
Older Worker Employment and Labour Force Participation – Phase 2

FINAL REPORT

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Collaboration on Older Workers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION	7
Phase 2 Objectives and Methods.....	7
Report Context and Organization	7
SECTION 2: WHAT WAS DONE	9
Focus Groups with Older Workers	9
<i>Focus Group Structure</i>	9
<i>Data Analysis</i>	10
<i>Recruitment Challenges</i>	11
Interviews with Older Workers	11
<i>Data Analysis</i>	12
Employer Interviews	12
<i>Data Analysis</i>	13
<i>Recruitment Challenges</i>	13
SECTION 3: WHAT WE HEARD-OLDER WORKER PERSPECTIVE	14
Enablers	17
<i>Generational Work Ethic</i>	17
<i>Peer and Social Supports</i>	17
Volunteering to build networks	18
<i>Employment Programs for Older Workers</i>	18
Barriers	18
<i>Changing culture in the job market and workplace</i>	19
<i>Perceived Ageism</i>	19
Hiring practices	20
On the job	21
<i>Ageism Compounded by Racism, Ableism</i>	24
<i>Internalized Ageism</i>	24
<i>Health and Physical Challenges</i>	25
<i>Lack of Peer and Professional Supports</i>	25

<i>Inadequate Access to Information and Training</i>	25
<i>Region/Sector Challenges</i>	26
<i>Age 65 Mindset and Benefit Clawbacks</i>	26
Other Insights	27
<i>Meaning of Work for Older Workers</i>	27
Importance of human interaction and relationships	27
<i>“Work after Work”: Retirement Plans</i>	28
<i>Intergenerational Relationships</i>	29
Suggestions for Action	32
SECTION 4: WHAT WE HEARD-EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE	34
Insights on Older Workers	35
<i>Older Workers an Asset for Specific Positions</i>	35
<i>Older Workers Highly Regarded</i>	36
<i>Older Workers Working after Retirement</i>	36
<i>Skills and Retraining</i>	36
<i>Physical Challenges</i>	37
Minimal need for accommodation of older workers	37
<i>Lack of Older Workers as New Hires</i>	37
<i>Notion of “Retirement Age”</i>	38
<i>Relations with Younger Workers</i>	38
Anticipated Labour Force Gaps	39
Other Insights	40
Suggestions for Action	42
SECTION 5: SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES	43
Factors Supporting Older Worker Labour Force Attachment	43
<i>Targeted Employment Supports</i>	43
<i>Addressing Apparent Invisibility of Older Workers</i>	43
<i>Supportive Hiring Practices</i>	43
<i>Accommodating and Inclusive Employment Strategies</i>	44

<i>Recognizing both Financial and Human Need as Motivators for Working Past 65</i>	44
<i>Identifying Niche Opportunities</i>	44
<i>Peer Support</i>	44
<i>Benefiting from Intergenerational Relationships</i>	45
<i>Unique Work Ethic</i>	45
APPENDICES	46
Appendix A - Demographic Profile Tables	46

Executive Summary

In 2017, the Province released *SHIFT: An Action Plan for an Aging Population*, its road map for change in how we think about our aging population. As part of the plan, the government committed to working with employers and the public to promote the value of older workers and encourage their labour force attachment. Through a research collaboration with the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging (NSCA) began work to identify and understand the factors that support inclusive workplaces for older Nova Scotians. Phase 1 of this study, conducted in 2017, examined literature on older worker labour force participation, and provided a report of the current knowledge on barriers and enablers to engagement.

Building on the findings from Phase 1, and in consultation with the Departments of Labour and Advanced Education and Seniors, NSCA embarked on Phase 2 of this study in 2018. The aim of Phase 2 was to further explore the barriers and enablers to older worker engagement through direct conversations with older workers and employers in Nova Scotia. To achieve this goal, nine focus groups involving 57 older workers (age 55+) were conducted at six locations in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia Works centres in each of the four districts were a collaborating partner for the focus groups. The focus groups were followed by interviews with 10 older workers selected from these sessions. NSCA also carried out telephone interviews with 18 employers representing diverse private sector workplaces across Nova Scotia.

What We Heard-Older Worker Perspective

Fifty-seven older workers participated in the focus group sessions across the province. Almost twice as many women as men took part in the discussions, and most participants were in the 55-64 age range. More than half of the older workers taking part in the sessions were unemployed at the time of the focus groups. The deep value and meaning of work for older adults was an important, recurrent thread among the older workers consulted for this research. Participants spoke about the contribution their employment makes to their sense of purpose, life meaning, and personal identity. Many older workers had plans to work past retirement—“work after work”—as one participant described it. Financial reasons, including limited savings and pensions, were described as the other key motivator for participants’ continuing labour force attachment. Older workers also described a sense of feeling out of place in a changing work world with differing values, evolving technological demands, and new norms for hiring practices, workplace interactions, and job performance expectations. Perceived ageism and internalized ageism emerged as significant factors negatively impacting both the attraction and retention of older workers in the labour market.

Key recommendations provided by focus group participants were to:

- Expand targeted employment initiatives for older workers
- Target Human Resource professionals as change agents for perceptions about older workers
- Capitalize on opportunities within Nova Scotia Works to promote and support older workers
- Support community hubs as affordable access points for current software and technical support

- Help older workers navigate available resources with a directory of learning opportunities and age-appropriate training
- Provide better information flow and resources for entrepreneurship and skills training
- Encourage employers to provide more flexible work options
- Explore options for linking older workers to peers in local hubs and online communities
- Promote positive intergenerational workplace relationships

What We Heard-Employer Perspective

The employers interviewed for this study comprised administrative, executive, or human resources personnel familiar with corporate values, policies, and hiring practices. Participants represented six employment sectors (manufacturing, retail/wholesale, health/social services, banking/finance, accommodations/food, and professional/technical services) within each of the four Nova Scotia Works districts but were not necessarily connected with or known to Nova Scotia Works.

The employers uniformly held older workers in high regard, commending them for their reliability, dedication, strong work ethic, and communication skills. That being said, participants generally reported an absence of targeted hiring and formal retention practices to keep older workers on the job. Most employers had few concerns about looming skills gaps with pending retirements of older workers; they described typically having more job applicants than there were jobs available. Niche job markets for older workers surfaced in the tourism and transport sectors, where older workers were meeting specific, unmet labour needs for a few employers. Even among the handful of employers expressing concerns about pending loss of capacity with worker retirement, no formal hiring or retention plans were in place. Older workers' physical challenges and limited technological skills were not perceived as significant, and workplace accommodations were described as infrequent and relatively easy to address. Employers generally rebuffed the notion of 65 as "typical" retirement age, and reported employing people in their 60s and 70s, and in once case, in their 90s.

Based on employer commentary, recommendations for strategies to support welcoming and inclusive workplaces for older workers include:

- Identify and capitalize on niche job markets for older workers where unmet labour needs exist
- Leverage older workers' time, skills, and experience through "rehirement" and mentoring opportunities
- Target employers, human resource professionals, and the general public with an awareness campaign about the value of older workers
- Develop an evidence-informed tool to support human resource personnel in hiring older workers
- Utilize resources available through Nova Scotia Works to support attraction and retention of older workers

Factors Supporting Older Worker Labour Force Attachment

In summary, this research involved primary data collection with older workers and employers across Nova Scotia to understand the factors that will support increased attachment of older Nova Scotians to the labour force. Drawing on the findings from these different perspectives, the factors that

emerged to support older Nova Scotian's increased participation in the labour force include: targeted and appropriate employment supports, the invisibility of older workers to employers, supportive hiring practices, accommodating and inclusive employment strategies, recognizing diverse motivators for working past 65, identifying niche opportunities for older workers, opportunities for peer support, benefiting from intergenerational relationships and recognizing older workers' work ethic as a positive attribute.

Section 1: Introduction

In 2017, the Province released *SHIFT: An Action Plan for an Aging Population*, its road map for driving change in how we think about the aging of our population. One of its many strategic goals is a commitment by government to work with employers and the public to promote the value of older workers and encourage their participation in the labour market. Through a research collaboration with the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging embarked on work to identify and understand the factors that support workplaces inclusive of older Nova Scotians.

Phase 1 of this study, conducted in 2017, examined literature on older worker labour force participation, and provided a report of the current knowledge on barriers and enablers to engagement and promising practices. Building on the findings from Phase 1 and subsequent discussions with representatives from the Departments of Seniors and Labour and Advanced Education (LAE) the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging (NSCA) embarked on Phase 2 of this study. The aim of Phase 2 (spanning March to November, 2018) is to understand the factors that will support increased attachment of older Nova Scotians to the labour force. This phase involved working with Nova Scotia Works centres, which are funded by LAE to help Nova Scotians understand, prepare for, and meet the needs of the provincial labour market. Selected work centres supported fieldwork for this research by acting as liaisons with job seekers, employers, and community partners to recruit participants and hosting focus group sessions.

Phase 2 Objectives and Methods

Objective 1: Identify the factors that enable and present barriers for mature/older workers to attach to the labour force.

To achieve this objective, nine focus groups with older workers (age 55+) were conducted at selected locations within each of the four Nova Scotia Works districts. To gain greater depth on some key perspectives, staff of the NSCA also conducted follow-up interviews with ten focus group participants.

Objective 2: Identify the conditions to ensure workplaces are welcoming, inclusive, and supportive of mature/older workers.

To achieve this objective, interviews were conducted with 18 senior administrative, executive, or human resources staff from a range of employment sectors in the four Nova Scotia Works districts. The interviews explored employers' experiences with recruitment and retention of older workers, along with their perspectives on perceived barriers and enablers for supporting older workers' labour force engagement.

Report Context and Organization

This document synthesizes the findings of the focus groups and interviews with older workers and employers. The sections outlined below describe how the content of this document is organized.

Section 2: What Was Done provides an overview of the data collection process and approach to analysis for the older worker focus groups, as well as the older worker and employer interviews. A fuller description of the methods is available.

Section 3: What We Heard-Older Worker Perspective presents the core themes to emerge from the focus group sessions. These findings are organized by barriers and enablers to labour force attachment. An understanding of these themes is further enhanced by the inclusion of excerpts from individual interviews with selected focus group participants. These excerpts reflect specific concepts to emerge from these conversations, and include themes of being employable, but not finding work; positive work environments, and employment redirection. In this section, we also provide some discussion of other insights to emerge from the sessions, and present participants' suggestions for action.

Section 4: What We Heard-Employer Perspective outlines our findings from the employer perspective. These findings are not organized by categories of perceived barriers and enablers but are rather presented as insights about older workers that emerged from these conversations.

Section 5: Summary of Key Messages. This section summarizes our key findings from the older worker perspective and from the employer perspective on factors that support increased older worker attachment to the labour force.

Given the approach taken in Phase 2, the findings from this work are not generalizable. Rather, this research offers valuable insights into the experiences of older Nova Scotians' labour force engagement and actions that could be taken to enhance their experience.

Section 2: What Was Done

Focus Groups with Older Workers

The statement of work for Phase 2 of this study called for two focus groups to be conducted in each of the Nova Scotia Works districts (HRM, South Shore/Valley, North, and Cape Breton). Work centres within each district (Job Junction, Peopleworx, Futureworx, and Island Employment, respectively) were chosen as the locations for the sessions. Each selected work centre was designated to act as a liaison with other work centres and community partners within the district to recruit participants.

Focus Group Structure

One focus group in each region was to comprise participants of Targeted Initiative for Older Workers (TIOW) programs offered in 2016-2017 who were aged 55-64 at the time of enrollment in the program. The intent of this focus group was to explore the experiences of participants in obtaining employment and in the workplace since involvement in the TIOW program. The second focus group in each region included an “at large” population of people aged 55+ who were unemployed and looking for work. This session drew participants from current clients of Nova Scotia Works and the community at large who were not currently employed, but who were interested in finding work. This focus group explored participant experiences in obtaining employment, individual needs in terms of skills and type of work sought, desired workplace conditions, and job seeking and interviewing experiences.

The maximum number of participants was set at 10 per session and pre-registration for the focus group was required. The initial sessions, held between May 30 and June 13, spanned a maximum of 90 minutes and were facilitated by NSCA staff experienced with focus group methodology. At the conclusion of the scheduled focus groups, and after consultation with the research team, two additional older worker focus groups were conducted. These sessions, also spanning a maximum of 90 minutes, targeted a slightly different demographic of older workers. They were held in Amherst on July 23 and in Tantallon on July 25. The supplemental focus groups were scheduled after NSCA staff shared their concerns with the research team about the composition of focus groups conducted to date. Chief among these concerns was a perceived over-representation in the focus groups of displaced workers and persons seeking employment primarily due to financial need. It was agreed that in addition to these important perspectives, the insights of older adults who may be choosing to work, rather than needing to work, were a significant absence. In total, fifty-seven individuals participated in the focus groups (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the Nine Focus Group Sessions

Older Worker Focus Groups – Summary of Participation				
Region	Location	Date/2018	TIOW Session Participants	“At Large” Session Participants
South Shore/Valley	Peopleworx, Coldbrook	May 30	7	9
North	Futureworx, Truro	June 8	2	7
Cape Breton	Island Employment, Sydney	June 11	0	4
HRM	Job Junction, Halifax	June 13	10 ¹	10
Supplemental Sessions				
North	Innovation Centre, Amherst	July 23	N/A	4
HRM	Tantallon Public Library	July 25	N/A	4
TOTAL			19	38

All participants received a \$25 gift card at the beginning of the session in recognition of their time. The sessions were audio recorded and notes were taken during the session, with post session reflections documented as well. Questions for the focus groups were developed in collaboration with representatives from LAE and the Department of Seniors. At the conclusion of each focus group session, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic profile and indicate whether they were willing to be contacted at a later date to discuss taking part in a personal interview.

Data Analysis

The detailed handwritten notes from each focus group session were transcribed into an electronic file, which was then reviewed for high level themes related to our overarching framework of barriers and enablers to older worker employment. Key themes were sometimes assigned subthemes (where relevant) based on recurring commentary across all focus groups. These themes were then compiled into a summary document containing all participant commentary from all groups related to each theme and subtheme. The material was reviewed and reorganized multiple times until we determined that all participant data related to barriers and enablers had been extracted, including significant outliers, such as one participant’s report of never having encountered ageism in the work

¹ Although 11 people participated in this session, commentary from only 10 older workers was integrated in this report when it was subsequently discovered that one participant (age 45) did not meet the age requirements for inclusion in the study.

place or labour market. This material comprised our working data for further exposition and discussion.

Recruitment Challenges

Participation in the focus groups was uneven in spite of best efforts to attract participants. While good turnouts occurred in HRM and the South Shore/Valley districts, the response rate in the North and Cape Breton districts was limited. Recruitment efforts and the resulting response are believed to have been impacted by factors such as:

- Work centre staff did not always have current contact information for former TIOW program participants creating challenges in communicating about the session.
- The decision not to recruit in local newspaper for the “at large” session across all the sites. At issue was a worry that the Nova Scotia Works staff person managing general registrations would be inundated with calls from the general public.
- Lack of travel funding to support individuals who may be travelling a distance to attend the session. Several work centre contacts noted that for unemployed participants, the cost of travel across the large geographical area encompassed within the district would be prohibitive. The decision about the number and location of each session was made at the outset and the location was not always convenient especially in large geographic areas. The gift card available to participants was intended to provide some monetary compensation to the participant.
- Confusion around work centre’s scope of recruitment. NSCA staff was working on the assumption that the selected centres were recruiting through other work centres in their regions as well as drawing from broader community networks (based on original communication from LAE Director). It became apparent that this was not always the case. At least one centre was unaware of this expectation and was recruiting only within their immediate community. This miscommunication may have contributed to low numbers in some areas.

Interviews with Older Workers

Between August 27 and September 18, follow-up interviews with 10 focus group participants were conducted to further explore issues and themes arising from the focus group sessions. To identify core themes for further exploration in the interviews, the NSCA staff discussed their general impressions of key takeaways from the focus groups following each session. NSCA staff subsequently reviewed the notes from each session and conducted further discussions, from which four key themes were identified for follow up in participant interviews: *Employable but not Finding Work*; *Examining Positive Work Environments*; *Health Barriers*; and *Employment Redirection*. Interview participants were chosen on the basis of their focus group commentary related to these concepts, as well as the richness of their contributions to a number of important subthemes (including ageism and the value and meaning of work). Questions for the interviews were developed in collaboration with representatives from LAE and Seniors, requiring tailored questions for each theme of inquiry.

Data Analysis

These interviews were conducted over the telephone and generally lasted about one half hour. Interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken during the interview. The notes and targeted sections of the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into an electronic file, which was reviewed in a similar fashion to the focus group material to identify and extract core themes. This material was compiled separately into individual worker profiles highlighting the human stories attached to the overarching themes. These narratives, using pseudonyms, are contained in *Section 3: What We Heard-Older Worker Perspective*.

Employer Interviews

Phase 2 of this research engaged a number of representatives from workplaces in personal interviews to discuss their experiences with older workers. Telephone interviews of approximately 30 minutes duration were conducted with 18 employers across the province between July 10 and September 11. Administrative, executive, or human resources personnel familiar with company values, policies, and hiring practices were targeted in six employment sectors within each of the four Nova Scotia Works regions. Interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken during the interview.

Questions for the interview guide were developed in collaboration with representatives from LAE and Seniors. Explored topics included participants' experiences with recruitment and retention of workers (in general and specifically in relation to older workers), and employer perspectives on barriers and enablers for hiring and retaining older workers.

The research team agreed to seek a broad representation from different sectors and sizes of businesses within Nova Scotia. These sectors included manufacturing, retail/wholesale, health and social services, banking/finance, accommodation/food, and professional/technical services. Input on potential employer participants was sought from staff at participating Nova Scotia Works centres as part of the selection process. The team agreed that interviewees would include employers in private for-profit and non-profit organizations, but not the public sector. Organizations working under government regulatory guidelines, such as nursing homes, were included in the study. See Table 2 for an overview of employer participation.²

² Despite persistent efforts from early July through early September, NSCA staff were unable to meet the interview target of 24 employers to represent 6 sectors within each of the 4 regions. As a result, our findings contain unequal representation from the South Shore/Valley region (employers from only 3 of the 6 sectors were interviewed). Additionally, across all regions, only two employers were interviewed from each of the banking/finance and accommodations/food sectors.

Table 2: Overview of Employer Participation

REGION SECTOR	Manu- facturing	Retail/ Wholesale	Banking/ Finance	Health Social services	Accommoda- tion/ Food	Professional/ Technical Services	Total
HRM	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	5
Cape Breton	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	4
North	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6
South/Valley	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	3
Total	4	3	2	4	2	3	18

Data Analysis

Notes taken during the interviews and targeted sections of the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into an electronic file, which was initially reviewed for high level themes related to our overarching framework of barriers and enablers to older worker employment. It became apparent that the conversations were not providing data that “fit” this framework, so instead key themes were identified as they emerged from the data. These themes were sometimes assigned subthemes (where relevant) based on recurring commentary. The themes were then compiled into a summary document containing all participant commentary from all interviews related to each theme and subtheme. The material was reviewed until we determined that all relevant participant data had been extracted.

Recruitment Challenges

Employer recruitment was carried out by NSCA staff, who began the process by placing cold calls to employers from a previously compiled and approved list. The back and forth communications required to reach a confirmed interview time made the employer communication process quite time consuming. Multiple calls or emails to each employer, which sometimes spanned a couple of weeks after an employer had consented or signalled interest in the study, were often required to conclude the interaction. Parallel calls to more than one employer within the same sector in one region were avoided to prevent potentially having duplicate participants within sectors/regions. Fuller information on the amount of work effort involved to achieve the 18 completed calls is available in the Methods report.

Section 3: What We Heard-Older Worker Perspective

Fifty-seven older workers participated in the focus group sessions across the province. Almost twice as many women as men took part in the discussions, and most participants were in the 55-64 age range. More than half of the older workers taking part in the sessions were unemployed at the time of the focus groups. A detailed demographic profile of participants is provided in Appendix A, Table 1.

The older worker focus group discussions centred largely on participants' experiences in seeking and finding employment, and their current or anticipated transitions into retirement from the labour force. These conversations reflected the present-day concerns of participants from a wide range of employment sectors, backgrounds, and job tenure types (full-time, part-time, contract, etc.) Despite a diversity of employment histories, the majority of participants shared a common experience of either recent or ongoing employment instability. Few of the older workers taking part in the focus groups were currently employed in positions they had held long-term; of those presently situated in long-term work, one identified increasing job precarity as a growing concern. For the most part, older workers taking part in the focus groups were either seeking employment, or fairly recently had been established in their current positions. For this reason, much of the focus group discussion related to attachment or reattachment to the labour force, as opposed to conditions supporting the continuation of employment past retirement.

The pool of older workers taking part in this study comprised people displaced from the workforce due to business closures or restructures, layoffs, or shrinking sector markets. Additionally, workers whose health issues, physical demands of the job, or changes in family structure had launched them back into the job search market were also represented. The remainder of participants described precarious work histories that often involved cycling in and out of employment over the course of their lifetimes.

The following discussion provides some perceived enablers and barriers for engagement in the labour force, an overview of participant motivations for working and plans for retiring, and some insights into the value and meaning given to work. This section concludes with a set of suggestions for action recommended by the focus group participants.

EMPLOYABLE BUT NOT FINDING WORK

ANNIE

“You’re going have to deal with the fact that ageism is a big part of this.”

Annie is a single woman in her early 60s who moved to rural Nova Scotia to care for an aged parent. She has done a mix of jobs throughout her life and went back to school recently to make herself more employable. She’s disappointed to find that her new skills aren’t being recognized by employers. After an extended period of unemployment, Annie picked up a summer job working as a cashier. This job was “actually kind of fun,” she reports, in spite of paying only minimum wage, and that she is often drained at the end of her 12 hour shifts. “I certainly don’t tell anybody, but I’m just exhausted,” she adds. Being on her own, her options are limited. “If I stop,” she says, “everything collapses around me.”

Annie sees herself as capable and job-ready but has struggled to find lasting employment. It was after completing her training and still not finding work that ageism first appeared on her radar. It was job counsellor who told her, “You’re going have to deal with the fact that ageism is a big part of this.” Annie was picking up some subtle cues from employers in job interviews. “You would get these, you know, micro emotions, you’d come in and you’d see, just for a second, that crestfallen look. And then the interview would go fine, but you never heard from them again.” She adds, “When it repeats often enough, you recognize that it is a pattern.” Sometimes these interactions are simply breathtaking. Annie says, “I went for one interview, and the woman interviewing me...as I was leaving, patted me on the jaw and said, ‘You’ve reminded me that I need to get new overhead lights here. These are really unflattering to jowls.’”

Unstable employment has taken a huge toll on Annie. “It’s a constant juggling act,” she says. “Last winter I didn’t have enough work in to get EI and it was a terrible panic—an absolute, gut-wrenching, lie-awake-at-night panic.” Annie doesn’t see her experience as unique. “You read a lot about millennials having trouble,” she says “...not being able to get jobs, and resenting boomers because the boomers won’t quit their jobs and retire....But you don’t hear nearly as much about the reverse—that it can be really desperate to be an older person trying to survive, and...just never quite making the mark with interviewers...despite their experience and their skills.” Annie keeps on, she says, because she has no choice. “It’s really depressing...I can go back to school, I can get new clothes, I can do all kinds of things, but I can’t change my age.”

JILL

“My work is value added to my life.”

Jill has seen her once full-time job within a local community agency reduced to fewer hours and converted to a yearly renewable contract. “Every year, we hold our breath and wait to find out if we have a job,” she says. This transition has undermined Jill’s sense of job security, and the changes have negatively impacted her years of pensionable service. She has taken an additional part-time, minimum wage job to make up for lost wages, and to help keep her connected to others at a time when she is feeling especially isolated in her situation.

EMPLOYABLE BUT NOT FINDING WORK

Although she loves her current work, Jill has been seeking more stable employment. “I don’t think that I necessarily live for my work,” she says, “but my work is value added to my life.” Finding other employment in her field has been a challenge. “I have been startled to ... recognize just exactly how much the career has evolved, the profession has evolved,” she says. In her current position, there have been limited options for training in changing technologies. Compounding her sense of having some outdated job skills is Jill’s feeling of being adrift in marketing her skills in the workplace. “It’s been very sobering, kind of a splash of reality,” she says. “The skill sets that I’m using here do not seem to be recognized as being transferable to another [position in the same field]”. Jill is largely unaware of programs or supports for older workers seeking employment, and acknowledges, “I’m stumbling through it on my own.”

WILLIAM

“It gives you a down-graded feeling. I never, ever had any trouble finding a job when I was out in the market place.”

William, in his early 70s, has been unemployed for over a year. Health issues derailed his successful career as a self-employed sales broker when he was unable to service customers while convalescing. Left without income, he struggled to find his way back into self-employment but new clients were few and far between. William switched tracks to job seeking with an employer and has applied for a wide range of sales positions. He feels well qualified for advertised positions, sometimes gets interviews, yet can’t land a job. More often than not, he gets no responses to his applications.

William’s experiences have left him frustrated and perplexed. When asked what he thinks is preventing him from finding the work he needs, William says, ““I think that when [employers] look at the resume, they start adding up the years. They say...this person is not 25 years old, and he may be well experienced, but we’re looking for somebody younger. I strongly feel that’s the bottom line.” Like other older workers we spoke with, William says that ageist attitudes from employers can be subtle and hard to pinpoint. “I understand that would be against the law for them to discriminate over age,” he says, “but I still feel that that is a factor.” Of his fruitless job search to date, William says, “It gives you a down-graded feeling. I never, ever had any trouble finding a job when I was out in the market place.” Still, he remains strongly motivated to find work. Chief among his reasons, he says, is “the desire to get back to where I was, and be able to pay bills...you want to be able to look after your commitments.”

BEVERLY

“I felt useful, I felt better at the end of the day, working, than I did sitting around.”

Beverly has had a challenging financial road since she was “pushed out” of a professional job several years ago— “more or less forced to take a payout” as part of a restructuring process in which she feels older workers were targeted. “There were times I was really in a bit of a desperate situation,” says Beverly, who sometimes had to rely on friends for support, and at one point, had to apply for income assistance. For the past few years, Beverly has been acquiring casual work through temp agencies, and although the work is sporadic, “the extra money coming in certainly does help.”

EMPLOYABLE BUT NOT FINDING WORK

Previously, Beverly worked at a call centre for minimum wage. “I was always exhausted after working a shift. I hated it, but I did what I had to do to survive.”

In her 60s, Beverly is now seeking work for 2 or 3 days a week. She says job openings in the field for which she trained in university are rare, and although she’s had a couple of interviews for positions in her chosen profession, she’s had no luck in landing a job. Beverly thinks her age is a factor in not finding work. “[Employers] say they don’t consider your age, but they do,” she maintains. “They’re smart enough not to tell you that right out, but they’ll hint around at your age.”

Beverly’s health is sometimes an issue in maintaining employment. She had to pass on a week’s work recently due to a bout of illness. She describes being without a vehicle as another barrier. For one job, she says, “I had to get a taxi from the [bus] terminal to where I was working, which cost me \$14 coming and going. Now if you’re losing \$28 out of your 11 dollar an hour job, is that worth it?”

Starting to receive OAS earlier this year has helped take some of the financial pressure off, but for Beverly, working is more than about the paycheque. “I felt useful, I felt better at the end of the day, working, than I did sitting around or trying to find something for myself to do....I felt better about myself.”

Enablers

A number of factors emerged in the focus group discussions as contributing positively to older workers’ attachment to the labour force. These included a self-assessed strong work ethic along with social, peer, and employment supports. Although not all of the following points were explicitly identified by participants as enablers, our analysis suggests these factors function as such.

Generational Work Ethic

Participants described what they see as the innate qualities and values of their generation as important enablers for labour force engagement. Among the attributes of older workers identified across focus groups were older workers’ dependability and reliability, their life experience, strong communication and social skills, solid work ethic, and loyalty to the employer. Participants regard themselves as goal-oriented and as taking pride in their work, and described these capacities as translating into good customer service and problem-solving abilities on the job.

Peer and Social Supports

The ability to connect with older worker peers throughout the career transition and job search process surfaced as an important social and moral support for participants. One woman travelled more than an hour each way to attend a focus group session in rural Nova Scotia. She said older worker engagement was an

important issue that she wanted to talk about with other people in her situation. Several participants reported that hearing about other people’s

“WHEN YOU’RE NOT WORKING AND YOU DON’T HAVE THAT SOCIAL NETWORK, IT IS A PROBLEM.”

challenges and successes during the focus groups gave them some needed perspective, and helped

formulate their thinking about the steps ahead. Peer support was highlighted as especially important for people who are unemployed, or who are without strong networks of family and friends. This element came out strongly in the discussions about TIOW programs, discussed below.

Volunteering to build networks

Volunteering was described by some participants as one way to stay connected to others and to build relationships in the community. Volunteer work was additionally described as a valuable networking tool that can lead to paid employment. Some participants discussed volunteering as a means for older workers to showcase their skills to potential employers. The latter approach sometimes pays off: a couple of participants reported they had obtained paid work through volunteer placements. One participant who landed paid work in this way felt that for older workers, volunteering can be a key pathway to paid employment. One older worker added that doing unpaid work in areas outside her professional expertise helped build her confidence by shifting her out of her “comfort zone”.

Employment Programs for Older Workers

Employment support initiatives targeting older workers (TIOW projects and the “OWL” workshop in Halifax) were widely and enthusiastically praised by focus group participants who had taken part in these programs. In order to fully understand the positive response to these initiatives, it is necessary to touch upon the emotional impacts of being unemployed or under-employed described by participants. Some older workers spoke of the loss of work as leading to sometimes profound crises of confidence about their sense of personal value, skills, and abilities. The experience of being personally supported as well as professionally mentored within targeted older worker programs emerged as an important factor in the positive assessments of the programs. Three participants described their experiences in an older worker program as “transformative.” Participants reported

“THIS PROGRAM WAS A VERY POSITIVE THING BECAUSE IT GOT ME TO WHERE I AM NOW. I’M IN A VERY GOOD PLACE.”

that the program gave them greater clarity about their transferable skills, and several linked participation in the program directly to their current employment, which in some cases, involved a career change. They additionally described the program

as having helped build their computer and job search skills, and having supported attainment of core training like First Aid and WHMIS. Peer support within the group was identified as a particularly important element. In a subsequent interview, one participant said, “You are with 15 people that are feeling the same thing that you are, so you can bond quickly because you have a shared experience.”

Barriers


Focus group participants identified a wide range of impediments to their labour force participation, ranging from perceived ageist attitudes, to a lack of access to training and resources, health and physical challenges, and persistent structural barriers. Throughout these discussions across the focus groups, a larger context for these experiences became discernable. This broader context emerged as a perceived changing culture in the job market and workplace that has, for some participants, created an abiding sense of disconnection and displacement. While not strictly

speaking a barrier to employment, we believe the workplace cultural divide described in the focus groups provides an important perspective in understanding the barriers that participants discussed.

Changing culture in the job market and workplace

Some participants spoke about their sense of how a changing world has impacted the workplace. “I grew up knowing your worth is based on the work you do. That world has gone away,” said one man. One participant intentionally sought out a smaller company to work for, wishing to avoid “a corporate environment, where you are a number.” Another woman described a sense of being valued by her employer as contributing significantly to her job satisfaction.

Participants articulated their sense of a changing work world in their discussion of new social norms and different hiring and workplace interactions and expectations. Several older workers reacclimating to the job search process after removal from the employment market talked about their lack of ease with “having to sell yourself” to employers. Others found the lack of follow-up from employers—sometimes even after interviewing—to be disconcerting. Navigation of online job application processes emerged as sometimes harrowing for unaccustomed job searchers. “It’s intimidating,” said one participant. Another older worker described a growing loss of confidence that accompanied applying for work through online platforms. “The job market did it to me,” she said. “How you apply for jobs—there is no interaction, no face.” Some older workers spoke about their discomfort with the changing pace of work on the job. One participant said, “[Employers] think everything has to be done ‘click, click’. My approach is to take time—quality versus quantity.” Said another, “It seems like all these new companies are so fixed on the bottom line. Time [and] speed is such a factor.” One older worker with a long history as an independent sales broker described being let go from his call centre job when he was deemed to be taking too long on his calls.



“I GREW UP KNOWING YOUR WORTH IS BASED ON THE WORK YOU DO. THAT WORLD HAS GONE AWAY.”

Call centre work, undertaken by several participants (usually described negatively and ending unhappily) seemed emblematic of the cultural disconnect that some older workers described. Alternatively described as “terrible,” “stressful,” “demeaning,” “boring,” and “bad,” call centre employment was identified as an especially poor fit for older workers. One older worker with arthritis left her job when the employer wouldn’t accommodate her limitations. “In a call centre, time is money,” she said. “Even a trip to the bathroom is counted. You couldn’t get up and walk around if you needed to.” Others described the perceived “time is money” ethos as alienating, and several participants found having their calls monitored to be especially galling.

Perceived Ageism

Participants identified ageism as a factor negatively impacting both the attraction and retention of older workers. Encountering ageism in the job search process, and to a lesser extent, on the job, was a recurrent theme across focus groups. Some participants, regarding themselves as skilled and employable, linked their inability to find a job to ageist hiring practices. Others described a sense of being pushed out of the workplace because of their age.

Hiring practices

Participants talked about encountering both subtle and not-so-subtle ageist attitudes from employers and human resources personnel during the hiring process.³ One older worker wondered how much ageism played a role in the jobs she applied for in her small community repeatedly going to younger workers. Another came to the conclusion that ageism was in play when her updated education made no difference in getting hired.

“IT’S THE PERSON ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE
DESK SAYING YOU’RE NOT A FIT BECAUSE OF
YOUR AGE.”

Others sometimes questioned interviewers’ comments about their being “too experienced” or “overqualified” for the job, or likely to become “bored” with the work. Some talked about being perceived as “threatening” to employers. Several older workers

saw these reactions in an ageist light, and suggested employers may feel intimidated by their skills and experience. In a follow up interview, one woman who was previously self-employed reported, “Being an entrepreneur is a bit of a red flag to hirers. I thought it would show that you could take a large amount of responsibility....but what job counsellors tell me is that it makes you seem as though you might not follow direction well, might compete for leadership, and might just generally be too much of a wildcard.”

A few older workers felt that the age of the person conducting the interview can be either a barrier or an enabler to their being hired. One participant preferred being interviewed by an HR age peer because she thinks that older employers may recognize an older workers’ reliability and skills more readily. Others suspect that being interviewed by a younger employer was a factor in their not getting hired. “It’s the person on the other side of the desk saying you’re not a fit because of your age,” said one participant.

Some focus group participants described encountering overtly ageist attitudes during job interviews and in accessing employment services. Examples given included (illegally) being asked their age during a job interview. Being on the alert for ageism in hiring is sometimes instilled during employment skills programs. Several participants reported that part of their training involved learning how to craft a resume that disguises their age.

Perceived ageist attitudes from employers have left some participants feeling skeptical and mistrustful about their employment prospects. There was some discussion in the focus groups about the perception that other groups like youth, students, and newcomers are being given preferential treatment in hiring policy and practice.

³ Encounters of this type came up spontaneously and frequently in many of the subsequent interviews with focus group participants.

On the job

Other older workers spoke about the subtle messages they receive from not seeing age peers in the workplace. “It’s like we’ve become invisible,” said one participant. Another older worker suggested that employers want the face that greets their customers to be “young and beautiful.” One woman worried that employers wouldn’t accept her need to take time off for medical appointments to manage a health issue. Another participant said he was “forced” into retirement because of health challenges. “I was seen as one of the first people to exit,” he says. Across the focus groups, just one participant actively asserted that ageism has not been a factor in her employment. In speaking of her current job where she has worked for almost a decade, the participant stated that she had never encountered ageism from her peers or employer. She added, “I haven’t shopped for any jobs, so am not experiencing what others may be.”

POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

DAVID

“I took the hint and I said, ‘It’s time to think of something else.’”

David, who is in his early 60s, lives in a rural community where he is working multiple jobs to help cover the cost of specialized medical equipment for a health condition. He has a full time janitorial position, but is doing additional part time and casual work until he gets the paperwork sorted to qualify for funding help with his medical expenses. David worked in retail store management all his life. His last job came to an end in a phone call telling him his services were no longer needed. “I was gobsmacked,” he says. Feeling “discouraged and depressed,” he signed up for a Targeted Initiative for Older Workers (TIOW) program offered through the local Nova Scotia Works centre. He says it was “the best decision I ever made in my life.”

David had been thinking about returning to retail management, but found “our world has changed.” In three months, he said, “I sent out a hundred applications for different retail manager positions and I had absolutely zero interviews....I took the hint and I said, ‘It’s time to think of something else.’” Through the TIOW program, David obtained his current full time job, where he couldn’t be happier. He says, “At [my current employer] I have a living example of a positive work environment. The people that I work with...are all ages...ethnic backgrounds...that creates a synergy that gets things done. For me that’s really impressive. I have not had one bad day since I started there.” David attributes his success to the TIOW program. “It was key,” he says, “because you realize that you’re not a worthless, disposable person; things happen, it’s happened to other people as well, and you can draw strength from each other.”

DEBORAH

“It’s the trust that they put in me.”

Deborah, who is in her 60s, returned to her home community after a long absence and was surprised to find how long it took to find work. She had been expecting to be hired fairly quickly based on her office skills but “it wasn’t so easy at all. When you’re a little bit older, it seems to be that they’re looking for somebody younger.” When asked what gave her this idea, Deborah reports: “The first encounter I had when I dropped off a resume that I thought for sure I was well qualified for....the manager that I spoke with that day said to me, ‘No, no. This is a fast-paced environment. I don’t think that you’ll be able to keep up with it.’” Deborah recalls, “I was kind of shocked, really....I never thought of age being a hindrance to getting a job. When you’re sitting down doing [office work], I can’t see where age makes any difference in it....It really threw me for a loop.” A “frustrating” job search of more than a year followed this unsettling encounter. Deborah says, “I started to think, oh my gosh, maybe I’m *not* employable so much anymore.” She briefly took a job at a call centre, which she describes as “a terrible experience....I lasted a day and a half.”

Deborah did eventually find “a perfect job” in the tourism sector at a time when she “had kind of given up” hope for finding work. “I’m a people person. I just love talking to people and listening to their stories and telling them mine,” she says. Deborah appreciates her employer’s flexibility in accommodating her need for occasional time off to attend medical appointments. She equally

POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

appreciates that her employer has faith in her abilities. “It’s the trust that they put in me,” that makes a difference, she says. While Deborah has a health issue that may become a concern in the future, for now, at least, she sees retirement as a few years away. “Being home for a year, a year and a half just wasn’t for me. I need to be out with people, talking to people—that’s what I enjoy,” she says.

JENNIFER

“I think I would really struggle not having much on my plate....I think I’d get very old.”

“I can’t think of a single time that I’ve been treated with ageism by an employer,” says Jennifer. That observation made this late 50s community worker something of a rarity among her peers in the older worker focus groups. Jennifer was curious about other participants’ descriptions of encountering ageism in their job search process. “The one thing that struck me around the table....was that [people were] so sure that the reason for the struggle was their age. I don’t know how you could ever know that that was the case....It could well be true, but how could you know?”

Jennifer had a bit of a revelation during the focus group. She used to make her lack of computer expertise a subject of self-deprecating humour among colleagues, but thinks she’ll handle this differently going forward. She sees the potential for joking about her lack of technical skills to generate negative stereotypes about older workers. “At the office, I’m going to really make an effort not be seen that way.” Jennifer says her age does play a factor in her thinking about taking on new employment. “When you’re 20, everything’s new— you can try anything—it’s all experience, it’s all adding to your resume. But when you’re [my age]....a job that I was going to take now at this age, I would have to be so sure that I was going to like it.”

Retirement at 65 is not an option for Jennifer. “I need to [work past 65] for more than just financial reasons,” she says. “I think I would really struggle not having much on my plate....I think I’d get very old.” Jennifer’s wish to remain part of the workforce past age 65 is also driven by a greater purpose. “For me, it’s to try to leave this place a little better than when we started, and to do things that can impact the community.”

JANE

“I have to keep telling myself every day it’s not a job performance thing—but it still feels like it.”

“It was a big shock....I certainly wasn’t expecting that outcome at all.” That’s how Jane describes the recent loss of a much-loved contract position working for a non-profit. Shortly after an older worker focus group session where this participant in her early 60s spoke glowingly of her employment doing front-facing work, she got word that her contract was not being renewed. News of the organizational restructure behind the contract termination was a blow, particularly since Jane lost a former position in a previous restructure. “I have to keep telling myself every day it’s not a job performance thing, as I’ve been told very clearly,” she says, “but it still feels like it.”

In the meantime, Jane has picked up temporary work in the tourism sector to help tide her over financially. Overall, she says she is “feeling positive that I have the skill set to do a lot,” but acknowledges, “I’m hesitant about my age.” Jane explains: “You just feel like when you walk in [to an

POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

interview], you can almost feel people go (*gasps*), you know—when they're looking at you, and realizing that you're not 25 years old, that they thought maybe you were." Jane also feels her technical skills need some brushing up to make her more competitive in the job market. "When you're sitting in a room where four 25 year olds are applying for a position, she says, "...all those feelings are welling up."

Jane has to navigate a job search environment that she finds at odds with her values and beliefs about interacting with others, and finds online job searching especially a challenge. "There are so many jobs now where you don't even meet somebody" during the application process, and she prefers to rely on existing social contacts. "I'm not about cold calls," she adds, "I don't find that comfortable." Maintaining her confidence through the job search process is one of Jane's biggest challenges as an older worker. Her previous attachment to an older worker employment program has helped with this. "You come away [from the program] with a new term: 'LE' — Life Experience, and I think it's valuable," she says. "You can't buy it. You can't teach it."

Ageism Compounded by Racism, Ableism

While the focus groups were largely racially homogenous, the few persons of colour present described employer responses to their age and race as disadvantaging. One woman stated, "Age and race are a very big issue in Nova Scotia," and that in her experience, her race had been a greater issue for employment than her age. An employer response to disability was identified as a barrier by one participant who felt that her use of a walker influenced an employer's decision not to hire her.

Internalized Ageism

There appeared to be internalizing of ageist attitudes among some participants in the focus groups. After losing his job due to a business closure, one participant in his 60s who described himself as a "digital dinosaur" worried about how his age might be a factor in finding work. He thought, "Who's going to hire me?" Another participant wondered whether older workers' discouragement with the

job search process has become damaging baggage impacting job interviews. "Perhaps employers are picking up on this," she said, in an effort to explain why people may not

"WHO'S GOING TO HIRE ME?"

be getting hired. Participants occasionally expressed some unconsidered, limiting attitudes of their own about other older adults in the workplace. Said one woman, "When I see what I think is a 70 year old at Tim's, I feel bad for her."

Negative attitudes toward the physical appearance of older adults also seemed to be internalized to some extent. One woman suggested that offering “How Not to Look Old” seminars could be helpful, arguing, “The way you dress... affects how people think about you. The world of fashion is not the reality of the baby boomer population. We don’t want to look like 85.”

Health and Physical Challenges

Several participants described having to change or leave their employment due to health or physical challenges. For some workers who want to remain attached to the labour force, there has been a recognition that the kind of work they can do has become more limited with age. Says one: “Physical work is a problem for my health. One day of hard work [takes me] 3 days to recover.” Several participants described having to leave employment when health problems or physical work demands became too much to manage, and two formerly self-employed participants linked the loss of their businesses to health issues. Others reported that health issues could impact their plans to work past 65.

Lack of Peer and Professional Supports

Some participants described feeling unsupported in their employment transition processes—both professionally, through lack of awareness or access to job search resources and job-related training—and personally, particularly for people who lived alone. Said one participant: “I don’t have networks.... I don’t know people in this demographic... who are still working. I realize... I have become very isolated.”

Inadequate Access to Information and Training

The focus group discussions revealed a lack of clarity about older worker eligibility for programs like Employment Insurance (EI), training through the Centre for Entrepreneurship Education and Development (CEED), and other older worker initiatives that may be offered through Nova Scotia Works or elsewhere. A few participants described having limited awareness of available informational resources and employment training supports for people aged 65 and over.

For some participants, having limited skill with computers was described as an employment barrier. One participant who’s had to leave a physical job due to increasing limitations from an old injury said, “I could go on the spare board, but need computer skills that I don’t have.” Offered another: “My training is old school. Everything now is computerized.”



**“MY TRAINING IS OLD SCHOOL. EVERYTHING
NOW IS COMPUTERIZED.”**

Many focus group participants expressed a willingness to receive training to build their computer and technical skills, but identified some challenges in accessing the training they needed. Cost was a key issue. One man who had recently lost his job in a technical field said that being up to date on software was always a necessity for remaining competitive. Being without work means he can no longer access the latest technology. “At work I had access to a computer and the latest software. My desktop at home is outdated and can’t be updated.... cost is a real problem for me to stay current.”

Some participants said they only needed to build skills in specific programs, such as Excel or SAGE, but couldn't afford to purchase software or attend lengthy programs to obtain this training.

Region/Sector Challenges

A poor local job market was described as a limiting factor in finding employment by several older workers. One older worker returning to her small community after more than 20 years away says she was "shocked" at how long it took her to find employment. Several participants encountered more limited job prospects after moving or returning to the province. In a couple of cases, the move took place in order to care for aging parents. One participant returning from work in Alberta found a less appreciative attitude from Nova Scotia employers, suggesting, "Workers [here] are expendable." Another man who had immigrated to Canada expressed frustration with a lack of recognition for his professional training and experience.

A paucity of local jobs was sometimes related to changes in specific employment sectors. Declining construction and retail sectors were directly linked to job loss for a number of participants. At the time of the focus group session, one participant in the construction industry had just sold her house and was planning to move to a larger urban area in search of work. Several older workers reported a loss of employment in the retail sector with the closure of national retail chain stores. Other older workers with professional backgrounds in IT, marketing, and engineering lost employment due to company closures or downsizing, and a couple of older workers in manufacturing similarly lost jobs due to plant closures.

Some participants described perceived nepotism in tight job markets within smaller communities as compounding the problem. One woman said "who you know" could make the difference in finding employment; another suggested "who's your father" played a factor in whether you got hired. Another participant thought employers were "picking and choosing" from a field of familiars for the few jobs that are available.

Age 65 Mindset and Benefit Clawbacks

The stated intention of a large number of focus group participants to work past age 65 stands in contrast to what many saw as a systemic Retirement-at-65 mindset. There was some discussion of how this outdated norm persists in employment program design and among employers who may resist hiring older workers due to a perceived limited return on investment for workers approaching age 65. One woman reported being bluntly told at an EI office that she was "too old for retraining." Other workers described their lack of clarity about whether EI, CEED, and the OWL programs were open to people past the age of 65. Some participants believed that employers feel the costs of providing training for older workers outweigh the benefits gained in return. One participant stated she seeks term contract work in part to head off this argument. Participants also shared their perceptions that employers think hiring older adults will cost them more in medical and dental benefits.

Other structural barriers identified in the focus groups were earnings clawbacks when allowable income is exceeded for CPP, disability, and EI benefits. One participant receiving income assistance (IA) said she would be unable to afford the cost of her medications (currently covered by IA) if she returned to work for a low-paying job. Another older worker said he had considered looking into an apprenticeship program but was deterred by others' reports of apprenticeship being an expensive process with uncertain prospects for employment.

Other Insights

Meaning of Work for Older Workers

The deep value and meaning of work for older adults was an important, recurrent thread throughout the focus group discussions. As noted earlier, a loss of employment was sometimes experienced as a personal crisis. Participants spoke about the contribution their employment makes to their sense

“I REALLY LOVE WHAT I DO. IT KEEPS ME YOUNG....FOR ME, IT IS BOTH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REASONS.”

of purpose, life meaning, and personal identity. This understanding of the importance of work shapes some older workers’ plans for remaining attached to the labour force. Said one man reflecting on his extended period of unemployment: “If this is

retirement, I just can’t stand it...I’m going to keep going until I can’t keep going anymore...I need a purpose, I need a mission, and retirement without some kind of objective just wouldn’t work for me.”

Importance of human interaction and relationships

Several older workers talked about their struggle to align with increasingly technology-driven job markets and workplaces. Said one man: “It seems society isn’t into people anymore.” Another offered, “We are social beings and we need to talk and engage with humans.”

The importance and value of interacting with others on a direct, human level surfaced in discussions about older worker employment programs. The warm personal support and mentoring of instructors in these programs was often identified as a core element in the program’s success.

At times during the focus groups, some participants described mixed feelings about adapting to new technologies. “I need to become more technologically savvy. I need to change my attitude about it,” said one woman. Another participant, despite working in IT, described online job applications as a “problem,” adding, “Networking was more productive” in his search for employment. The question arises as to what extent this apparent resistance to technology might reflect a broader resistance to an evolving technological workplace and the perceived values that go with it.

Both women and men in the focus groups and subsequent interviews spoke about the importance of work in maintaining a good quality of life. Female participants spoke about their sense of personal satisfaction and meaning derived from work, and the importance of employment to feeling vital and useful. Women in the study also talked about better mental and emotional wellbeing as a result of employment, including having a greater sense of confidence and self-esteem; two women spoke about how being employed contributed to their sense of identity. Being connected to others on personal and social levels, and being engaged to the broader community were also described as incentives for being attached to the labour force.

Financial need and community connection were important motivators for employment for both women and men, although the framing of these

“WE’RE A GENERATION THAT TALKS TO PEOPLE.”

elements differed somewhat between genders. One man spoke of his financial reasons for working as being able to “meet commitments” and two male participants described the community engagement aspect of employment as “giving back” to community. Another man spoke of work as an opportunity for “proving [his] worth.” Male participants, like their female counterparts, also spoke of the importance of employment to their sense of life satisfaction, purpose, and meaning.

The experience of job loss appeared to strongly impact both women and men. One woman described her loss of employment as “devastating”. One man linked his loss of work to experiencing depression, and another male participant spoke of a loss of self-respect when he lost employment due to health problems.

“Work after Work”: Retirement Plans

A large number of focus group participants had plans to work past retirement. Participants discussed a range of plans for “work after work” (as one older worker described it) — that is, of remaining attached to the labour force in some capacity after the age of 65. Many discussed financial reasons, including limited savings and pensions, as a key motivator. Several participants who have already transitioned to post-career positions talked about their disappointment with the paycheques they were receiving late in life. In addition to exacerbating financial pressures, low wages were equated with a sense of not being recognized for the skills and experience they bring to the workplace. For some, the transition into retirement involves a lot of thinking about how they’ll make ends meet. “I’ll be working forever,” said one older worker.

Discussions of financial need as a driver for work force attachment were frequently inseparable from

another key motivator for “work after work,” namely, the need for personal fulfillment. “I really love what I do,” said one participant.

“It keeps me young...for me, it is

“I WON’T BE SITTING AT HOME.”

both economic and social reasons.” The link between working and a sense of personal satisfaction and wellbeing was significant. As one participant stated, “I’ve never been happier, but I’ve never been poorer.” Although not always embraced so fully, a number of older workers expressed a similar willingness, when necessary, to trade off better wages for meaningful work. One older worker noted, “I did take a pay cut...but am so much happier because of the environment...I am treated like gold. People treat you with respect.” Another participant said that no longer having the responsibility of raising a family gave her more options for the kind of work she could accept. “[It’s] an absolutely lovely time of my life. You’re in a different place in your life,” she says.

While there was no clear consensus on a “magic number” for retirement age, the notion of 65 as “retirement age” clearly emerged as a relic from the past. Some participants intended to keep working as long as their health permits, without any particular age in mind. Others anticipated transitioning out of the labour force a few years past age 65, and in some cases, in their 70s. At whatever age, the idea of an abrupt and complete removal from the labour force was not generally envisioned. Participants instead talked about future employment scenarios including part-time work interspersed with volunteer activities in the community, working multiple jobs, or shifting into self-employment. The importance of remaining connected to community life was a significant thread in the discussions of retirement plans. “I won’t be sitting at home,” said one participant.

Intergenerational Relationships

Focus group conversations sometimes veered into negative commentary about perceived differences in the work ethics of older and younger workers. These turns in the conversation are informative. Older workers' expressions of negative stereotypes about younger workers ("attached to their phones; "don't show up for work") highlight that ageism can work both ways. Some focus group participants related that employers disclosed after hiring that their age was a positive factor in their landing the job. In these cases, participants stated the employers felt older workers were more responsible or mature than younger cohorts.

More importantly, the occasional "generational bashing" in focus groups may be indicative of tensions that exist where one group feels marginalized or threatened by another. Awareness of the potential for intergenerational conflict in the workplace seems to be a factor to bear in mind in the discussion of older worker engagement. Positive focus group commentary about intergenerational

relationships may provide some insight into best-case workplace scenarios. Some participants spoke about having collaborative, mutually supportive relationships with

younger workers. One woman said, "I'm still struggling with the computer. I work with a lot of 25 year olds. I have life experience. We work back and forth sharing skills and knowledge about what we know best." Another participant said about younger workers: "I teach them things; they teach me things."



"I TEACH THEM THINGS; THEY TEACH ME THINGS."

EMPLOYMENT REDIRECTION

TOM

“I was making \$50,000 a year. I’m now making 17. That’s a huge lifestyle change.”

Asked about his current employment status, Tom, in his 60s, says “I’ve never been happier, but I’ve never been poorer.” Tom has a professional background of almost 20 years in the corporate world. He recently took a part-time job with a community organization. His move into this position followed a gradual path that began when a serious illness led to the loss of his own business a few years ago. “I was making \$50,000 a year. I’m now making 17,” he says. “That’s a huge lifestyle change. And it’s not emotionally easy, but I’m happy with it.” Tom’s passion for contributing to community and the importance of personal satisfaction on the job are big factors in making his current work so rewarding, in spite of the limited pay. He sees his job as “an opportunity for me to give back to the community and to practice the skills that I’ve learned over the last 30 years.”

Tom describes the loss of his business as especially impactful. “When my business failed, it took my ability to borrow with it. It also took a lot of my self respect.” Tom says he got through those extraordinarily difficult times “because I found things that were worth doing,” and through reaching a decision about how to move forward. “I accepted the fact, when I realized that I was never going to get out of debt, that this was what life was going to be. [I decided] I’d better figure out how to live it.” Tom is practical, too, in terms of retirement plans. “As long as my health holds out,” he says, “I figure to work as long as I can until I [reach] that tipping point on the pension where I get the max...I’m not working any longer than that. It sounds self-serving, but that’s going to be my life.” Tom thinks, however, that employers shouldn’t make assumptions about older worker’s trajectories out of the work force, and he sees a double standard in action. “It always has bugged me that employers don’t expect young people to last more than a couple years in their employment, and yet they don’t look at a 60 year old and realize that they’ve got at least 5 years, if not 10 years of loyalty.”

RALPH

“When an employer hires someone in our age bracket, they know they’re going to get a good worker—that’s just in our DNA, I think.”

Ralph, in his early 60s, has reached a point in life where he’s no longer interested in doing full-time work. He was recently laid off from a retail job due to a business closure, and is now “regrouping—updating the resume, making a few contacts.” He’s looking for part-time work with flexible hours. “I can do almost anything for 3 days a week, 4 days a week,” he says, “Knowing that you don’t have to be there 5 days, in that grind, over and over and over again. Been there, done that.”

Working part-time gives Ralph time to provide care for an aging parent, which is a priority for him and his siblings. “To do full time work wouldn’t be fair to myself, [my parent], or the people who I’m working for, because if anything happens, you have to get up and go.” Family and social factors are bigger motivators than earnings for the kind of employment he’s seeking right now. “We’re not wealthy by any means,” he says, “but we’re okay for a little bit. Right now, family comes first.”

EMPLOYMENT REDIRECTION

After being let go from his last job, Ralph worried about how his age might affect his job prospects. He's had some processing time since then. "I'm navigating myself through," he says. "I'm re-thinking that thinking.....I'm still young, I can still work, I've done a lot of things, and I can contribute a lot to whoever hires me next. I'm very marketable." Ralph's changed thinking was also helped along by accessing work programs at a local Nova Scotia Works centre. Taking workshops with other unemployed people from a wide range of age groups and experiences gave him some perspective. "It isn't just me," he thought, "It's nothing I did. These people got laid off, too....they're in the same boat as me." Seeing older people working in the community also sends an encouraging signal to him. "There's work out there," he says. "When an employer hires someone in our age bracket, they know they're going to get a good worker—reliable, showing up on time—that's just in our DNA, I think, or how we were raised to work."

Suggestions for Action

The following table presents some recommendations emerging from the focus group discussions. The suggestions for action tend toward workplace attachment and re-attachment due to the nature of the conversations and group composition during these sessions. The ideas are not ranked, but rather reflect some core themes that surfaced across the groups.

Expand Targeted Employment Initiatives for Older Workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More targeted employment programs for older workers • Include more interview support, opportunities for career exploration, job shadowing, work placements • Make programs available to people 50+ • Better promote existing programs
Strategically Target Perception Change about Older Workers
<p>Employers: Target corporate HR as influencers of change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use re-certification process of Human Resources Association of Nova Scotia (HRANS) to educate for change: challenge stereotypes, promote value, attraction, retention of older workers <p>Older workers: Capitalize on opportunities within EI office/NS Works centres to connect with older workers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops exploring self-perceptions, barriers • Check-ins, interventions, data collection, information distribution related to older worker engagement
Provide Better Access to Computer and Software Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community hubs for public access to software and tech support • Greater access to affordable training
Provide Age-Appropriate Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a directory of learning opportunities for older workers • Utilize trainers sensitized to older adults' learning styles and preferences, encompassing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pace of learning, small group work, social aspects of group dynamics • Peers or university students acting as supportive mentors • Promote greater visibility and access to online training opportunities
Deliver Better Supports for Entrepreneurship and Skills Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve visibility/access to existing online training and program resources through use of a navigator/coordinator • Provide grants for business start-ups

Support Greater Employer Flexibility/Buy-in

- Encourage employers to provide more flexible work options, e.g. part-time, casual work
- Support reverse job fairs to link employers with older workers
- Consider financial incentives for employers to hire older workers

Develop Instruments for Older Worker Peer Support

- Explore options for linking older workers to peers: online, regular meetings at community hubs, libraries
- Support initiatives that provide opportunities for interpersonal peer support, networking and information sharing among older workers

Promote Positive Intergenerational Relationships in the Workplace

- Support workplace initiatives that encourage dialogue between generations (perceptions, different approaches, values)

Section 4: What We Heard-Employer Perspective

The discussion with employers was intended to help identify the conditions that ensure workplaces are welcoming, inclusive, and supportive of older workers by exploring their experiences with recruitment and retention of older workers. In this way, these conversations would offer insight into what barriers employers may be facing when considering recruiting and/or retaining older workers. Participants were from private sector workplaces ranging in size, sector/type of work and location in the province (see Table 2, Section 2 and Table 2, Appendix A) offering a diversity of perspectives on how older workers are viewed. Participants were mostly from some level of management directly

“I’M OPEN TO ANY AND ALL. IT IS NOT ABOUT THE AGE, IT’S ABOUT THE ATTITUDE.... WE JUST NEED PEOPLE THAT CAN HAVE REALLY GOOD CONVERSATIONS WITH CUSTOMERS. IF YOU CAN DO THAT, WE CAN TEACH EVERYTHING ELSE.”

involved with hiring, and only 7 were human resources executives. As noted previously, the employers were not necessarily connected to Nova Scotia Works or representative work settings from which older workers in this study were drawn.

Of the 18 workplace representatives interviewed, almost all indicated they currently had in their staff

complement some proportion of individuals aged 55+ (range of approximately 12% to 80%- see Table 3, Appendix A⁴). In several workplaces, employers shared that their staff complement included persons in their late 60s and early 70s, with one employer noting their employees included a worker in their 90s. This situation was more so long term employees continuing to work in what is often considered “retirement years” rather than active or intentional recruitment. The majority of participants were not experiencing any employee recruitment challenges specifically and did not express concern about losing older workers to retirement. However, several noted anticipating challenges in the future. Given this context, the specific way in which older workers could be targeted whether through recruitment strategies or efforts to retain existing workers did not emerge as a main theme of the conversation with these participants.⁵ In fact, in most cases when asked, participants were very clear to point out that they didn’t do anything specific regarding older workers, that age was not a factor in their hiring but rather attitude, skills and experience and that they wouldn’t decide not to hire an older work on the basis of age. These findings are not surprising given that participants are unlikely to want to be seen as ageist in their human resource practices. At the same time, this may be a factor of participant bias (those who agreed to participate may have good HR practices compared to those who didn’t) which should be considered when reviewing the findings.

⁴ For the most part, these were considered estimates as participants were not asked to produce accurate statistics about their employee complement.

⁵ Many employers, however, were interested in receiving information about Nova Scotia Works and potentially utilizing their resources to support recruitment/retention efforts.

The following discussion provides an overview of employers' perspectives on older workers with reference to recruitment or retention where possible. It should be noted that given the diversity of workplaces that participants reflect, some findings are very specific to the sector/type of position largely due to the nature of the work. To help illustrate the variation, where possible sector and/or type of work is identified in the presentation of findings. The section concludes with suggestions for action informed by these discussions, rather than recommended by participants. Workplace representatives interviewed did not identify barriers and therefore did not offer suggestions to address barriers.

Insights on Older Workers

Older Workers an Asset for Specific Positions

There were a few specific work settings in which older workers were identified as being a good fit for the type of work. For example, employers within the health service sector noted older workers were an asset for personal support type of work where an emphasis on client relations was important. It was felt they displayed compassion and respect for the individual being supported and this was viewed as an asset. At the same time, one employer whose agency supports young adults with cognitive, physical, and other disabilities described how stigmatizing and undermining to a sense of autonomy it can be for adults to be supported by older workers whose role may be publicly interpreted as parental care. Additionally, another participant whose agency catered to seniors described resistance from families of care receivers to having “someone the same age as mom” caring for a parent—described as a sense that someone their parent’s age may not be up to the job of providing care.

Other positions in which older workers were considered a good fit included positions within the trucking industry and tourism industry. For example, a participant from the trucking industry noted older adults were more open than individuals with young family responsibilities to take on long hauls and at times their wives accompanied them. Another participant noted that older workers were a good fit for seasonal type work that is typically the requirement in the tourism industry in Nova Scotia. This interviewee observed that with September and October becoming a peak tourist season, older workers have the availability to meet an unmet labour market demand when students return to school. A participant whose workplace was involved in the transportation of passengers added that clients felt more comfortable with “experienced” drivers.

“THE PEOPLE THAT ARE EXPERIENCED CARE GIVERS AND HAVE BEEN DOING THIS [FOR YEARS], HAVE A FIERCENESS ABOUT THEM. THEY ARE COMFORTABLE WITH PERSONAL CARE...THE YOUNGER WORKERS HAVE LEARNED IT FROM BOOKS AND SOME TRAINING, WHEREAS THE WORKERS WITH EXPERIENCE HAVE LEARNED IT OVER THE YEARS AND IT IS INNATE WITH THEM.”

Older Workers Highly Regarded

All participants expressed high regard for older workers. Most commented they were reliable, hard-working, conscientious, and knowledgeable. “They live to work, rather than work to live” was offered by one participant when referencing older workers’ work ethic in contrast to the younger generation. A few commented that older workers had lower absenteeism than other age groups. Further, older workers’

strengths in areas of client relationships were seen to enhance customer service, a benefit noted by several participants. At the same time, there seemed to be a disconnect between the importance to older workers of relationships and making connections, and the visibility of this factor to employers.

Older Workers Working after Retirement

Participants from the health and social service sector involved in hiring for personal support positions noted that individuals who had retired from the health service (e.g., nursing) were being attracted to this line of work. It was suggested that perhaps these individuals were not looking for work that was physically demanding, such as direct nursing, but still wanted to help others in a caring profession.

A participant from the finance sector and another from the manufacturing sector noted that workers who had retired were asked to come back for special projects, and, specific to the manufacturing sector, to cover off leaves. The participant described this situation as a “win-win” because the employer benefited from having an experienced and familiar retiree rather than incurring training costs or filling in with an inexperienced employee, and the retiree had an opportunity for short term employment offering varied benefits - being connected to others, sharing experience and knowledge, financial compensation.

“SOME OF OUR RETIREES HAVE RETURNED TO THE WORK FORCE AND THEY HAVE BEEN EXCELLENT. THEY HAVE EXTENSIVE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BUSINESS AND GREAT VALUES. WHEN WE WELCOME THEM BACK, IT IS A WIN-WIN BOTH WAYS.”

“I THINK WE ARE IN A WORLD WHERE TECHNOLOGY IS RUNNING US AND OUR DAILY ACTIVITIES.... GIVING YOUR 100 PERCENT TIME TO LOOK AT SOMEONE AND BE PATIENT TO LISTEN TO WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY— IT’S BECOMING A SKILL THAT WE ARE LOSING.”

Skills and Retraining

Limits with respect to older worker’s level of comfort and familiarity with technology came up in a few interviews but was not a dominant point of the conversation. In these situations, having computer savvy people within the work setting do the work or act as a mentor emerged as strategies. Both employers from the finance sector noted the very

specialized nature of their field, requiring specific certification or training which can act as a barrier to workers of any age coming into these positions. At the same time, another employer commented that older workers within their workplace had recently participated in a two-days leadership training,

suggesting this employer had no concern with investing time and resources in its older workers. This same employer adopts an approach that emphasizes skills and attitudes, supporting a more inclusive hiring and work environment for everyone.

Otherwise, interpersonal and social skills were commonly noted as strong among older workers and an asset to the position especially if the position is customer service oriented (e.g., personal support, cashier, tourism).

Physical Challenges

Several employers spoke about the physical challenges of specific positions with the potential to present challenges for workers of any age. Extended periods of standing and lifting were specifically noted by employers from the retail, accommodation, and manufacturing sectors. One participant from the manufacturing sector noted that “physical assessments” were required on a regular basis to meet licensing standards and another from the manufacturing sector noted that unless workers had a background in manufacturing, it would be difficult for them to come into this type of work later in life due to the shift hour scheduling and physical demands of the work.

Minimal need for accommodation of older workers

Employers describe a range of accommodations they are open to making to support workers in staying on the job, but accommodations were not discussed as a great concern. Conversations on this topic indicate that employers generally responded to requests as they came up, rather than having formal policies in place. Employers described a range of accommodations, such as schedule changes or ergonomic fixes, and noted that some older workers retired due to health issues. With respect to the latter, these health issues were spoken of as serious and not as something that could be addressed through workplace accommodation.

Lack of Older Workers as New Hires

Several participants noted that it is relatively rare for them to have interviewed an older worker as part of the hiring process. It is not clear from the interviews with workplace representatives whether this was because participants were unaware of the age of applicants, due to the way in which positions were posted or the application process, or whether applicants who were older workers were screened out. There were a few exceptions to this where participants’ comments offered some



“NOT MANY PEOPLE OVER 65 [ARE] APPLYING FOR THE JOBS... WE’RE OPEN TO BRINGING IN MORE...THEY’RE JUST NOT ARRIVING OR APPLYING.”

insight. For example, some stated they received no applications from older workers despite an interest in hiring them (e.g., retail sector); others suggested this might be because older workers are self-selecting and determining the work was not suitable for them (e.g., retail industry perceived as menial

work; or daunted by a need for an involved licensing process as in the insurer interview). When asked about the interview process, another employer perceived no potential barriers to older workers participating in an online assessment segment comprising “one third” of the interview process.

When asked if they had worked with employment supports like Nova Scotia Works to actively explore the lack of older worker applicants and find ways to attract older workers, they had not. Only a few companies (notably a tourism employer) described targeted strategies for hiring older workers, which included actively partnering with retirement related supports to recruit (e.g., CARP, ex-Military/RCMP). A couple of home care providers mentioned accessing OWL or Age Advantage programs as potential labour pools but did not comment to what extent individuals through these programs were hired. One retailer expressed some wonderment about why no older workers applied for posted jobs, but when probed, acknowledged they had never raised the question or strategized about this with Nova Scotia Works, with whom they have a good relationship.

Notion of “Retirement Age”

Responses to a specific question asking what retirement age means to them in terms of employment were that most participants rebuffed the idea of 65 as “typical retirement age” and sometimes mentioned employing people into their 70s. Several participants spoke about their perception that financial need was an important factor in older workers staying in the workforce. In particular, one participant from the trucking industry commented that older workers may stay on the job to access health plans for medications not covered by Pharmacare. There was some discussion of people wanting to work, and being healthier and more fit so able to work longer, but the overall sense from the participants is that financial reasons play a large role in the decision to work past typical retirement age.

“I THINK IT’S PRETTY OBVIOUS WHY THEY’RE HERE...I MEAN WHY ELSE WOULD YOU GET UP AT 5 O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING TO GO TO WORK FOR 12 OR 13 HOURS A DAY AT 70 YEARS OLD?”

Relations with Younger Workers

When asked directly about intergenerational relationships in the workplace, participants largely described positive interactions, with no perceived conflicts or challenges. More often, participants would sidetrack the conversation about differences between older workers and younger workers and perceived stereotypes one group has of the other, but overall reported no problems. This finding may be authentic in certain workplaces or it may be a factor of the disconnect between human resource personnel and the day to day realities of their employees.

“WE’RE RANGING IN AGE FROM 14...TO 90.... I DON’T THINK THERE ARE VERY MANY COMPANIES THAT HAVE THAT KIND OF SCOPE. OUR STAFF PARTIES ARE PRETTY FUN, I CAN TELL YOU.”

In a few instances, examples of positive intergenerational relations were shared. One participant from the manufacturing sector commented that his workplace used older workers to mentor younger workers and assist with the training of new hires. Another participant from the manufacturing sector identified a mentoring role for older workers as well, but more so on an informal basis.

Anticipated Labour Force Gaps

The majority of employers interviewed for this study reported few concerns about looming gaps in labour force capacity with pending retirements of older workers. For the most part, they described either having more job applicants than there were jobs available, or having only occasional hiring challenges for highly specialized positions. Among the half dozen employers who did talk about concerns for future capacity, one hospitality industry employer in a rural location said “it’s a struggle every year” to find staff of any age. This employer identified the seasonal nature of the work and the low pay relative to more lucrative jobs in the area as major obstacles to filling job vacancies. “Secession planning is the biggest thing on my horizon,” the employer reported, noting that over the next three years, a high number of core management and support staff will be retiring without a qualified pool of local workers to step into these positions. Another rural hospitality industry employer observed that it is sometimes a challenge to fill vacancies, but adds there always seems to be available workers to fill crucial trades-based positions.

“THAT IS THE BIGGEST THING ON MY HORIZON RIGHT NOW...SUCCESSION PLANNING. WE ARE GOING TO BE IN THE CRAPPER IN THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS.”

A Valley retailer shared their concerns about losing capacity as their older workers trickle out of the workforce, but had no clear idea of how to attract new hires from among the older worker population. Another retailer in northern Nova Scotia stated that filling job vacancies is becoming harder each

year, attributing this to a limited local worker pool, and a high turnover in the retail industry, particularly when student workers move on to further their education. This employer described older workers as highly valued for their communication skills with customers, but feels older worker misperceptions about the nature of the work as “menial” or requiring specific skills may be keeping them from applying. This employer has been working with the local Nova Scotia Works centre to make benefits of the job (scheduling flexibility, training support) more visible to older workers.

A human services non-profit in northern Nova Scotia expressed concern about retaining older workers in a changing fiscal environment that imposes reduced personal time with clients and a greater focus on the bottom line. The employer also felt that younger workers, although more accepting of limited time with clients, were more apt to leave their jobs in search of better opportunities within a competitive industry. Of equal concern is a pending loss of volunteer human resources—largely comprising older adults—who provide a significant level of client support within the organization, and for whom there are no apparent successors.

A couple of employers who expressed concern about pending skills gaps with retirements described some strategies they are using to capture and transfer the skills of departing workers. A financial sector employer discussed her organization’s efforts to profile the skill sets of existing workers and new hires, which she sees as potentially flagging gaps that need filling. A manufacturer spoke about informal processes being used to identify key personnel for mentoring and support to step into positions over the next 5 to 10 years.

Other Insights

During the employer interviews, we became aware that the idea of “older workers” sometimes felt imposed on employers rather than being a distinction they made themselves. Conceptually dividing staff into groups of older and younger workers for the purpose of discussion sometimes seemed artificial and at odds with how these employers regarded their employees. Many employers had to give some thought to just how many people over 55 were on staff. When questioned further about these staff members, it became evident that workers in this age group were often long-term employees who were aging in place, rather than recently hired older adults.

Putting all of this information together, two thoughts arise. One issue is whether employers in this study conceptualize their long term employees aged 55+ as older workers at all. A second issue relates to the visibility of workers aged 55+ who are not currently on staff with the employer. An unconsidered conceptualization of employees aged 55+ as long-term-staff rather than as older workers (if this is what we are seeing) has implications. It may help explain the overall lack of targeted

“WE DON’T EVEN REALLY THINK ABOUT AGE. IF WE ARE INTERVIEWING FOR AN OPENING WE [LOOK FOR] A POSITIVE ATTITUDE, SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE AND REASONABLE BEHAVIOR— AND THAT’S HOW WE HIRE.”

hiring of older workers (who are in essence, “invisible,” to employers, as one focus group participant suggested). An employer’s lack of distinction between older workers and workers in general may also shed light on the absence of formalized succession planning, even when pending skills gaps were identified.

These points may help explain a notable lack of perceived barriers to engaging older workers identified by employers in this study. This puzzling absence stood in marked contrast to the experiences reported by older workers in the focus groups. As an alternative to unconscious ageism, perhaps what we are seeing are the divergent positions of older workers who are pursuing employment, contrasted with employers’ experiences with older workers who are currently part of the labour pool. This theory may be supported in employers’ reported willingness to accommodate older workers currently on staff, which was usually couched in language expressing an openness to accommodating all workers, without differentiation by age.

Based on this research, the retention of long-term workers aging out of the work force seems well supported. Participating employers frequently described having workers in their late 60s and even early 70s on the job without significant issues. Less clear was the visibility and engagement of older workers currently in the job market who may feel less supported. A perceived lack of engagement by employers may contribute to the barriers described by focus group participants in this study.

On the whole, employers in this study see themselves as non-ageist. They described a willingness to make accommodations for older workers, which they generally stated as accommodations they would make for workers of any age. Employers affirmed that they hired staff based on skills and “fit” with company culture, without consideration of age. The disconnect between older workers’ perceptions of encountering ageism and the apparent absence of ageist attitudes among employers

is striking. The difference may be related to the divergent perspectives identified above. Alternatively, the employers interviewed for this study may simply have been suppressing ageist opinions. It is also possible that the pool of interviewed employers contained a pro-older worker bias by virtue of their agreeing to take part in the study in the first place. We may accept employers' perceptions of not having ageist attitudes at face value, or we may question whether there is unconsidered age bias. The presence of older workers in the workplace supports the former assessment. The absence of targeted hiring, formal retention or rehirement policies, and practices for older workers raises questions about the latter supposition.

Suggestions for Action

The following table offers suggestions for action to ensure workplaces are welcoming, inclusive, and supportive of older workers. These suggestions are derived from the findings above, and are not recommendations from the participants themselves.

Target Older Workers for Niche Positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify positions within employment setting and sectors that would benefit from time flexibility, skills, experience of older workers • Develop promotional campaign for employers
Leverage Older Workers' Time, Skills, Experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain roster of retirees interested in staying connected and in what capacity • Identify opportunities within employment setting in which older workers can be involved • Promote value of mentoring or advisor roles to employers
Promote Factors for Older Workers' Attachment to the Labour Force
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an awareness campaign targeting employers, human resource personnel associations and the general public that will focus on the benefits of older workers
Review Recruitment/Hiring process with "Older Worker/Age Friendly" lens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an evidence-informed tool that human resource personnel can use in their hiring process
Utilize Resources Available through Nova Scotia Works
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold conversations for workers and human resource personnel to better understand older workers and their needs in the workplace • Use programs that support older workers when recruiting and hiring for positions

Section 5: Summary of Key Messages

In considering the key messages to emerge from the consultations with older workers and employers, it is important to be mindful of the multiple perspectives represented here. First of all, most of the focus group participants who participated in this study were older workers who recently experienced, or who had an ongoing experience of, employment instability. As a result, their commentary tended more toward issues related to workforce attachment, and largely reflected the concerns of people needing, rather than choosing, to work. Secondly, it appears that for the employers interviewed for this study, the term “older worker” mainly signified long-term staff currently employed within the organization rather than potential new hires. This calls into question the visibility of older workers, both on and off the job, to employers.

Bearing in mind these different perspectives, some important factors supporting older workers’ increased participation in the labour force emerged from the discussions with older workers and workplace representatives. Key findings in this area are outlined below.

Factors Supporting Older Worker Labour Force Attachment

Targeted Employment Supports

The importance of targeted and appropriate employment supports for older workers came up in discussions on a variety of points in the focus group sessions. Older workers who had taken part in TIOW and OWL programs attributed their current employment to participation in the program, and identified enhanced job search skills and confidence-building as important outcomes contributing to their success. Participants also felt that greater awareness and inclusivity of employment services and supports available to older workers (delivered in formats appropriate to older adult learners) would better support their success in the labour market. Affordable, accessible, and targeted training in specific computer software programs, as opposed to lengthier training sessions covering a broader range of skills, were identified as more suitable to older workers’ training needs.

Addressing Apparent Invisibility of Older Workers

Based on our employer interviews, questions arose about the visibility of older workers to employers. Our findings suggest that older workers on staff may not be regarded by employers as older workers per se, but conceptualized instead as long-term employees. Further, the relative absence of older workers among employers’ new hires, coupled with the almost total lack of targeted recruitment strategies used by employers, may be indicative of older workers’ invisibility in the job market as well. Targeted campaigns to create greater employer and public awareness of older workers, both in the workplace and in the job market, could be a useful strategy for raising their profile. Further, strategic targeting of human resources personnel to increase awareness of older workers could help develop in-house change agents at work sites.

Supportive Hiring Practices

Some older workers’ perceptions of ageism in the hiring process could serve as a useful red flag indicating a need for greater employer self-awareness of age bias. Human resources personnel could here also be targeted as conduits for corporate change by promoting more inclusive recruiting and

hiring practices. A good start would be encouraging employers to review their practices using an older worker lens, and developing an evidence-informed tool that human resources personnel could apply to recruitment and hiring processes. Strategies for encouraging employers and employees alike to consider their unexamined beliefs and attitudes about age-based differences could also be useful.

Accommodating and Inclusive Employment Strategies

Two employers interviewed for this study exemplified divergent and apparently successful approaches to accommodating and including older workers in their work forces— one through targeted hiring, and the other, through use of what might be described as a universal approach to hiring and retention. In the first case, a tourism operator outlined a structured, targeted hiring program that capitalized on older worker attributes to meet an unmet labour market need. In the second instance, a manufacturer described an intentional provision of informal workplace policies supporting flex time and physical accommodations for workers of all ages. Further exploration of the specifics of these differing approaches could yield some useful information about best practices that other employers could adapt to their workplaces.

Recognizing both Financial and Human Need as Motivators for Working Past 65

Many focus group participants had plans to work past the once typical retirement age of 65. Most discussed financial reasons, including limited savings and pensions, as a key motivator for remaining attached to the labour force. However, discussions of financial need seldom occurred in isolation from conversations about the importance of work to individual wellbeing and a sense of personal fulfillment. The latter motivation emerged as an equally important incentive for older workers wishing to remain engaged in the labour force.

Focus group discussions revealed that for some workers, job loss can prompt deep personal crises— sometimes leading almost to a sense of lifetime reckoning—which seemed to go beyond the expected stress and difficulty ordinarily attached to being unemployed. The value and meaning of employment to older workers in this study stands in contrast to employer perceptions about older workers' motivations for staying on the job. Most employers attributed older workers' labour force attachment past the age of 65 to financial need. Addressing this limited understanding could provide some useful context for better understanding worker motivations and supports needed to enhance their work force engagement.

Identifying Niche Opportunities

Two employers we interviewed described utilizing specific attributes and skillsets of older workers to hire for otherwise hard-to-fill vacancies in their workplaces. A cue might be taken from this type of creative ingenuity to seek out other opportunities for pairing older workers with unmet needs in the work force. What other positions across employment sectors and settings might benefit from the particular qualities, skills, and attributes of older workers?

Peer Support

Being able to connect with other older workers throughout the career transition and job search process emerged as an important social and moral support for focus group participants. Supporting peer networks for older workers, both in-person and online, would provide opportunities for older workers to network, share experiences, provide mutual support and mentoring, and share

information and resources. A structured peer support network could also provide a venue for deeper discussions on important topics such as ageism and internalized ageism.

Benefiting from Intergenerational Relationships

Some valuable information may be gleaned from the occasional “youth bashing” that arose in focus group discussions. While perceived generational differences sometimes led to the expression of criticism, and even resentment, from older workers, an awareness of potential tension between generations was absent in employer reports. This discrepancy may be due to an actual absence of intergenerational issues on the job; optionally, it is possible that the employers’ apparent lack of age differentiation among workers, or overall lack of awareness about interrelationships among employees may be factors in not seeing tensions where they may exist. As some focus group participants discussed, there is equally the potential within intergenerational relationships for mutual support and appreciation that can ultimately benefit the employer and the work environment. For this reason, it seems important to recognize, acknowledge, understand, and address potential intergenerational tensions in the workplace. Being able to support and capitalize on positive and collaborative relationships across age groups could be an important consideration for employers going forward.

Unique Work Ethic

Older workers in this study regard their perceived generational work ethic as a positive attribute supporting their engagement in the workplace. They describe their life experience, reliability, dependability, communication skills, and employer loyalty as strong assets that distinguish them in the job market. Employers similarly recognized many of these same characteristics among older workers.

Appendices

Appendix A - Demographic Profile Tables

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Focus Group Participants (N= 57)		
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Number†</i>	<i>Percent</i>
AGE		
55-59	27	47
60-64	24	42
65-69	5	9
70-74	1	2
GENDER		
Female	36	63
Male	21	37
FIELD OF WORK*		
Management occupations	3	5
Business, finance and administrative occupations	13	23
Natural and applied science and related occupations	1	2
Health occupations	2	4
Occupations in education, law and social, community and government services	8	14
Occupations in art, culture, recreation and sport	4	7
Sales and service occupations	15	26
Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations	4	7
Natural resources, agriculture and related production occupations	1	2
Occupations in manufacturing and utilities	1	2
Various, Missing and/or Unspecified	5	9

†Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

*Based on Statistics Canada's National Occupational Classification 2016 V 1.1.

Demographic Characteristics of the Focus Group Participants, continued		
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
EDUCATION		
Did not complete high school	7	12
High school graduate/ GED	21	37
Some college/ university	5	9
College diploma	7	12
University degree(s)	16	28
Insufficient Information	1	2
EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Employed	25	44
Not employed	30	53
Missing	2	4
GROUP IDENTIFICATION**		
Disability	23	40
Visible minority/Aboriginal	7	12
Not specified	34	60

**Some individuals identified more than 1 category and therefore have been counted twice.

Table 2: Employer Participants' Size of Workplace (N=18, 1 missing)					
Less than 25	25-49	50-99	100-199	200+	Total
2	5	1	3	6	17

Table 3: Proportion of Older Workers (55+) in Employer Participants' Workplace (N=18, 1 missing)			
Less than 25% or "low proportion response"	25%-50%	More than 50%	Total
7	6	4	17