequence of the restructuring of industry which was accompanied by the withdrawal of large numbers of older workers from the labour market, there have been recent increases in labour force participation rates among this group (Table I) as economies grew and public policymakers in some countries began to emphasise the need to prolong working lives, with some employers developing policies aimed at their employment and retention. However, while commentators point to the

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	Men						Women					
	1983	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008	1983	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008
Australia	62	63.2	60.8	61.2	66.2	67.7	20.5	24.9	28.6	36.1	44.5	50.1
Austria	–	–	42.6	44.5	43.1	52.8	–	–	18.8	18.9	23.5	31.6
Belgium	50.6	35.4	35.9	36.3	43.2	42.8	12.3	9.9	13.3	15.8	24.0	25.5
Canada	72.4	64	58.9	61	66.7	67.2	33.5	34.8	36.3	41.6	49.4	54.6
Denmark	67.2	69.1	67.9	64.5	70.2	65.8	41.7	45.9	40.1	48.2	55.7	52.8
Finland	54.1	47.1	44.6	48.1	56.5	60.5	47.4	40.8	41.9	45.2	56.4	59.0
France	53.6	39.3	41.5	41.7	43.9	42.6	32.7	26.9	30.9	33	37.9	37.7
Germany	63.1	55.9	54.5	52.4	61.3	67.2	26.3	24.7	31.3	33.5	43.2	50.6
Greece	70.8	59.5	61.1	57.3	60.7	60.9	25.7	24.3	24.5	25.5	26.9	28.7
Hungary	–	35.3	28.6	34.1	42.4	40.5	–	15.1	9.7	13.3	27.7	27.0
Iceland	–	93.5	92.7	94.7	90.1	90.9	–	81.1	84.8	76.8	81.9	78.1
Ireland	78	65	63.9	64.7	67.8	68.4	20.2	19.9	21.2	27.8	38.4	42.5
Italy	56.2	53	44.1	42.7	44.3	47.0	15	15.5	13.8	16.1	21.5	24.7
Japan	97.1	83.3	84.8	84.1	83.1	85.1	46.1	47.2	48.5	49.7	50.8	53.1
Korea	–	77.2	79.7	71	74.5	76.3	–	49.6	50.4	48.6	46.5	47.9
Luxembourg	37.8	43.2	35.1	38.6	39.4	44.5	14.7	13.8	13.3	16.8	25.1	32.5
Mexico	–	85.9	80.7	80.8	79.3	80.0	–	24.4	26.9	28.6	30.7	34.6
The Netherlands	54.1	45.8	42.3	50.8	57.7	62.7	13.4	16.8	18.6	26.4	34.4	42.5
New Zealand	–	56.8	65.3	72.2	79.7	81.9	–	30.7	39	48	62.5	64.9
Norway	80.3	72.8	72.3	74.4	74.6	75.0	53.1	53.9	57.4	61.6	62.9	64.9
Poland	–	48.1	45.5	40.4	43.4	46.8	–	29.6	27.6	23.7	23.5	21.6
Portugal	70.7	66.5	61.9	64.5	62.4	63.0	32.6	32.3	34.5	41.9	46.1	46.6
Spain	71.5	62.5	54.9	60.5	63.2	65.1	20.3	19.4	19.9	22.6	29.6	34.2
Sweden	77	75.5	70.7	72.8	76.4	76.7	59.7	65.8	63.7	65.9	69.2	69.3
Switzerland	–	86.4	82.3	79.3	77.8	78.9	–	43.8	58.7	51.3	57.7	61.6
Turkey	–	61.3	60.9	53.4	47.4	43.8	–	26.6	26.1	21.6	17.0	15.0
UK	70	68.1	62.4	63.3	67.9	70.1	36.1	38.7	40.8	42.6	48.9	50.0
Europe	62.9	55.5	52.4	51.9	55.5	57.2	27.6	26.4	27.8	29.5	35.2	37.4
USA	69.4	67.8	66	67.3	69.3	70.4	41.5	45.2	49.2	51.9	57.0	59.1
Total OECD	80.6	65	62.7	62.8	65.6	67.0	34.5	34.7	36.4	38.8	43.7	46.2

Note: Figures are percentages

Table I. Trends in labour force participation rates among people aged 55-64 among the OECD countries

inevitability of ageing workforces: "Future competitiveness in the private sector and efficiency in the public sector will rest increasingly on the performance and productivity of ageing workforces" (p. 691), it is a logical step to realise that the flexible organization does not recognise the value of the older worker (Sennett, 2006), which would suggest that premature exit from the labour market may remain a feature of the work histories of many.

Technologies, the structure and processes of labour and organisational forms are under incessant pressure to maintain footholds on the treadmill of international competitiveness. Theorists of globalisation, for example Castells (2000) and Beck (2006) explain the profound shift in skills and competences of employment which have changed to keep pace with demands for globally valued knowledge to maintain global market flows (despite current minor retractions of production to local labour markets). Sennett (2008) delineates the profound restructuring of modes of work as new flexible labour processes and organisations. He maintains that the "skills society" is bulldozing the orderly building up of careers along linear life paths. He maintains that jobs in the

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sense of "random movement now prevail; people are meant to deploy a portfolio of skills rather than nurture a single ability in the course of their working histories; this succession of projects or tasks erodes belief that one was meant to do just one thing well" (Sennett, 2008, p. 265). In a recent review Taylor and Jorgensen (2008) speculated that demographic shifts in combination with global changes in product and service delivery may spur employers to seek alternatives to older workers, leading, as Sennett (2006) puts it, to them facing the "spectre of uselessness" (p. 86).

Despite the flagrant forces reshaping organisational performance, overall, the translation of lifelong learning policies within changing workplaces has been lagging in developed societies (see Taylor and Urwin, 2001; Phillipson, 2009), notwithstanding arguments that this should be a critical element of efforts to promote greater labour market participation among older people (Auer and Fortuny, 2000). Policy initiatives are underway in the European Union with the aim of increasing adult participation in lifelong learning (Reday-Mulvey, 2005) and in Australia lifelong learning is set as government policy (see COAG, 2006), yet aspirational benchmarks have not been converted into real achievements. Life stage possibilities for individuals to enable new opportunities to redefine the scope of midlife require educational support, as Phillipson (2009, p. 121) states, "... the challenge for social policy is to create the conditions for greater choice within transitions encountered after age 50". Participation in adult education and training fails precisely in the forties when this could assist people to "step up" to new roles and activities (Phillipson, 2009). In the information technology (IT) industry, Platman (2009) notes the dual aims of world-beating competitiveness and high employment participation for an ageing labour force. Older IT workers' capacity to envision careers beyond their fifties was constricted by age-based "normative" capability assumptions which truncated careers (see Brooke, 2009). A structural incompatibility was found between the exceptional dynamism and competitiveness of the IT industry and the conventional age-staged and extended career.

It can be argued that the dismissal of previous individual performance for the potential of others immediately disadvantages those with a history of success in their work. Concurrently, commonly held stereotypical views of older workers play a role in cutting off this group from possible recruitment or retention. This can be most clearly seen in the attributes that flexible organizations attempt to project; responsiveness, creativity, innovation and institutionalised impatience, which are at odds with commonly held stereotypes of older workers; reliability, resistant to change and difficulty in reskilling.

While recently policymakers have attempted to set out a business case which seeks to position older workers as a strategic investment, according to Lyon *et al.* (1998), this rests uneasily with new approaches to managing human resources, which stress the need to align strategic business planning and HR practices in order to achieve worker flexibility, organizational commitment and the retention of a "core" workforce. While the importance of workforce investment over the long-term is also stressed, there is selectivity in to whom this investment should apply. Older workers' employment with the firm may pre-date, by a considerable time, the introduction of new practices, generating suspicion among managers who may view them as having ideologies and allegiances at odds with the new value system they are trying to establish. Such perspectives may provide the rationale for recruiting younger and inexperienced workers to new businesses and to the exclusion of older ones among established businesses seeking to emulate these conditions.

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According to Lyon and colleagues, this perspective not only legitimises existing attitudes, it also provides a seemingly more coherent and, above all, business-focused explanation for the apparent drawbacks in employing older workers. Older employees are not only perceived as being less effective, they also represent a serious barrier to organizational change and flexible performance. According to the authors

> Nothing better epitomises the contradiction between long-term employee investment and numerical flexibility than the treatment of older workers . . . [HRM's] philosophy can be seen to amplify older workers' problems by reinforcing ageism in management thinking through the provision of a commercially appropriate rationale which embellishes existing stereotypes and doubts about the commitment of older workers (Lyon *et al.* (1998, p. 57).

This article considers the potential barriers to the employment and retention of older workers. Drawing on qualitative data collected among four Australian employing organizations, attitudes to age and ageing are considered in the light of ongoing organizational change in response to new operational contexts.

2. Methodology

The qualitative data and quotations that form the basis for this article are based on interviews undertaken at four case study organizations in Australia. While participation in these interviews was unequivocally voluntary and anonymous, purposeful sampling was undertaken to achieve the largest possible spread of respondents from the various levels, business areas and locations of the case study organizations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the analysis of the interview and observation data was done using NVivo 7.

The four organizations that participated in this study cover distinct industries. The characteristics of the organizations are as follows:

(1) An Australian branch of a multinational manufacturing firm. This organization has locations predominantly across the eastern seaboard of Australia, although other sites include South and Western Australia and New Zealand. The interviews were undertaken at the head office of this firm in Victoria, a total of ten key informants were interviewed. The interviewees were from the middle and upper levels of management.

(2) Two freight terminals of an international airline. The locations of these terminals are at two major Australian airports. Interviews were undertaken at both of these locations yielding a total of 32 key informants. The interviewees in this case were from various levels of the organization including cabin crew through to local airline general managers.

(3) A small national university. This institution has locations across Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Interviewees were engaged from the Melbourne and Sydney campuses, a total of 15 participants were interviewed. Key informants from this organization represented various faculties and administrative bodies within the university.

(4) Roadside assistance branch of a motoring organization. This organization operates in Victoria. 15 participants were interviewed from this organization. The key informants in this case were OH&S, Human Resources and Industrial Relations managers and patrol staff.

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The interview schedule used covered five general areas. Key informants were asked to describe their current role including tenure and tasks, any concurrent roles and their most recent previous employment. Subsequently, respondents were asked to describe the key challenges that their organisation was currently facing in terms of competitiveness, organisational and structural challenges and the idiosyncrasies of the working environment. Respondents were then asked how their organization was addressing issues of workforce ageing. This included awareness of ageing workforce issues amongst management and supervisors, how these issues influence the culture and day-to-day practice of the organization and any policies or actions being undertaken to address the potential impacts of workforce ageing. Also in this domain, respondents were asked about how work/life balance was promoted and if any problematic policies and practices could be improved to improve health and well-being. Finally, key informants were asked whether there was evidence of older workers preparing for the potential impact of ageing on their capacity to do their work. This included discussion of health and well-being factors, training and attitudinal facets.

3. Findings

Despite the demise of mandatory retirement in Australia and the trend for increasing longevity in employment consistent with other OECD countries, countervailing factors may still induce older workers' early exit. The paper identifies themes affecting the continuing employment of older workers in this range of organizational settings. These themes are based in individual factors and inhibitors of the potentiality of older workers, the capacities required for rapidly transforming jobs and changing physical capacities in relation to organizational requirements. Further organisational-level consequences of the retention of older workers, corporate memory and the flexibility requirements of changing organizations, are also discussed. These factors, whilst not inevitably leading to retirement, form potential challenges to older workers' capacities to be responsive to the new and changing workplace contingencies and thus to prolong their employment in these settings.

3.1 Inhibitors of older worker potentiality

The changing workplace has meant that the dated skills of older staff are in competition with the newly acquired skills of younger people. The notion of prolonging careers is an aspiration which calls for "battling on the job", which was cast as generational competition over the match between new workplaces and new skills requirements. On the other hand, perceptions of the external labour market as potentially hostile to older workers might lock people into the stasis of their current employment and inhibit the exploration of potentialities. While individuals might wish to exercise personal choice they are constrained by less attractive external labour market choices. In the words of two respondents:

> I think what I'm hearing from the marketplace is that these people are looking for changes and they understand that they're up against it so far as, you know, battling on the job front with younger people and they're willing to accept lesser commissions, lesser pays, whatever, to take a step.

> It really is a positive place. I mean it's not Utopia. Like, I'm not happy with senior management, with management committee, as you can see. But you ask yourself, really, is it

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> worth leaving for? No. You just get out of the frying pan into the fire. Very few businesses actually have the positive culture we've got.

Flexible organizations constantly engage in a search for talent. The importance of previous performance and concepts related to work ethic such as craftsmanship are devalued, by comparison, for the more intangible ideas of portability of problem solving skills and the ability to process and interpret changing bodies of information (Sennett, 2006). In the search for talent the judgement of this "potential ability" is far more personally damaging for older workers' prospects than an assessment of previous mistakes and successes. For instance, individuals may be under-skilled and conceal their inadequacies, potentially depriving themselves of learning opportunities. A respondent considered that older workers may not want to admit that aspects of the competences required for their role have surpassed their capacities and which leads them to falsely represent these:

> Well I think after speaking to a lot of them, they're quite happy that they're still in the position that they are and they don't talk a lot about difficulties that they possibly may be having, so there's not that expression, oh I'm having trouble doing such and such or whatever. So you don't see it openly, whether there is an underlying, you'd only get by interviewing those sort of people that could be identified, but I don't get that, it doesn't come across that way.

According to Sennett (2006) the paradigm for success in flexible organizations is not that of a craftsman. The flexible paradigm discourages trial and error learning, negates performance track record, and encourages superficial engagement with problems and privilege portable problem solving skills. Undervaluing older workers' experience and over valuing the new skills of the youth can favour younger workers being trained while older workers seen as dispensable and are treated as "a non entity". In the words of one respondent:

> Respect and don't stand over. When I say don't stand over, don't push them to one side like they're a non entity. Utilize their experience. I'm not talking for myself here but there are a few down there who have been here a long time and because they've been pushed to one side, their morale has dropped and I really think that is shocking actually. Shocking for the company to totally disregard all the experience that we've got. Whereas they probably think oh well they'll be leaving soon so we'll train this one up whereas that one's not getting trained properly.

Future skill needs presented as a challenge to the case organizations, with the skill sets of older workers frequently and increasingly misaligned with operational needs. For instance, in this regard the motor vehicle roadside crew of the Motoring Organization is undergoing a transition from traditional mechanical skills to those requiring IT knowledge and expertise in engines utilizing the latest gas technologies. In the automobile roadside repair work, the issue of the adaptability of older workers to making transitions to new technology was seen to have a "demoralizing impact". The organization has not recruited anyone new for 13 years, suggesting that the organization faces serious challenges in adapting to the new skills requirements. In the words of one respondent:

> Maintaining your knowledge of vehicles when you are 20 years old and this is, you know, the newest vehicle that you've been exposed to is quite easy. But for example, I've just taken delivery of a brand new car which is only a gas car. It's the first motor built in Australia like

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that. I think it takes a bit for a mechanic who's been used to working on cars for 30 years with a particular type of motor to change. It has an impact and it's a demoralizing impact, I think, to be honest. I think Motoring Organization faces some serious challenges in that.

The discourse around adapting workplaces to the capacities of older workers elicited the stereotype of older workers 'being set in their ways'. The discourse concerning what defines an older worker reveals the complex interplay between age-stereotypes regarding older workers' capacities with evolving technologies and perceptions of decreased learning speed and efficacy, organizational training and the experience of biological factors. In the words of respondents:

Interviewer: So there's loss of – it's more difficult to take in new information, physical problems.

Respondent: Yes, it is a bit more difficult, because you're set in your ways. It's always difficult, but I suppose we tend to close our minds up, whereas we shouldn't.

No, I haven't really had any feedback on that, to be honest. I often think about it and I think because you're working on highly advanced technical vehicles these days, and I often wonder how people feel about that, you know, this old bloke coming to work on their car sort of thing.

That's probably an issue with as you're ageing, you probably don't learn as well as you used to and that's probably a little bit of an issue in terms of keeping up with the technology. We have training here but it's nowhere near as – it's not as comprehensive as it used to be.

I think what will probably take me out of the job is keeping up with technology. I think that may be the thing that will possibly make it hard for me.

3.2 Changing physical capacities and organizational requirements

Latent age-bound views of older workers' physical capacities could be disguised by respondents, who associated them with physical conditions such as obesity and poor eyesight. The interweaving between age and physical changes meant that stereotypes could be inseparable from physical manifestations in workplaces. Proposed adaptations to accommodate older workers had the potential to undermine organizational agility. According to three respondents:

Respondent 1: As cars are advancing, in previous years, young patrols have brought in some of the newer ideas of how technology is running, where now the only way we can pick it up is through contact with outside sources. Secondly, as we're getting older, our physical wellbeing is dropping down, so a young patrolman is more flexible and goes under a car a lot easier. As we get older, we don't fit under a car. Our shape means we don't fit under as well and mobility doesn't allow it either.

Respondent 2: I don't have that. Because my job is – my days off are often in the middle of the week, sometimes they're on the weekend, sometimes they're in the middle of the week but they vary. You don't have a regular rhythm. I think that affects a lot of aspects of your life and your lifestyle and probably more as you get older. I think that's probably one area that could be looked at for the ageing workforce to ease those people who are getting a bit older back into a more regular nine to five type routine.

Respondent 3: I'm being very vocal here, but part-time doesn't work in our area. It just doesn't work.

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Interviewer: Why not?

Respondent 3: There's no room for five hour shifts. We have eight hour shifts and some days, eight hours isn't long enough. Five hours, they're having a break and you're not getting much out of them, really. I don't disagree with part-time, I'm just saying in our industry over there, it just doesn't suit us. There is enough work for everyone to keep going eight hours.

3.3 Organizational-level consequences of ageing workforces

The preceding section of this article leads towards consideration of whether the functioning of organizations has the potential to be substantially undermined by the ageing of their workforces. The case studies exemplify Sennett's position concerning the role of craftsmen in organizations. As self-managing, carrying know-how and experience, which understands the integrity of the work and does not requires levels of management input. On the other hand, in the case organizations new business models were demanding radically new skill sets and the abandonment of previous modes of working which could leave older workers ill-equipped to respond.

3.4 The potential mismatch between corporate memory and strategic management

Interviewees frequently referred to the importance of corporate memory and the risk of knowledge loss as older workers exited organizations. Certain kinds of knowledge or experience were considered valuable, perhaps even balancing perceived deficiencies elsewhere such as physical decline. Generalised, "rule-of-thumb" and practical knowledge which could be applied in a range of settings was valued over specialized and new knowledge. Accrued experience also benefited organizations as physical deficits potentially affecting productivity could be offset by product experience. Meanwhile, younger workers could potentially benefit from older workers' know-how, which could reduce the risk of occupational injuries. In the words of four respondents:

Respondent 1: The advantage of it is that you get a lot of experienced people. I mean, the positive side is that you've got lots of experienced people with a lot of corporate memory and a lot of experience in teaching and running an organization.

Respondent 2: There's probably more trust from the organization in the patrol, because they've been doing it for so long. If you don't trust them by now, whereas with the younger people, they have to keep more of an eye on it. We're sort of left alone a lot to our own devices and as long as you do your job, nobody worries. The younger you are, the more things you want to do outside the workplace, so you take short cuts. You get the job done, but you could be doing the wrong thing as far as management is concerned. I'm not saying we're perfect, but I think management will have a more - they'll feel more at ease with the workers. They don't have to continuously be on their backs to do things.

Respondent 3: The negative would be they have to find someone to replace us and that's getting harder and harder, especially in the motor industry. It's getting more complex with a lot of people specialising in a particular model car. So if you're out on the road, you've basically got to know a little bit about everything.

Respondent 4: I suppose in our industry the manual handling side of things, which is a very large part of the freight product, you know the human body wears and get old and gets tired. So that would affect performance, but also with the implementation of a lot of mechanisation and different things that we have these days, a lot of that has been removed. So therefore with the support and people working safely and working you know, using their brain when they

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> do work . . . yeah I think you know the benefits are that although you know that you may not be as physically fit as you were, the knowledge of the product that we have and how to do things I'd say in a lot of cases balances that out.

However, such employee perspectives frequently appeared to be at odds with managerial ones. Here, supporting the claims set out earlier in this article, corporate memory was frequently viewed as being anathema to the flexible organization, undermining responsiveness and restraining much needed change.

For instance, many Australian universities are undergoing major transitions as the nature of higher education is changing as government targets require improved research performance. Teaching has historically been the primary focus of much tertiary education in Australia. There was considerable doubt that an ageing academic population could respond effectively to this additional objective, given that many academics have little or no research track-record, with backgrounds primarily in the delivery of learning. Culture change towards this new academic agenda could not be achieved in the time remaining for these careers, with the risk of loss of motivation as staff considered that aspirations were misaligned with organizational goals. In the words of a respondent:

> You can't turn someone in their mid-50s into an active researcher for 10 years time, it's like it's too late, they're not going to get any ARC [Australian Research Council] grants, they're not going to be competitive.

Similarly, in the air freight company, new more modern management approaches were being demanded by the market but were being constrained by an organizational culture that had long since ceased to evolve. In the words of one respondent:

> *Interviewer*: So, what are their main business and organizational challenges at the moment, do you think?
>
> *Respondent*: To change the culture of the workforce. We've got, I guess, yeah, you probably could call it an ageing workforce, in the sense that our average tenure of service is 14 years for each employee. Our average age is about 44, so basically when people come to Air Freight Company, they tend to stay here. They don't tend to move on. We have people that have raked up about 30 years of service, just by working here at the terminal, so basically come in doing the same job. So basically trying to change the culture in a sense that we don't want to, I guess, remain where we currently are sitting, back ten years ago. We want to actually move the company forward into the 21st century and start implementing things such as performance management, talent management, and also have, I guess, a more rigid roster system, instead of just working off a pure spreadsheet, which is what we're doing at the moment.

Similarly, echoing the perspective of Lyon and colleagues referred to earlier, the opinion was also expressed that not only could older workers' value to the organization diminish considerably, they could also become an impediment to effective management, undermining authority and control. In the words of one respondent, utilising a sporting metaphor:

> We want fit, strong, centre-half forwards working out here. Which is terrific, except everybody gets older. You end up with, you know, the retired player becomes the commentator after a while.

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Added to this, tensions were arising in case organizations when issues of equity and operational requirements were considered. While paternalistic feelings towards older workers were frequently expressed by managers, "soft" and "bridge" jobs were coming under close scrutiny amid efforts to balance operating budgets. It was perceived that the scope for accommodating older workers in terms of lighter duties was reaching its limits as increasing numbers wanted such jobs while the decision latitude of managers, due to ever more demanding service standards, was decreasing. Such accommodations were also being perceived as potentially undermining operational performance and generational solidarity if redeployment was not handled with consideration given to equity issues. In the words of three respondents:

> . . . what is going to happen when these guys are too old? They're going to have more compo [compensation] claims, there's going to be absenteeism, all these things adding cost to the business. We're not meeting our service standards, which we're being driven by, like how quick can we get to a member and the costs compound the effects of that.

> We have a specific function, which is called an import delivery function, which predominantly requires a person to drive a forklift and remain on the forklift for most of the day. So we've moved that type of role and that type of person and their age into that specific role, which has now reduced the ability for somebody who maybe in their twenties or thirties to do it. I'm not proud of this, but they've been nicknamed "Dad's Army". They've accepted the fact that as a duty of care, we are creating a working environment which is keeping the productivity levels up and allowing the more elderly people in our organization to extend their work life, if you like, because I think if they were expected to do what the younger employees are doing, they would be into injuries and that type of activity, and I think you have to be sensible about it. But it does get to a point where you do get saturated to the point where you can't keep offering that, because the productivity does eventually start to slow when you reach a point where everybody just wants to sit on a forklift all day.

> The other concern, of course, is that we have a tendency when people become elderly in the workforce, that we isolate them from – to put it in a term – the "grunt" labour activities. Now, that's not always possible and I think at times that has a tendency to be seen to be favouring the activity where people are being paid the same amount of money and all that for the type of activity that they do, but isolating people and maybe just sitting them on a forklift or sitting them behind a counter, doing reduced physical activity when in fact the role calls for quite a regular physical contribution, so I think that's an issue.

4. Discussion

Skills transitions require conversion into organisational profitability. The ability to apply skills involved a dialectical interplay between changing organisational structures in relation to perceptions of the adaptability of older workers. This was seen to translate into competitive discourses over the utility of old age stereotypes which were "trialled" against new organisational changes, while solid new age perceptions did not emerge as replacements. The linearity of careers was fragmented in high-tech organisations, manufacturing environments and previously craft-based jobs as these organisations adapt to survive globally.

In academic teaching environments, piecemeal knowledge work has developed as response to the market demand for knowledge products supporting the internationalisation of the student population. The need for responsiveness of institutions to burgeoning numbers of students and an increasing emphasis on

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research performance has resulted in new academic role requirements. Knowledge work involves organisational management of a throughput of students within a globally competitive environment, taking on characteristics of units of production (Marginson and Considine, 2000). Skills and competences require quick adjustments and cost effective delivery of education managed by reduced and rationalised administrative centres of management. Different pressures have built up on academic staff to service this industry necessitating the reorientation of teaching away from one-to-one relationships with academic mentors to mass throughputs of human capital. At the same time, a trend towards a quick turnaround of academic knowledge as intellectual products has occurred as efforts to raise standards of research scholarship have been initiated.

Manual processing environments also exemplify the need for outputs of production in the least time possible, which fragment tasks into productive components. Also elements of IT are embedded within manual operations and logistics driven by the speed required to produce internationally competitive goods. Furthermore, work intense practices were commonly deemed to be unmanageable by older workers. The roadside maintenance organisation represents a craftsman environment delineated by Sennett (2008) in which pressures to continue and yet accommodate the need for flexible responses and new computerised technologies changed the nature of labour processes.

These ageing workers exemplify "rootedness" of labour processes (Sennett, 2008) in the trade of being a mechanical craftsmen. The individuals operating within the framework of the flexible organisation do not operate like craftsmen. The required input of time, trial and error learning and reflection on the processes does not fit with the short time span of projects and teams within flexible organisations (Sennett, 2006). The time pressure on servicing clients also conforms to time pressured and work intensive nature of the job outputs. To the flexible organisation the approach of a craftsman is viewed as inept and out of sync with constraints on working time and illogical in an environment where projects vanish quickly as they appear. Within this framework the priority value is immediate timely performance.

Altogether, the findings of this study underline the problems inherent in trying to promote the employment of older workers. Long-term chronic under investment in skills acquisition and retention and in the maintenance of well-being over a working career and other support strategies which keep older workers at optimal or near optimal levels of productivity present as serious risk factors for the modern flexible organization. Such observations point to the need for much greater investment in human capital over the long term rather than the front-loading of this than has hitherto been the case if future cohorts of older workers are to avoid labour market disadvantage.

Concerning present cohorts, however, there are dilemmas for public policymakers in finding a balance between providing an adequate social safety net for those left behind while wishing to encourage the prolongation of working lives. According to Sennett (2008) the well-crafted organization will respond to the fragmented nature of work, as dislocation is a permanent fact, to demonstrate that loyalty matters, as workers who are retrained by an institution are much more bonded to it than are in-and-out workers. Figuring out how to build on existing skills is a strategy that will help orient individuals in time, a strategy that will build and retain personal narratives. In

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Sennett's view, "The well-crafted organisation will want to pursue this strategy to keep itself together" (2008, p. 266). For this to be feasible requires conservation and transformation effort of great magnitude, which may not be achievable, but on the other hand passivity may consign the potentiality of older workers to the organizational past. However, tempting though it currently may be for policymakers to emphasise work over welfare, the evidence presented here points to diminishing prospects for many older workers for whom experience accumulated over a career will likely continue to compare unfavourably with the perceived potentiality of youth.

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