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Gendered ageism: Older women’s experiences of employment agency practices

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This study investigates the relationship between mature female job-seekers and private employment agencies in the Auckland region. Twelve women who were made redundant after age 40 were interviewed about their experiences of using agencies to find clerical work. Five agency staff were also interviewed to discover their views on placing such women in work. Although the two groups occupy contrasting positions within the employment relationship, several complementary themes emerged from the two sets of interviews. Both groups described gendered ageism as a key issue for older women seeking office work and identified a range of strategies employers use to avoid employing them in permanent positions. In contrast to most previous research, which emphasizes perceived skills deficits, both groups saw problems of appearance and ‘team fit’ as more formidable barriers to re-employment. The findings are discussed in relation to the expanding role of employment agencies and policy approaches to combating gendered ageism in employment.

Keywords: clerical occupations, employment agencies, gendered ageism

New Zealand, in common with other OECD countries, has an ageing population and diminishing birthrates. In consequence, older people constitute a growing proportion of the working age population and ageism is increasingly recognized as an important workplace and social issue. New Zealand government policy emphasizes the importance of retaining older workers within the workforce (Dalziel 2001) and both human rights legislation and employment...
law prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of either age or gender. Despite this, there is an increasing amount of empirical evidence which suggests that older workers are discriminated against, both within New Zealand (Burns 2000; Gray and McGregor 2003; McGregor and Gray 2001; Murray 2002) and internationally (Hirsch, Macpherson and Hardy 2000; Walker 1998). Older workers who experience involuntary redundancy have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group who often face longer periods of unemployment than similarly skilled younger workers and reduced income and status if they succeed in finding new employment (Davey and Cornwall 2003).

Until recently, research into the redundancy and job search experiences of older workers has focused primarily on the early retirement and exit of male workers and has tended to neglect the experiences of older women (Duncan 2003). New Zealand research has also tended to utilize survey data which do not discriminate clearly between different occupational groups (e.g. Burns 2000; McGregor and Gray 2001). However, as many feminist researchers have pointed out, the social construction of ageing is a gendered phenomenon which affects different occupations in diverse ways (Ainsworth 2002). Research suggests that women may experience discrimination at younger ages than men and that older women are frequently perceived as both less attractive and less competent than younger women (Brook Street Bureau 1990; Itzin and Phillipson 1993; Loretto, Duncan and White 2000).

Those older women who grew up when the male breadwinner and female carer model of gender relationships predominated may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of gendered ageism within the workplace. Such women were often socialized into leaving school with limited qualifications, entering traditionally female occupations and either withdrawing from the labour force or working part-time while their children were young. These women often have quite meagre financial resources if their life-circumstances change and they are forced to become economically independent in the later part of their working lives. They may have few financial assets, limited or non-existent pension entitlements and frequently can only obtain low-skill and precarious employment which provides little economic security (Warren, Rowlingson and Whylley 2001).

Women who have chosen clerical, secretarial or reception work may be especially liable to discrimination during the later part of their working lives as they work within female-dominated occupations where ageism and sexism frequently combine to create the ‘double jeopardy’ of ‘gendered ageism’ (Onyx 1998). A British study by Wallace (1999) found that employers saw the ideal age for secretarial and administrative positions as around 25 years with women in their mid-thirties and beyond experiencing considerable discrimination. Similar findings were reported in an Australian study which found that employers preferred clerical and reception staff to be 25 years or younger and had little interest in recruiting women over 45 years (Steinberg et al. 1998).
Mature female clerical workers who are made redundant may therefore face considerable problems finding new employment within the same occupational category.

Recent research suggests that private employment agencies are becoming increasingly important intermediaries between workers and employers. This trend is particularly likely to affect women as clerical, reception and secretarial workers are the largest single group within the agency labour force (Hotopp 2000; Phillpott 1999). Data from Australia, the United States and Europe shows that employers are increasingly contracting out the recruitment of permanent staff to agencies and are using them to conduct the initial screening of candidates. There is also an increasing use of temporary clerical labour and growth in long-term contractual arrangements between employment agencies and organizations (Dasborough and Sue-Chan 2002; Forde 2001; Gray 2002; Stanworth and Druker 2000).

Statistical data on the growth of private employment agencies in New Zealand is limited; however, extant data suggests that the relationship between mature women seeking clerical work and private employment agencies merits further investigation. A report by Else and Bishop (2003) for the Ministry of Women’s Affairs shows that clerical work is the largest single occupational category for New Zealand women with 21 percent of employed women working in this almost exclusively female area. Statistics New Zealand (2003) estimates that the number of private employment agencies grew from 342 in 1997 to 714 in 2003 with approximately 40 percent of agencies located in the Auckland area. Neither Statistics New Zealand nor the Employers’ Federation collects data on the number of clerical jobs advertised through private employment agencies; however, both the New Zealand Herald marketing department (verbal communication 2003) and the five agencies contacted during this research estimated that around 80 percent of clerical vacancies in the Auckland region are advertised by recruitment consultants on behalf of employers. Finally, research by McGregor and Gray (2001) and Burns (2000) shows that mature job-seekers use advertised vacancies and employment agencies as their main job search strategies. These studies also reported that most mature job-seekers viewed agencies negatively and believed that agencies discriminate on the basis of age.

The effects of these structural changes within the labour market are the subject of considerable debate within the employment literature. On the one hand, critics have accused agencies of offering exploitative and insecure employment to job-seekers with few alternatives (Peck and Theodore 2000). It has also been suggested that agencies may facilitate age and gender discrimination within the labour market by applying discriminatory criteria on behalf of employers (Encel and Studencki 1997). In contrast, it has been argued that agencies may help disadvantaged groups circumvent employer prejudices by promoting candidates on the basis of different characteristics to those specified by employers (Druker and Stanworth 2004; Gray 2002). The temporary work
available from agencies may also facilitate the retention of work-related skills and provide a possible route into permanent employment (Meadows 1996).

While temporary jobs may provide a stepping stone into permanent employment for some workers, many people return to unemployment at the end of their contracts (Korpi and Levin 2001; White and Forth 1998). In addition, many workers who reluctantly enter temporary work after redundancy fear the insecurity of this lifestyle, worry that their benefit entitlements may be compromised and are concerned that the lower pay and status associated with short-term employment will send a negative signal regarding their long-term employability to prospective employers (Gray 2002). The temporary work offered by agencies therefore carries considerable risks for older women choosing this route into permanent re-employment.

The relationship between employment agencies, temporary workers and client organizations has been the subject of two recent, qualitative, studies of clerical work. A British study by Druker and Stanworth (2004) argued that the increasing prominence of agencies within the employment relationship creates a complex set of employment relationships in which the three parties may have conflicting or ambiguous expectations of each other. This study also noted that the older workers studied would usually have preferred permanent employment but could not obtain it. In contrast, a New Zealand study by Casey and Alach (2004), which examined the experiences of 45 temporary clerical workers, concluded that most women had good relationships with agency staff and clear, instrumentally oriented relationships with the organizations they worked in. Unlike other research this study also suggested that, for these, mainly younger respondents, temporary work was a deliberate, and satisfying, lifestyle choice.

While both of these studies direct attention to the interaction patterns and mutual expectations of temporary clerical workers, employment agencies and client organizations, neither deals specifically with the issues facing older women using agencies to search for permanent clerical employment after redundancy. Research on gendered ageism within the workplace suggests that the interactions between older female job-seekers and agencies may have different characteristics to those between younger women and agencies (Dipboye and Colella 2005). As this article shows, the increasing use of employment agencies as intermediaries between job-seekers and employers creates a triangular set of relationships which can exacerbate the problems of gendered ageism faced by older women in clerical occupations.

**Methodology**

The empirical research described in this article was carried out in the later part of 2002. The research was designed as a small-scale exploratory investigation of mature female job-seekers’ interactions with private employment agencies.
The study concentrated on clerical work for three key reasons which were identified in the introduction. First, clerical work constitutes the largest single occupational category for New Zealand women; second, female clerical workers are the largest single group of agency temps and also the largest single group seeking permanent employment through agencies; third, clerical work is an occupation where gendered ageism has been shown to operate from relatively early in women’s careers.

The interactions between mature female job-seekers and employment agencies were explored from two contrasting perspectives: from the perspective of job-seekers themselves and from the perspective of recruitment agency consultants. The views expressed by job-seekers and consultants provide clear insights into the way these two groups perceive employer preferences and behaviours.

Female job-seekers were recruited as study participants through advertisements in two North Shore newspapers. These sought volunteers willing to be interviewed for a study of mature female workers experiences of redundancy and job search. The advertisements stipulated that participants must be 45 years or more, have previously worked in general clerical, secretarial or receptionist positions in the Auckland area for at least 20 hours per week and have experienced redundancy from those positions during the last four years.

Twelve women meeting these criteria responded. Their ages ranged from mid-forties to early sixties with a median age in the 50 to 55 year age band. Eight women were divorced, widowed or separated. Four were married or partnered. All women had children though only two still had children living at home. Paid employment was an economic necessity for all women in the sample with the four women in relationships who were unemployed, disabled or in insecure employment themselves.

All women had at least 20 years full- or part-time experience in office work. Immediately prior to redundancy six women had worked as receptionists, two as secretaries and four as office administrators. No respondents had tertiary qualifications; however, all had recent qualifications in the use of office software. The women’s redundancies had occurred between two months and four years before their interviews. At the time of interviewing eleven had regained employment with one working as a receptionist, two as secretaries, four as call-centre staff and four as home care providers. Although the majority of the positions were long-term, all women saw their current jobs as less secure and of lower status than their previous employment and all described themselves as significantly worse off financially. Three respondents also pointed out that they had been forced to move from front of house positions as receptionists to backstage positions in call centres in order to obtain re-employment.

Women were interviewed in their own homes. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and covered a wide range of topics including previous career history, reactions to redundancy and unemployment, coping methods,
job-search techniques and current attitudes towards work. Only those parts of the interview relevant to women’s experiences with private employment agencies are reported here.

Five recruitment consultants were interviewed, all of whom had several years experience in this role. Four consultants were found through personal contacts and one through the Yellow pages. Personal contacts were used in preference to random sampling in order to facilitate freer disclosure concerning the problems of gendered ageism within the New Zealand labour market. All consultants worked for typical high street employment agencies specializing in the supply of clerical staff for Auckland employers. Consultants were interviewed in their offices. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and asked about their own perceptions of mature candidates, employer perceptions of older women, employers’ ideal candidates for office work and issues they encountered when placing older job-seekers in temporary and permanent employment.

The four female consultants were in their late twenties or early thirties and employees of different agencies. The male consultant was in his mid-forties and the owner of a large, up-market Auckland agency. In terms of physical presentation the four female consultants were perceived by the researchers as both physically attractive and fashionably attired. Reception staff at the agencies were young women in their early twenties who were also perceived as physically attractive and well dressed. The majority of job-seekers observed at these agencies were women in their twenties, again fashionably garbed. In terms of age and physical appearance the researchers perceived clear differences between the older job-seekers and the female recruitment consultants.

Interviews with all 17 participants were taped and transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed for key themes using a grounded theory framework. The key themes from each group were then compared and interpreted in relation to each set of respondents’ structural positions within the labour market.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the interview data: first, the difficult relationship between female job-seekers and consultants; second, the ‘double jeopardy’ of gendered ageism within the clerical labour market; and third, the role of agencies as providers of temporary employment.

A difficult relationship

The mature women in this study all described their interactions with female consultants as difficult. Most respondents had initially approached agencies fairly confidently, believing their solid work record, experience and computer literacy would enable them to regain permanent employment relatively easily.
Most respondents also believed agency staff were there to help them and expected consultants to advocate on their behalf with employers. To their surprise, many women experienced agency consultants as uninterested and found their interactions with them difficult. These difficulties were usually interpreted as resulting from generational differences between women which encapsulated the problems they were experiencing within the wider employment context. A former receptionist in her mid-fifties explained:

On the telephone I can sound animated and I would often get called in for jobs, and then they would see me, and not that I looked bad, but I looked my age, and they instantly weren’t interested. There were so many incidents (pause) they’re run by young, upwardly mobile, stunning young women. They wanted a younger person that looked like them.

The female consultants took a more nuanced view of their relationship with older job-seekers, although it was clear from their comments that the relationship could be difficult for them also. All consultants highlighted the fact that the primary function of agencies is to assist employers rather than job-seekers. As one consultant in her late twenties explained: ‘You’ll appreciate that we’re basically driven by what the client wants, so we’re usually looking for what they are looking for.’ Despite this, several consultants expressed sympathy for older women and shock at the attitudes of some employers towards them. Consultants also emphasized their own attempts to help women bypass employer prejudices by highlighting the skills-based strengths of mature job-seekers to employers. The success of these attempts, within a labour market characterized by increasing competition between agencies and a large pool of applicants for each job, is debatable, with other comments by both job-seekers and consultants suggesting that employer preferences dominated.

At a more personal level, the comments of several consultants suggest that their interactions with older women may have aroused their own fears of ageing. A consultant in her late twenties, who was discussing employer prejudices, remarked ‘Oh, my god, I’ll be turning thirty this year’ as though this was a self-evidently alarming event. Similarly, another consultant in her early thirties extolled the virtues of mature women but when asked how she could improve her own job prospects if she were over forty replied: ’If I were in that age bracket, and thanks for knowing that I’m not, but if I were looking old I’d make sure my skills were as high as possible.’ Such advice contrasts sharply with the more cynical advice of a former secretary in her mid-fifties who commented that the best thing older women could do to improve their job prospects was to lose weight, invest in high-heeled shoes and become as glamorous as possible.

The consultants’ comments seem compatible with Pearlman’s (1993) suggestion that younger women may experience highly ambivalent feelings
towards mature women because such women personify their own fears of ageing within a youth-oriented culture. The relationship between the two groups of women is further complicated by their different structural positions within a gendered labour market. The older women constitute an underpowered and vulnerable group who were often reluctant to challenge perceived discrimination for fear of damaging their relationships with consultants and prospective employers. In contrast, the short-term interests of consultants employed on a commission basis are clearly best served by meeting discriminatory employer demands, even when these militate against the longer term interests of all women.

Double jeopardy

Much of the literature on age discrimination within the workplace has investigated negative stereotypes held by employers. Among the most commonly identified stereotypes are older workers’ perceived lack of relevant skills, resistance to change and new technology, slower pace of work and increased risk of ill-health (Murray and Syed 2005; Tempest, Barnatt and Coupland 2002). These stereotypes apply equally to men and women. Negative stereotypes concerning appearance and ability to interact with younger workers have received less attention within the ageing literature (Brooke and Taylor 2005) but may be particularly relevant to the ‘double jeopardy’ of gendered ageism within the workplace. The findings of this study suggest that, at least for older women in some clerical occupations, negative stereotypes concerning their appearance and lack of ‘team fit’ are as important as more commonly investigated stereotypes relating to work skills and health.

The job-seekers in this study all had office computing qualifications which they had updated throughout their careers. Despite this, all women had difficulty obtaining permanent employment. Most women perceived rejections on the basis of appearance or lack of ‘team fit’ as a more intractable problem than skills deficits and most experienced a rapid decline in self-esteem as a result of unsuccessful job search experiences. A fairly typical experience was recounted by a 61-year-old former secretary who was told by a young female consultant that she was unsuitable for a secretarial position because the manager was a young man and she would remind him of his mother. In her words:

I was never aware of my age … but suddenly your age comes to the fore and you think ‘Oh my god, it does count now, nobody wants me because I’m too old’ … This negativity comes through to you from these people and you start feeling negative about yourself. (pause) I lost my confidence in lots of ways, not just for jobs.

The women’s descriptions of employer requirements were corroborated by the interviews with agency staff. All consultants placed great emphasis on
physical presentation, especially for ‘front of house’ receptionist positions. As one consultant rather cynically commented, ‘they always want good looking at reception’. The male agency owner repudiated the notion that women become less effective employees as they age but stated that physical presentation can be a problem for older female candidates:

I think the physical presentation is probably the key thing. We place value on experience but some people have the perception that you’re clapped out when you reach a certain mileage on the clock. It seems to be a beauty thing, as you become more mature some people might perceive that you’re not so attractive.

The importance of ‘team fit’ was also highlighted by consultants. This was defined as fitting the personality of the candidate to the characteristics of the existing team. While all consultants stressed that ‘team fit’ was not necessarily about age it clearly functioned as a mechanism for screening out older candidates. As one consultant explained:

Obviously nobody’s meant to discriminate based on age or that sort of thing, but I think what people say is ‘team fit’ because if they’ve got a young team then they don’t necessarily want an older person.

This consultant also noted that during the last decade the age of the typical management team the agency dealt with had shifted from the mid-fifties to the mid-thirties. She believed this demographic change made it harder for mature women to find work as many younger male managers seemed reluctant to employ older women. Several other comments from both job-seekers and consultants suggest that younger managers may perceive older workers as a threat to their authority. These observations are compatible with evidence from overseas studies which have also found that employees are being promoted to middle management positions at younger ages and that this trend may contributing to gendered ageism within the labour market (Brooke and Taylor 2005; Burns 2000; Wallace 1999).

The move towards decentralized management structures within organizations may also facilitate gendered ageism as such structures may enable lower level managers to enact inappropriate working practices without being observed by senior management (Duncan 2003). As Lawrence (1996) has observed, such discrimination may not be deliberate or conscious and may therefore be unrecognized by employers, making it particularly difficult to combat.

**Being a temp**

Although none of the women in this study had obtained permanent employment through agencies, they had all obtained temporary clerical work from
this source. The positions ranged from full-time employment with the same company for several weeks to a few hours in several different companies over the course of each week. While all women were grateful to the agencies for providing employment, most disliked temping. In contrast to the women described by Casey and Alach (2004), who had deliberately chosen temporary work for the freedom it supplied, the women in this study all described temping as insecure, lonely and badly paid. The constant requirement to be immediately available if the agency had work and the fear of losing work or alienating the agency by turning down work also made it difficult for women to engage in other activities. As a divorced clerical worker in her mid-fifties, who had recently been made redundant for the fourth time, explained:

It can be hard going into strange places, you feel like everyone’s looking at you, and you’ve got all these different systems and five minutes later you have to know it all. It’s a bit daunting, but what’s the choice? I have to go temping because the dole money’s only $164 a week.

Several women compared the relative ease with which they obtained temporary positions with the difficulty of obtaining permanent employment. A secretary in her late fifties remarked:

I find it disconcerting when people say temp jobs turn into permanent jobs because that’s never happened in my case. There was one job where I’d been for 12 weeks and then got invited back for another nine and when a vacancy came up I was told I didn’t fit the culture. The people were in their thirties. They didn’t want me permanent, so I found that hard.

In this particular case, insult was added to by injury by the fact that she was asked to stay long enough to train her younger female replacement. Despite this, the respondent expected to continue obtaining temporary work until she retired at 65, explaining: ‘With temp work people don’t look at who you are, they only look at what you are doing.’

The women’s perceptions of temporary work were validated by the consultants, all of whom described temporary work as requiring both technical and interpersonal skills and high energy. As one consultant explained: ‘Temping requires very hard work, a lot of flexibility, a lot of energy because you’re going into new environments all the time and that’s tiring.’ The consultants’ descriptions of the ideal temporary worker are congruent with other descriptions of temporary work within the literature (Druker and Stanworth 2004). However, they contradict traditional stereotypes of the older worker. The consultants’ willingness to place older workers in temporary positions and employers’ willingness to accept them suggests that the reasons why mature women experience difficulty finding permanent employment are not simply
related to perceived skills deficits but also to more intangible manifestations of gendered ageism.

For most of the women in this study, the constant round of applications, rejections, temporary work and unemployment was eventually demoralizing and financially insecure enough for them to move into lower status work in order to obtain more stable employment. Women’s willingness to accept lower status employment is sometimes conceptualized as giving them a relative labour-market advantage over older men, who are traditionally seen as less willing to downgrade their employment (Duncan 2003). While respondents’ willingness to be flexible in their job choices facilitated their re-employment, the move to lower status work was often associated with financial hardship and psychological distress. As a former secretary who was now working as a home carer explained: ‘It’s less pay, less everything. I feel [pause] in this job I’ve got I’m referred to as a carer, but I’m not, I’m only a cleaner. I feel degraded.’

Clearly, older women’s willingness to respond flexibly to redundancy by accepting either temporary work or lower status employment comes at significant personal costs. As Ainsworth (2002) points out, such costs are minimized by discourses constructing women’s willingness to accept low-paid, low-skill employment as the appropriate response to late career unemployment.

Discussion

This research shows that gendered ageism can be a serious problem for mature women seeking permanent office or reception work after late career redundancy. The findings suggest that, at least in the clerical occupations studied here, technical competence alone will not necessarily result in permanent re-employment for older women. The gendered ageism respondents experienced seemed to be based as much upon their appearance and the perception that they might not relate well to younger staff as upon perceived deficiencies in their technical skills.

All women in the study had solid work histories and had heeded the traditional advice to update their technical skills on a regular basis. The technical competence of many of the women is illustrated both by stories several women told of being asked to train up their younger replacements and by the consultants’ acknowledgement that many employers were prepared to accept mature women for temporary positions because of their technical competence but were unwilling to appoint them permanently because of their appearance and perceived lack of ‘team fit’. As Druker and Stanworth (2004) note, employers generally have high expectations of temporary clerical staff, expecting them to be technically competent, reliable, fast learners and capable of initiative. Clearly, the gendered ageism affecting mature female clerical workers will not be solved simply by countering common stereotypes concerning older workers’
skills and necessitates greater attention to combating prejudices surrounding inter-age dynamics within the workplace.

All consultants in this study emphasized the importance of acting within the law and avoiding age or gender discrimination. They nevertheless described a range of indirect tactics consultants sometimes used to screen out older candidates. These included estimating women’s ages by asking about their schooling or early careers or explaining that ‘team fit’ was a key requirement of a job. The concept of ‘team fit’ was used by all consultants and currently seems to function as an acceptable, psychologically mandated, rationalization for discrimination which can be legitimated with reference to academic research on the importance of teams in organizational life.

The actions of consultants need to be interpreted within the wider context of the agency labour market within the Auckland region at the time this research took place. Official unemployment rates were low during this research, hovering around the 4 to 5 percent level. However, the local employers and recruitment consultants spoke to during the research estimated that around 70 to 100 applicants commonly applied for each clerical position, with up to 300 applicants applying for some of the more desirable positions. As Gray (2002) points out, when agencies are short of job applicants it is in their own interests to resist discrimination and encourage employers to accept a wider range of candidates. However, when agencies have large numbers of job-seekers to choose from they are likely to reject hard-to-place candidates in favour of job-seekers who more nearly meet employer specifications.

The tendency to reject hard-to-place candidates is strengthened when, as in Auckland, an increasing number of agencies are in competition with each other to supply staff. Under such circumstances, the requirement to gain regular or repeat business may enable discriminatory employers to more easily condition agencies into accepting covert age discrimination as a business norm. A recent survey of Australian human resource managers by Dasborough and Sue-Chan (2002) suggested that the initial stages of the business relationship between agencies and employers are often characterized by a degree of mutual wariness. The costs of early mistakes are particularly high for agencies as clients tend to withdraw their custom permanently after negative experiences early in the relationship. Over time, the relationship between agencies and client organizations tends to become more trusting with both sides gaining greater understanding of the other’s business norms. It is therefore possible that the increasing propensity for agencies and employers to enter into long-term contractual relationships will eventually make agency staff more willing to advocate on behalf of a wider range of job-seekers.

The relatively widespread discrimination reported by both job-seekers and consultants in this study suggests that recent legislative and policy initiatives aimed at banning age discrimination and encouraging older workers to remain within the labour force are not totally effective. Within New Zealand, the most obvious changes of recent years have been the raising of the state
superannuation age from 60 to 65 over the period from 1992 to 2001 and the passing of the Human Rights Act, which disallows employment discrimination on the grounds of age or gender. These changes have been beneficial for employees still in work and have dramatically increased the proportion of 60-to-64-year-olds in employment from 24 percent to 45 percent. However, there is some evidence that employers are more reluctant to recruit older workers in the absence of clear retirement criteria (Murray 2002). Within this study, all the consultants highlighted this issue, with several suggesting that older workers’ tendency to stay with the same employer for longer than younger workers is currently perceived as a disadvantage by some employers who fear being saddled with increasingly unproductive staff.

The New Zealand government’s *Jobs jolt* initiative, announced in August 2003, contains specific provisions for helping mature beneficiaries find re-employment by providing specialized case management and skills training. The initiative specifies that people in the 55 to 59 year age group are no longer exempt from work testing when claiming state benefits and must accept any suitable employment they are offered by either government or private employment agencies. For many mature female clerical workers this initiative may have had the unintended consequence of worsening the problems they face and forcing them into a series of increasingly low-paid, low-skilled and insecure jobs.

The ‘business case’ argument for employing older workers has been made by many politicians, business leaders and researchers (e.g. Davey and Cornwall 2003; Duncan 2003; White 1999). This approach highlights the positive attributes of older workers and exhorts employers to enhance their own best interests by cultivating a mixed age workforce which maximizes the potential of older workers. While there is some evidence that some New Zealand employers are deliberately seeking a mixed age workforce which matches their customer profiles (Walker 2004), other research suggests that many New Zealand employers retain negative stereotypes of older workers. The findings of this study suggest that the negative impact of such stereotypes on mature women seeking clerical work may be exacerbated by the increasing casualization of the clerical labour force and complicated by the growing tendency to outsource the recruitment of both permanent and temporary clerical staff to private employment agencies.

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