

STEREOTYPES AND OLDER WORKERS: THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Social prejudice about older people in society is expressed in a variety of discriminatory stereotypes. This paper explores the nature of stereotypes held by a large group of older workers and by employers in New Zealand. The empirical study shows that older workers aged 55 years and over who are members of New Zealand's largest union and employers who belong to the New Zealand Employers' Federation hold in common a number of stereotypes about older workers. The negative stereotypes held by both groups are "adaptability factors", such as resistance to change and problems with technology, particularly computer technology. The positive stereotypes also relate to "adaptability factors", but in this case they are reliability, loyalty and job commitment. The implications of the findings are considered for the Government's policy on positive ageing and for societal change.

INTRODUCTION

Persistent stereotypes – social beliefs, which are often learned from others (Franzoi 1996) – surround older workers. Stereotypes are rarely neutral and are often highly evaluative (Oakes et al. 1994), dividing people into in-groups and out-groups. They are part of a wider picture of social prejudice against older people in general that the Government and policy agencies are attempting to address through attitudinal change and policy initiatives under the rubric of "positive" ageing (Dalziel 2001). Stereotypes are not fixed mental states, and redefinition and abandonment of stereotypes are part of the process of social change and of social progress. For example, stereotypes against women, ethnic minorities and gays are less pervasive today than they were a century ago (Oakes et al. 1994). Because stereotypes significantly influence the way the public processes social information, it is useful to know the extent to which groups such as older workers themselves and employers subscribe to contemporary social attitudes

and beliefs. In particular, the extent to which stereotypes are held about older workers may influence employment-related decisions and give rise to age discrimination at work (Chiu et al. 2001).

THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE

There is now a significant amount of research on stereotypical beliefs about older workers in Western societies (Tillsley 1990, Taylor and Walker 1998), and this paper reports on the New Zealand experience. The study gathered information on stereotypes about older workers from two large questionnaire surveys undertaken by Massey University researchers engaged in a Public Good Science Fund study about the employment of the older worker. The first quantitative survey was conducted among workers aged 55 years and over who were members of New Zealand's largest union, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU); a second, similar survey was conducted among employers who were members of the New Zealand Employers' Federation. The studies were undertaken with the co-operation of the participant groups. The partnership approach to research, which involved access to membership databases and letters of support endorsing the value of the research, signalled the salience of the issue of the employment of the older worker to both the union and employers' groups.

Information about older worker stereotypes in New Zealand has been largely anecdotal, generally suggesting that false, stereotypical assumptions are commonly attached to older workers. For example, Rudman (1999), in a New Zealand human resource management textbook, describes as fallacies such beliefs as "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" and that after a certain age people are simply waiting to retire and collect their pensions. Our study was designed to move on from anecdotal perceptions and collect empirical data about whether stereotypes existed, and which stereotypes were commonly subscribed to by older workers themselves and by New Zealand employers.

BACKGROUND

The current socio-political environment lends greater significance to the issue of employment-related age discrimination. Firstly, awareness of age discrimination at work has been heightened by changes to the Human Rights Act 1993, which added age as a prohibited ground of discrimination from 1 February 1994 and effectively abolished compulsory retirement on the grounds of age after a five-year transitional period ending on 1 February 1999 (New Zealand Employers' Federation 1998). Secondly, the raising of the traditional "exit" age from work from 60 to 65 years for many workers reliant for financial security in their old age on government superannuation, and the fact that there is no longer a compulsory retirement age, also mean many older workers will stay longer in the work force. Thirdly, policy

considerations about the future of work demand a greater understanding of the “greying” of the labour force and society’s attitudes.

Other labour market dynamics – such as the ethic of individual rights intrinsic to the employment contracts legislative regime in New Zealand, in force at the time the surveys were conducted, and the worldwide reassertion of managerialism that accompanied economic restructuring – clearly influence the work environment for older workers. However, these influences, which can be positive or negative and operate either overtly or covertly, is hard to quantify. With heightened policy attention being paid to positive ageing strategies in New Zealand there is a clear need for better data collection about the impact of labour market patterns and human resource trends on older workers and their treatment at all stages of the employment cycle – from recruitment, selection, promotion and training, through to exit via retirement, redundancy or dismissal.

In addition to the wider socio-economic climate there are a number of individual and organisational characteristics affecting age stereotypes that should be recorded in relation to the study. Looking at individual characteristics first, it is important to note that both surveys explored stereotypical perceptions rather than actual job performance, and no data were collected on the relationship between age and job performance other than respondents’ perceptions. So are stereotypes about older people’s work performance based on myth or reality? Some previous research findings on this question are discussed in the following section.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ABOUT STEREOTYPES AND AGE

A vast body of literature has been devoted to what Loretto et al. (2000:290) describe as “one of the principal recurring debates, that of performance declining with age”. In fact a somewhat confusing picture emerges from the literature on this issue. Griffiths (1997) provides a useful summary of the scientific literature and states that most reviews and meta-analyses report little consistent relationship between ageing and work performance. However, while age may indeed be a poor proxy for performance, many of the international studies have different methodological starting points.

It is clear, for example, that some physical attributes such as eye sight, hearing and physiological systems deteriorate. Griffiths (1997:200) poses the question, “given the evidence for some age-related deterioration in various physiological and cognitive systems, why might work-based and population-based studies of the relationship between age and performance suggest different results?” Various moderating and compensating factors are pointed out in response. For example, older workers compensate for a decline in cognitive ability with an increase in job knowledge and skills (Salthouse and Maurer 1996).

Writing more recently, Chiu et al. (2001) argue that an explanation for the mixed results from international studies (setting aside methodological differences) is that jobs and related tasks vary in the extent to which their performance is impaired by physical ageing. They state that “what is clear is that older workers are not necessarily any less effective than their younger counterparts” (p.634). It appears, then, that stereotypes about older workers that relate to individual characteristics such as poorer performance have only a limited factual basis. Nevertheless, the difference between cognitive and physical work needs to be noted, as well as the fact that there is little previous or current New Zealand data directly on this point.

Organisational characteristics that influence stereotypes about age could include the nature of the industry, the human resource policies within an organisation (such as performance management, equity policies, company culture and philosophy), and whether the organisation pursues conducive work practices (such as flexitime, phased retirement and job sharing). Underpinning these organisational characteristics are national characteristics expressed both in the Positive Ageing Strategy and in the anti-age-discrimination provisions of the Human Rights Act 1993. One of 13 points of action which were recommended as key components in the Government’s Positive Ageing Strategy was the “elimination of ageism in the workforce, and the promotion of flexible employment options for older people” (Dalziel 2001:30). The human rights legislation encouraged a raised awareness about employers’ and workers’ responsibilities and rights in relation to age discrimination at work. Whether the legislation has gone further and pushed workplace attitudes beyond compliance towards a more tolerant and understanding atmosphere for older workers in New Zealand is another matter.

THE STUDIES AND METHODOLOGY

National, organisational and individual characteristics associated with ageist stereotypes were explored in the “Employment of the Older Worker” study (McGregor, 2001). The study comprised two separate large surveys of older workers and of New Zealand employers, and many of the questions asked were the same. Both surveys used a two-wave questionnaire design, and designated databases were used to find respondents and to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. The union’s database was used to identify 3,911 employee members 55 years of age and over, and a total of 2,063 employers were supplied by four regional groupings, including employers and manufacturers associations in the central and northern areas of the North Island, the Canterbury Employers Chamber of Commerce and the Otago Southland Employers Association. Letters of endorsement from the union’s national secretary and from the chief executive of the Employers’ Federation accompanied the respective questionnaires.

A feature of the research partnership between Massey University and industry groups was their involvement in the research design, including the wording of questions, style of presentation and topics covered. For example, the union insisted on the use of plain-English examples and an accessible style of instructions to respondents, which strengthened the usability of the questionnaire and improved the likely response rate. The Employers' Federation involvement saw the addition of several topics, such as the perceived effectiveness of performance appraisal in the management of older workers, which heightened the relevance of the survey to employers.

Both questionnaires, which were distributed in 2000, asked a set of common questions to test the respondents' views of older workers and to explore stereotypes, as well as questions specific to workers and to employers. One section common to both studies contained Likert-type scales¹ and asked workers and employers whether they agreed or disagreed with 26 particular statements about current stereotypes. The statements reflected previous research exploring stereotypes about older workers (Loretto et al. 2000, Lyon and Pollard 1997). These included views such as "older workers are more likely to be reliable" and "older workers are more likely to resist change". Another question common to the two surveys asked respondents to identify characteristics they felt were associated with particular age groups from 15 to 75 years. The 21 characteristics included items such as computer experience, flexibility, work ethic and people skills.

SAMPLE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Both surveys had healthy response rates by international standards, with a total of 2,137 valid responses from the workers' survey, representing a response rate of 54.6%, and 1,012 from the employers' survey – a response rate of 49%. The data collected represent the largest recent study of older workers in New Zealand, and provide a significant depth and breadth of information about workers and employers and about lived experiences of older workers in the workplace.

The gender breakdown of respondents in the worker's survey – 23.6% (496) of the 2,137 respondents were female and 76.4% (1,604) were male – is close to that of the EPMU's 54,000-strong membership (23% women, 77% men). A total of 60.2% (1,287) respondents indicated they were Pākehā European, 8.7% (186) indicated they were Māori, and 5.8% (123) indicated they were Pacific Island. The average age of those who replied to the workers' survey was 59 years, with 73% aged 56-60 years, 25% aged 61-

¹ Likert-type scales are a commonly used method of attitude measurement in social science research, measuring the extent to which a person agrees or disagrees with a statement – for example, 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

65 years and 2% over 65. A large majority of the workers who answered the survey had one job (91.9%) but 43.8% indicated they worked more than 40 hours a week. A majority of older workers who answered the questionnaire indicated they had been in their present job for some time.

Asked about retirement, just over half (51.1%) of older workers indicated they planned to retire later than eligibility for government superannuation (between 65 and 69) years, with a further 5.8% indicating they would retire at age 70 or older. Over a third (37.7%) indicated they would retire between 60 and 64 years. Significantly though, 81% said they had changed their minds about retirement and were now planning to retire later. Levels of saving, the increased cost of living, changes in the law about compulsory retirement and enjoyment of work were listed as important factors in the decision to retire later. If this predictor is borne out and these older workers do stay longer in employment, it will contradict the United States and Canadian experience where the abolition of compulsory retirement in the 1970s and 1980s had no effect on the average age of workers because older workers did not stay longer in employment (Matthews 1999). The difference may reflect the relatively weak tradition in New Zealand of comprehensive employer superannuation schemes.

The majority of employers who replied to the survey were larger employers, bearing in mind that in New Zealand 93.7% employ 10 or fewer people, but they appeared to be fairly representative of the Employers' Federation membership. The responses indicate that nearly 30% of employers who answered employed between four and 49 full-time staff and about 60% employed between 50 and 499 staff. Employer respondents indicated 60% of full-time staff were male and 40% were women, with the gender proportions roughly reversed for part-time workers. Statistical analysis was conducted to see if the size of the company distorted the data, and the analysis showed that the presence of larger companies did not skew the findings on gender and age.

Employers were asked in the study whether their organisations had work practices commonly credited with offering older people a more conducive employment environment that might attract, suit and retain them as workers. These work practices included flexitime, gradual or phased retirement, job sharing, job redesign, provision of training to suit individual employees, part-time or casual work for individual employees, job reassignment, extended leave, subsidised medical benefits, and employer superannuation schemes. Less than a third of employers indicated that they offered either flexitime or job sharing, and less than 10% offered gradual or phased retirement. Asked whether their organisations intended to introduce so-called "work friendly" practices in the next 12 months, a tiny number (26) indicated they would introduce flexitime or gradual/phased retirement, and only 36 intended to introduce job sharing.

FINDINGS ABOUT STEREOTYPES

Respondents to both surveys were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements under the theme of “views of the older worker”, which explored common stereotypes. While a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used in the survey, the results are reported here with the two agreement categories (“strongly agree” and “agree”) and the disagreement categories collapsed into one. In the presentation of findings, the Table 1 shows the views of older workers themselves (union members aged 55 years and over) and Table 2 shows the views of employers about older workers.

Table 1 Views of the Older Worker Held by Union Members Aged 55 Years and Over

Older workers are more likely to:	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %
1. Be reliable	96.6	2.2	1.2
2. Be committed to the job	93.9	4.1	2.0
3. Be loyal	92.5	5.6	1.9
4. Be productive	90.3	7.5	2.2
5. Be a good example for others	87.8	8.6	3.6
6. Be willing to stay longer in the job	83.2	8.5	8.3
7. Have better people skills	82.2	13	4.8
8. Have better customer skills	81.5	13.8	4.7
9. Fit in with the organisation	80.5	14.9	4.6
10. Offer employers a better return on investment	79.2	16.5	4.3
11. Be better team workers	76.5	17.0	6.5
12. Be better performers	72	24	4.0
13. Be ambitious	42.1	36.5	21.4
14. Resist change	49.4	15.9	34.7
15. Have problems with technology	48.8	18.3	32.9
16. Have higher levels of stress	40.6	23.9	35.5
17. Have more accidents at work	3.6	12.1	84.3
18. Be away from work sick	9.7	13.1	77.2
19. Be less motivated	12	15.3	72.7
20. Be less creative	12	17.9	70.1
21. Be less willing to train	23.6	19.3	57.1
22. Have lower expectations	27.3	15.7	57.0
23. Be less flexible	22.4	22.8	54.8
24. Be difficult to train	19.7	26.8	53.5
25. Be less willing to work long hours	38	15.8	46.2
26. Be less promotable	36.7	19.7	43.6

More workers agreed than disagreed with items 1-16, and more workers disagreed than agreed with items 17-26. There was a high level of agreement with statements about the dependability of older workers. For example, 96.6%, 93.9%, 92.5% and 90.3% of respondents agreed with the statements that older workers were more likely to “be reliable”, “be loyal”, “be committed to the job” and “be productive”, respectively. The results confirmed the presence of two commonly mentioned stereotypes relating to change and to technology. A total of 49.4% agreed that older people were more likely to resist change compared with 34.7% who disagreed. A similar majority (48.8%) agreed with the statement that older workers were more likely to have problems with technology.

The same questions were asked of employers and Table 2 provides the results. More employers agreed than disagreed with items 1-19, and more employed disagreed than agreed with items 20-26. However, for nine items (9, 10 and 13 to 19) “neither agree nor disagree” was the most common response, indicating that at least a plurality (and for items 14, 18 and 19, a majority) of respondents did not see these characteristics as particularly age-sensitive.

Positive views of the older worker from employers related to “dependability factors” such as reliability, loyalty and job commitment. Negative factors related to problems with technology and “adaptability factors” such as resisting change, and being less flexible and less willing to work long hours. While in general the two surveys similar stereotyping with differences of emphasis only, there was one significant difference. A very low percentage of employers agreed that older workers were ambitious (9.4%), compared with a much higher proportion of agreement from older workers (42.1%).

A comparison of the responses to the two statements about training (that older workers were more difficult to train and less willing to train) shows a substantial divergence between the views of older workers and employers. For employers, the most common response was “neither agree nor disagree” and, for the rest of the employers, more agreed than disagreed with these negative stereotypes. Thus the employers tended to be neutral to the training stereotypes or somewhat negatively disposed. However, well over half of older workers disagreed with both statements, the majority seeing their contemporaries as eminently willing and able to be trained.

Table 2 Views of the Older Worker Held by Employers

Older workers are more likely to:	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree%
1. Be reliable	83.6	11.3	5.3
2. Be loyal	81.2	16	2.9
3. Be committed to the job	65.9	18.5	5.6
4. Be willing to stay longer in the job	61.6	32.2	6.8
5. Resist change	60.1	22.8	17.1
6. Be a good example for others	56.4	36.9	6.7
7. Have problems with technology	55.4	28.4	16.2
8. Be productive	52.5	37.4	10.1
9. Fit in with the organisation	44	48.9	7.2
10. Have better people skills	42.2	47.3	10.5
11. Be less flexible	39.3	33.4	27.3
12. Be less willing to work long hours	39.1	32.3	28.6
13. Be better team players	32.5	36.5	30.9
14. Have better customer skills	34.9	51.9	13.2
15. Be less willing to train	32.5	36.5	30.9
16. Be less promotable	32.4	41	26.6
17. Be difficult to train	27.4	47.6	25
18. Be better performers	26.1	60.6	13.3
19. Offer employers a better return on investment	25.5	59.8	14.7
20. Be away from work sick	7.1	36.8	56.2
21. Have more accidents at work	3.8	42.1	54.2
22. Be ambitious	9.4	43.2	47.5
23. Be less motivated	14.6	40.4	44.9
24. Have higher levels of stress	20.4	43.4	36.2
25. Have lower expectations	31.3	33.6	35
26. Be less creative	22.4	43.8	33.9

A feature of the research design was inclusion of questions in the surveys that explored the common stereotypes from different vantage points, providing an opportunity for respondents to corroborate or contradict their own views. Thus both surveys asked respondents to identify certain characteristics with particular age groups from 15 years to 75 years with an additional "all ages" category. The findings (shown in Tables 3 and 4) tended to corroborate the results from the first line of questioning (reported in Tables 1 and 2), particularly in relation to stereotypes relating to technology. Both older union members and employers were asked to think about workers in different age groups and indicate which groups best illustrated a number of qualities and factors ranging from computer experience to loyalty to the employer.

Table 3 Characteristics Associated with Age Groups: % Responses from Union Members Aged 55 Years and Over

Characteristics	15-29 yrs	30-44 yrs	45-59 yrs	60-75 yrs	All Ages	Total
1. Computer experience	63.3	21.3	3.0	0.4	12.0	100
2. Enthusiasm	29.4	30.5	11.3	1.9	26.8	100
3. High levels of motivation	11.8	45.3	18.9	2.1	21.8	100
4. Creativity	17.7	39.0	13.9	1.0	28.4	100
5. Innovation	12.9	42.8	16.6	0.9	26.8	100
6. Adaptability	15.5	35.9	23.7	2.4	22.5	100
7. Project management skills	3.3	44.0	32.4	2.7	17.6	100
8. Flexibility	13.8	29.7	31.7	3.5	21.3	100
9. Confidence	11.0	29.2	27.4	5.2	27.2	100
10. Team spirit	6.3	29.2	26.2	3.1	35.2	100
11. Excellent personal presentation	3.8	27.8	32.0	5.5	30.9	100
12. Customer focus	3.9	24.0	31.8	3.4	22.6	100
13. Communication skills	4.5	24.9	40.3	4.9	25.4	100
14. Leadership	1.9	31.7	41.4	3.9	21.4	100
15. Professionalism	1.3	21.0	45.4	6.7	25.5	100
16. People skills	1.9	20.1	47.3	7.2	23.5	100
17. Business knowledge	2.0	24.8	44.8	10.4	17.9	100
18. Credibility	1.3	16.3	44.7	10.3	27.3	100
19. Strong work ethic	2.0	20.4	49.4	7.5	20.2	100
20. Judgement	0.7	13.8	50.8	11.7	23.1	100
21. Loyalty to employer	1.5	9.1	53.7	13.0	22.6	100

The results (Table 3) showed that older worker respondents strongly associated “computer experience” with younger workers, and to a lesser extent “enthusiasm”. Few of the 21 characteristics were seen by the respondents as being associated with workers aged 60-75 years, although more than 10% listed “loyalty to employer”, “judgement”, “business knowledge” and “credibility”.

Again, a similar pattern emerges from employers who were asked the same question (Table 4).

The findings show that employers strongly associated “computer experience” with younger workers, and to a lesser extent “enthusiasm” and “adaptability”. Again, employers saw few of the characteristics as being associated with older workers in the 60-75 age group except for “loyalty to the employer” which approximately 10% of

Table 4 Characteristics Associated with Age Groups: % Responses from Employers

%Workers	15-29 yrs	30-44 yrs	45-59 yrs	60-75 yrs	All Ages	Total
1. Computer experience	66.9	19.9	1.1	–	12.1	100
2. Enthusiasm	35.2	28.5	3.3	0.4	32.6	100
3. High levels of motivation	14.9	48.0	6.4	0.3	30.3	100
4. Creativity	27.8	40.0	3.5	–	28.7	100
5. Innovation	20.0	48.4	5.1	–	26.5	100
6. Adaptability	29.8	35.3	10.8	0.3	23.8	100
7. Project Management skills	1.2	40.4	34.9	0.2	23.3	100
8. Flexibility	24.5	33.1	16.5	1.2	24.7	100
9. Confidence	8.3	37.2	19.9	2.0	32.6	100
10. Team spirit	8.0	37.8	15.4	1.2	37.8	100
11. Excellent personal presentation	2.6	36.8	20.5	1.7	38.1	100
12. Customer focus	2.6	37.9	25.1	1.1	33.3	100
13. Communication skills	1.7	31.3	33.8	2.6	30.5	100
14. Leadership	0.6	31.3	39.3	1.2	27.6	100
15. Professionalism	0.3	24.5	38.8	3.7	32.7	100
16. People skills	0.4	25.7	39.9	2.7	31.2	100
17. Business knowledge	0.4	20.4	51.6	5.7	21.8	100
18. Credibility	0.1	19.2	48.5	4.7	27.5	100
19. Strong work ethic	1.1	25.4	45.0	3.3	25.5	100
20. Judgement	0.3	18.4	48.0	5.4	27.9	100
21. Loyalty to employer	0.3	10.7	50.3	10.6	28.1	100

respondents associated with older people. The characteristics that more employers felt were less age-specific and related to all age groups were “excellent personal presentation” and “team spirit”.

DISCUSSION

What can be made of these results? The two surveys in the Employment of the Older Worker study canvassed the views of over 1,000 employers and 2,000 older workers. Although the surveys were undertaken in the same year, they were individually conducted and did not use matched or related samples. However, when common questions were asked to explore stereotypes, the results were very similar. A majority of both employers and older workers held negative stereotypes about “adaptability” factors such as computer technology and resistance to change and positive stereotypes about “dependability” factors such as reliability, loyalty and commitment. A future research direction will be to analyse similarities and differences in stereotypes among

older workers by gender, to explore whether female workers are more or less positive than men about adaptability factors such as older workers' resistance to change and technology issues.

The findings are consistent with overseas research. For example, Tillsley (1990), who compiled a list of age stereotypes held by employers, found older people were seen as more loyal and reliable but less flexible and with outdated skills. A British study sponsored by the Institute of Personnel Management confirmed the presence of negative stereotypes relating to new technology and resistance to change (Warr and Pennington 1993). The general similarity of perceptions about older workers found in the two New Zealand surveys reported here has a number of implications. First, the "dependability" findings indicate that employers have a sense of worth about the reliability of older workers. Second, the findings confirm important policy implications in relation to workforce training. To maximise productivity it is clear that older workers need to remain comfortable with, and equipped to cope with, new technology in general and computer technology in particular. Both workers and employers acknowledge the stereotype of technophobic older people in the workplace and the challenge for policy making is to address attitudinal change and relevant training for older workers.

The findings raise the question of whether the stereotype that older workers have difficulty with technological change reflects the fact that older workers do have outdated computer skills. There is tentative support for this. In response to a separate question in the union survey that asked older workers if they had received less favourable treatment at work, 11.6% of respondents indicated they had suffered discrimination on the grounds of age. The primary ground of discrimination related to opportunities and selection for training, particularly computer retraining (McGregor 2001).

However, employers and older workers differed in relation to their views about willingness to train and whether older workers were more difficult to train, with the workers being more positive than employers. There was also a significant divergence in views about whether older workers viewed themselves and other older workers as ambitious. This may signal that employers' perceptions about training are misplaced and that older workers are in fact more motivated about upskilling than they are given credit for. While SeniorNet has made a valuable contribution to computer training for older people, it has a recreational focus and there has been little systematic attention given to computer training for older people in employment.

The lack of work training and professional development of older workers has serious implications for employers, trade unions and the workplace generally. First, the absence of training opportunities is likely to manifest itself in less than optimum

performance. Second, older workers are likely to find themselves with outdated technical skills and less technologically knowledgeable than those who have undergone training. Third, morale problems emerge when a particular group of workers is marginalised in relation to upskilling and professional development in employment.

Employers who regard the return on investment from training as lower for older workers undermine the business-case argument for the economic benefits of the employment of older workers. Such stereotypes can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with de-motivated older workers who under-perform, have poorer performance appraisals, do not maintain high levels of productivity and receive jobs that are more mundane.

It is perhaps useful to look at the results in light of the Government's Positive Ageing Strategy (Dalziel 2001), and in particular in light of some of its key aims, "the elimination of ageism in the workforce and the promotion of flexible employment options for older people." The findings in relation to flexible work practices indicate a more conservative approach by employers than that advocated by the EEO Trust (2000). In fact the results reveal a gap between textbook theory on the future of work, and workplace reality as experienced and perceived by employers in New Zealand.

At least for the present, many employers are not being compelled to embrace commonly-cited flexible work practices to attract, accommodate, retain or retrieve older workers. This may reflect the current state of supply and demand in the New Zealand labour market, which at the moment generally favours employers. It could be argued, though, that the findings indicate a need for continuing education of employers as the workforce ages, to increase their levels of preparedness for the "greying" of the labour market. This is especially true if we believe there are valid socio-economic arguments to retain older workers through flexible work practices. Considering that the study was undertaken among larger employers, the absence of flexitime (both actual and intended) is markedly at odds with the Government's ideals. It is highly likely that smaller employers, who comprise the bulk of New Zealand's employers, are less willing and even less likely to be able to afford flexible work options.

The study shows that stereotypes about older workers are pronounced in New Zealand's workplace culture. They are held in common by both employers and older workers themselves. They are influenced by individual and organisational characteristics, but they run counter to the Government's policy commitments to stop age discrimination at work and to promote positive ageing. We know that stereotypes are not fixed mental states but are redefined as part of social change. Only by acknowledging the existence of discriminatory attitudes, though, can society begin to

change its attitudes. New Zealand's aspirations to become a knowledge economy provide an incentive, but also a significant challenge, if it wants to harness and exploit the human capital potential of appropriately trained older workers.

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