

Mature aged Jobseekers' Experiences of Centrelink and the Job Network Services in an Australian Regional Centre

Abstract

Unemployment may be considered a normal, if not likely, experience of a person's lifelong career. This paper is based on a primary, qualitative study that focused on the way mature aged unemployed citizens experience government unemployment and employment agencies: Centrelink and the Job Network in a large regional city. It contributes to existing research that examines the experiences of particular unemployed groups as they negotiate their journey through these systems. Three themes emerged from the research, which was based on multiple in-depth interviews of 21 participants: the first focused on participants' experiences of disregard, disrespect and discrimination; the second related to the restrictiveness of job information, and; the third to inappropriate job matching and inadequate employability training. We conclude that the experience of our participants supports criticisms made in other research about the restrictiveness and inadequacy of Job Network services, particularly for disadvantaged jobseekers.

Introduction

In 2008 the Rudd Government announced proposed changes to what was then the Job Network (now Job Services Australia). Changes have since been introduced which will potentially affect the operation of both Centrelink and Job Services Australia. The rationale for these changes was that employment services provided by the Job Network did not meet the needs of disadvantaged jobseekers: findings that echo criticisms made by researchers, particularly of the Job Network, over the past five or six years. However, some already argue that such changes will not go far enough to address these disadvantages (Fowkes, 2009). One category of disadvantaged jobseekers, mature aged citizens, continue to experience lower rates of participation in the labour market (Hancock, 2006) at a time where career development provision across the lifespan remains comparatively limited (DEST, 2006). For this reason, the quality and effectiveness of employment services for this group continue to be of concern. This paper provides an in-depth, examination of 21 mature aged citizens' experiences of both Centrelink and the Job Network services in an Australian regional centre.

Background

The former Howard Government nonetheless championed the performance of the Job Network in helping to place unemployed citizens in employment. The success or otherwise of this is difficult to assess because limited data is made available for independent scrutiny (Eardley, Abello, & Macdonald, 2001; Stromback, 2008). However, the research that is available consistently concludes that the Job Network has performed quite poorly, particularly in providing positive outcomes for the most disadvantaged jobseekers in the labour market (Considine, 2003; Considine, & Finn, 2004; Eardley, Abello, & Macdonald, 2001; Handy, & Davy, 2007; Kerr *et al.*, 2002; McDonald, Marston, & Buckley, 2003; Pawar, 2005; Thomas, 2007).

A key feature of the Job Network was a principle of reciprocity called Mutual Obligation: that those receiving benefits should give back to the system that supports them. Introduced by the Howard Coalition Government in 1997, this principle of Mutual Obligation is based on a claim that this type of reciprocal arrangement prevents those receiving benefits from developing a 'welfare dependency' mentality (Mendes, 2000, p. 34). This idea of a contractual employment relationship, then called a 'Job Compact', was first formally introduced by the Keating Labor Government and required the government for its part to provide jobseekers with paid employment. The current version of welfare reciprocity effectively discharges government from the responsibility of providing paid employment, instead requiring jobseekers to 'actively' search for employment in return for benefits (Quiggin, 2001).

As longer term users of the Job Network, disadvantaged job seekers, such as the mature aged citizens in this study, are more likely to experience Mutual Obligation. However, critics argue that Mutual Obligation reconstitutes unemployment as an individual problem, rather than a problem arising from a lack of available employment, or as a result of specific barriers (Carney, & Ramia, 2002; Eardley *et al.*, 2001; Kerr *et al.*, 2002).

As a group, mature aged citizens continue to experience relative disadvantage in terms of labour force participation, levels of basic educational attainment and participation in further education. Mature aged workers also represent a significant percentage of those who are classified as long-term unemployed, those in casual employment, and those who are unemployed but prefer to be identified

as 'early retired'. Mature aged workers continue to experience barriers to workforce participation related to the poor quality of available jobs, the affects of injury and ill health, age-based discrimination and, a misalignment between skills possessed by mature aged workers and those required for the labour market (Hancock, 2006; Kerr *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, despite a shift away from a labour market environment where workers could expect to remain in one job for the majority of their lives, in Australia there is a continued lack of employment and career services available to older workers (DEST, 2006). This study contributes to existing research about regional services for jobseekers (Pawar, 2005), and recent research on how long-term unemployed citizens experience services provided by both Centrelink and the Job Network (Marston, & McDonald, 2008). It has relevance for careers staff employed within the Job Network itself, or those who act in an advisory capacity for the federal government.

Method

Participants and sampling

This qualitative, interview-based study examines mature aged citizens' experiences of their interaction with Centrelink and the Job Network. It was conducted using a social constructivist, interpretivist approach (Gergen, 1995; Guba, 1990), which is suited to research focused specifically on individuals' lived experiences (Schwant, 1994; van Manen, 1990). A study including 21 participants was conducted between 2003 and 2005 in a large Australian regional city with a population of over 100,000. Participants were recruited via distribution of posters and information sheets at sites such as the local Centrelink and Job Network offices, other employment agencies and via local radio. Intensity sampling was used as a means of selecting participants who had 'intensely' experienced the phenomenon of interest. This selection strategy is designed to locate 'information-rich' sources (Patton, 1990). The following criteria applied to this study: participants were 45 years of age or older; they believed that they were unwillingly marginalised from the labour force, and; they believed that age discrimination was a significant contributor to their labour market disadvantage.

Interviews and data Analysis

Prior to the commencement of interviews participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw from the study at any point and an assurance that their identity

would be kept confidential. Interviews were conducted in locations of participants' choosing: often at their homes and sometimes by telephone. To faithfully represent the views and experiences of participants the data was collected using prolonged engagement and multiple interviews. Interview transcripts were presented to participants for them to verify data collected from earlier interviews (Patton, 1990). The use of multiple interviews with most participants helped to ensure data integrity and authenticity (Bogdan, & Biklen, 1992) by allowing the interviewer to verify existing data and add depth by stimulating further reflection from participants. The process of data generation and analysis were intrinsically linked in an interactive relationship where data from each interview were compared and analysed with the data generated to date, in a process called 'constant comparison' (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990).

Results

Disregard, disrespect and discrimination

Participants perceived that the Job Network provided little real assistance, and that staff showed a lack of willingness to help them. The following comment is reflective of four participants' general dissatisfaction with this lack of assistance:

They don't really help you. They leave everything up to you. They don't say 'Harry [not his real name], what can we do to help you?' I'm doing it all myself I am sending resumes and job application all over the place...When I say to them, 'Should I call back?' They say, 'Oh if you really want to', in a really discouraging way. You're treated like you're a nuisance.

While this experience may indicate a respect for the participant's autonomy on the part of the agency, other research suggests that even jobseekers that are classified as 'intensive assistance' can receive little to no help at all (Considine, 2003; Handy, & Davy, 2007). As a related issue three participants raised specific concerns that Job Network agencies were primarily interested in making profits through easy-to-place clients rather than people like themselves who were highly disadvantaged for example:

It's like they're only interested in certain kinds of people... people who are younger and easier to slot into a job. I just don't meet the criteria they're concerned with, there's probably not enough money for getting me a job.

These participants connected this perceived lack of concern, or disregard, with the logical need for Job Network agencies to pursue profits first and foremost as commercial enterprises, in addition to assisting their clients:

They are businesses. Naturally they're motivated by money, and so they'll work hard to help some people and not really bother too much about others that aren't worth their while.

These concerns are echoed in others studies that highlight the lack of incentive provided to agencies by government to genuinely assist disadvantaged job seekers (Kerr *et al.*, 2002; Marston, & McDonald, 2008; Rapson, 2006; Thomas, 2007). Recent changes proposed by the Rudd Government are unlikely to help as they have not included increased funding (Fowkes, 2009)

Two of the participants in this study were not eligible to register as unemployed and expressed dissatisfaction at what they perceived as a lack of interest in providing them with genuine assistance, as typified in the following comments:

I've heard from someone that they don't get paid much money for getting me a job. But they get paid well for getting a job for someone who is on the dole. So here I am doing this every week and not getting anywhere. I only ever get to interview stage when I apply for jobs [directly] in the paper.

Participants in this study also claimed they experienced disregard in the form of overt disrespect by both Job Network agencies and Centrelink staff. Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with Job Network support and assistance programs and the treatment they received under these programs:

I actually put in a complaint against one person about the way he handled one of our group workshops. The person running it was actually abusive and made people feel extremely bad about being unemployed – in a round about way he told us that it was our fault.

Participants experienced few of the amenities or courtesies usually provided to consumers of services elsewhere – visits to agencies conducted as part of the research showed that even water was not generally made available to clients:

You have to sit and wait an hour or longer because they get so behind in interviewing people. You never get an apology or anything like that - you don't even get a cup of tea offered while you're waiting all that time.

Three participants in this study experienced embarrassment and a sense of stigma specifically in their encounters with Centrelink counter staff:

Centrelink is hell. You really start to resent the people over the counter because you've paid tax in your life and there they are: 22, 23 years old and try[ing] to accuse you of rorting the system. They really do treat you like dirt.

While several participants experienced this type of disrespectful or belittling treatment, three also claimed to have experienced both tacit and overt discrimination by Job Network staff as a result of their age (see also, Eardley et al., 2001; Encel, & Studencki, 1997; Handy, & Davy, 2007 for similar findings). Such screening processes work to disadvantage jobseekers in other ways.

Restrictiveness of job information

As jobseekers, five participants argued that agencies failed to provide them with adequate information about job vacancies, the nature of the work, and prospective employers.

Consequently, they felt a concomitant loss of control as a result of job agencies withholding information:

The information you get about jobs you're applying for is limited...it's hard to put together a detailed application that addresses what the organisation is after. It's hard to do that when there's so much you don't know about the job because you're being 'kept in the dark'.

Agencies often characterise withholding specific details about employers as part of screening procedures (Eardley, 2002). Two of the five participants attempted to gain more control of their job search by approaching employers directly, without success:

I got fed-up and decided I'd go directly to the employers. I went out there knocking on doors and found out the hard way that it's not an effective way to look for jobs anymore. They just tell you: 'We can't help you. We deal with such and such [employment agency]. They handle all of this for us'. All the old methods don't work anymore. But a lot of people still think you can get work if you really want to; if you use your initiative and get out there.

Three participants also claimed that Job Network processes restricted the amount of information they could provide employers. They complained that such procedures were highly structured and restrictive, and reduced their sense of agency:

I was told to fill in this form and they were all these little boxes to tick mainly naming different computer programs. I couldn't really see how they could figure out what I can and can't do by just ticking a few boxes. When it comes to telling them what sort of job I was after, there is a ridiculously small space.

Participants' views correspond with criticisms about the adequacy of information collection instruments used by agencies, especially Centrelink, to profile candidates (Kerr, Carson, & Goddard, 2002; Marston, & McDonald, 2008; McDonald, Marston & Buckley 2003).

Inappropriate job matching and inadequate employability training

For four participants, this sense of frustration also extended to the Job Network's handling of job referrals and job matches:

When they do eventually put you on to something, they're jobs that are poorly matched. They wanted me to go for a building inspector. I don't have the background or qualifications for this – it's totally inappropriate.

They also argued that Work-for-the-Dole failed to help them obtain either employment or employability skills. Work-for-the-Dole requires participants to perform prescribed tasks in return for benefits. Participants' reports are supported by other research into the effectiveness of Work-for-the-Dole (Borland & Tseng, 2004; Rapson, 2006).

While one participant found aspects of his Work-for-the-Dole experience enjoyable, participants concluded that the program failed to improve their employability profile because it did not enable them to acquire relevant skills:

They said you've all got to do 'Work for the Dole' with [a local historical organisation]. They had some old carriages and what they wanted to restore. As well as restoring the old [train] carriages we were shown how to make 'knick-knacks': items for sale from wood pulled off the old carriages. I was never much good at woodwork, but I thought: 'it doesn't take much to learn these things'. I quite enjoyed doing it in some ways because it got me mixing with people again. I also enjoyed learning some new skills. But the problem is that these skills aren't any good to me, they're only hobby skills.

In contrast other participants found the Work-for-the-Dole experience very unpleasant, even demoralising, for example:

I met up with some sorry over forty-fivers, who may well have failed to upgrade their skills or reach a professionally suitable goal, but who were being used as fodder for [a local green conservation group]. They were all professionally qualified but had landed on the unemployment scrap-heap. These people included forcibly retired psychologists, two electrical engineers and PR consultant. All with skills that were poorly matched to the kind of work they had been assigned with me at [the work site]. I fail to see how this kind of work experience helps them. How can it possibly help them to get back into the workforce? But what was most obvious was how demoralising it was for these people.

Two participants also commented on the inadequate amount of additional money job-seekers receive while participating in Work-for-the-Dole, for example:

When you're doing Work-for-the-Dole they pay you an extra \$20 a fortnight ... You're made to feel that the work you're doing is pretty much considered worthless; not worth paying money for. The problem with Work-for-the-Dole is that you're forced to be there, people turn up but only because they are being forced to be there.

Four participants experienced difficulties with other forms of employability or job training that were available via the Job Network. For two of the four participants, courses provided by the Job Network were too basic, and did not provide the skills and qualifications they needed to gain employment:

I've done computer courses, health and safety courses, [a] communication and customer service course and most of them are very repetitive. They can be really boring and a lot of the time they just go over the same old things; a lot of it is very basic and commonsense. But the biggest problem is that they do not help you get a job. The courses I'm talking about are cheap government funded courses. But if you want to study something useful where you get qualifications that mean something, you can't afford it.

This experience of a lack of 'follow up' was echoed by another participant:

I did [a personal development] course. It's meant to pick you up and get you active. It's a five-week course at [named employment agency] and it didn't do anyone any good. Nobody got a job out of it; just wasting government funds. He said by the end of the course we'll get you into a job – that was a promise. But at the end it was like

see you later you've done the course there was no follow-up with help or support. So in the end it was all a big waste of time. It made me feel worse not better.

Overall, participants believed that training offered through the Job Network was insubstantial and failed to train them adequately for paid employment.

Discussion

Participants in this study claimed that help provided by Job Network and Centrelink was disabling, inadequate and discriminatory. One reason for this, according to existing research (McDonald *et al.*, 2003; Pawar, 2005; Rapson, 2006; Thomas, 2007), is the government incentive system as it applies to Job Network. Specifically, the incentive-based model upon which the Job Network is based encourages agency staff to direct resources and effort into quickly placing easy to place job-ready clients into employment: referred to as 'creaming', while 'parking' less employable, hard-to-place jobseekers in poorly resourced dead-end programs. Mature aged jobseekers often fall into this latter category because of training issues and employer discrimination (Hancock, 2006).

The experience of participants reflects what Lisa Fowkes (2009) describes as the 'pressure on [Job Network] providers to ration scarce resources across their caseloads' (p.24). This is despite studies that identify the need for specialised career guidance to assist their re-entry into the labour force (Patton, 2001; Sheridan, 2008). In his study of non-metropolitan Job Network agencies, Pawar (2005) reported that agency staff can find the process of dealing with jobseekers who require intensive assistance daunting, particularly as they claimed to be inadequately resourced. This lack of resourcing also serves to restrict the potential for the employment of appropriately qualified career guidance and counselling practitioners within the Job Network (Patton, 2001). Indeed, recent research (Rapson, 2006; Marston, & McDonald, 2008) has found that hard-to-place jobseekers are often repeatedly cycled through program assistance and Mutual Obligation responsibilities, most commonly Work-for-the-Dole without attaining any tangible outcomes.

The experiences of participants in this study also highlight the negative affect of restrictive and poorly targeted services on perceived levels of control or self-efficacy. Participants felt locked into processes which provided irrelevant and inadequate training, and which provided neither

themselves nor employers with adequate information to make informed decisions about applying for or filling available positions. Processes obliged them to be ‘active’, but, paradoxically, appeared to reduce their own capacity to improve their circumstances. Finally, restricted interaction with agency and training staff, combined with minimal provision for information collection about participants’ work experiences appeared to obscure or sometimes erase acknowledgement of less quantifiable skills and qualities and, on occasion, quite significant past achievements and qualifications. These experiences echo findings of a recent study (Marston, & McDonald, 2008) about the experiences of long-term unemployed citizens with Centrelink and the Job Network

This lack of acknowledgement can only be exacerbated by the continued dominance of the principle of Mutual Obligation and the way it underpins Centrelink and Job Network service provision. This is because Mutual Obligation represents unemployed income support recipients as, ‘eternal recipients with no past and no future’ (Hammer, 2003, p. 19). For each episode of ‘mutual obligation’ that a job seeker is required to complete the unemployed citizen enters into a reciprocal agreement where their past contribution to society, either in the form of labour or taxes, is treated as invisible or inconsequential. For mature aged participants in this study with work histories, prior training and qualifications, the injustice of a system that is focused exclusively on what they owe is stark.

A much larger research cohort is required to validate the claims made by participants in this study. The secondary research cited in this paper certainly supports much of our participants’ experiences – at least in terms of long-term, disadvantaged jobseekers as a broader group but we cannot generalise from participants’ experiences of Centrelink and the Job Network to the experience of other mature aged jobseekers generally. Another possible limitation of this study is that it applies to government services that are in the process of change.

In response to the type of criticisms cited in this paper, the current Federal Government recently introduced changes to the Job Network system (now Job Services Australia), which it argues will enable it to deliver more flexible, personalised services with a greater focus on training in areas of skills shortage. Further proposed changes include streamlining and simplification of

administrative arrangements, a greater focus on rewarding agency outcomes that include both accredited training and placement, greater jobseeker involvement in determining their pathway to employment. Centrelink and Job Network compliance systems may be shifted to reflect 'work culture' norms, with graduated penalties for different forms of non-compliance (DEEWR, 2008, pp. 7-9, 16). However, a continued lack of funding and continued pressure on Job Services agencies to juggle heavy caseloads with scarce resources will prevent any meaningful individualisation of services for citizens who have specific needs, work and training histories. It is also an open question as to whether proposed changes to existing compliance regimes will change the way unemployed citizens within the system are valued; this is the topic for future research.

Conclusion

Participants' in this study experienced Job Network services, including models of agency assistance and job training, as restrictive and inadequate. These services also appeared to be predicated on a set of negative assumptions about the life experience, job histories and training of participants. As such, our findings also arguably highlight extent to which the principle of Mutual Obligation, and its application within Centrelink and the Job Network, shaped the services as experienced by mature aged participants. Indeed, the application of Mutual Obligation as a contract between government and citizen may also have contributed to a lack of acknowledgement of participants' lifelong contributions to society, their accumulated work experience, or their educational achievements. This erasure of positive civic contribution may also provide an explanation for participants' experiences of disrespectful treatment by individuals from Centrelink, the Job Network and its training providers.

Based on the findings of the Study, and assuming the continuation of the Mutual Obligation regime, this paper will make tentative recommendations relating to other practices within the Job Network. The first recommendations relate to time. Mature aged jobseekers require more time with case workers to overcome their particular barriers to employment; they also need to spend less time engaged in compliance and more time as genuinely active, empowered participants in their search for employment. The second recommendations relate to information. Mature aged jobseekers require more information about potential employers, and more information (in terms

of prior experience and education) needs to be collected from jobseekers themselves so that appropriate, targeted training or employment can be matched to it. The final recommendation relates to training: whether via the Job Network or Work-for-the-Dole, training must develop meaningful, relevant employability skills that enable mature aged jobseekers to move into the formal labour market.

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Theory and Practice

This section is designed as a brief professional review of the article. It provides relevant study questions and answers for readers to test their knowledge of the article.

What does the experience of mature aged jobseekers in this study tell us about career development across the lifespan?

Answer – That special provision, for both casework and job training, may be required to deal with the particular challenges faced by citizens at the latter end of their work-related lifespan.

Why is the principle of Mutual Obligation potentially problematic for mature aged jobseekers?

Answer – as a contractual agreement between the unemployed citizen and government Mutual Obligation is based on the premise that the unemployed citizen is always comes to the agreement from a position of ‘indebtedness’. This premise is particularly misrepresentative of mature aged jobseekers because it disregards any prior employment or educational history.

What other key features of Australia’s employment system worked against mature aged jobseekers in this study?

Answer – First, the lack of time allocated to case workers to assist mature aged clients. Second, the lack of information provided to and collected from mature aged clients, which leads to inappropriate job-placements and job training. Third, mature aged participants in this study did not believe that job training they attended, including Work-for-the-Dole, helped them learn relevant employability skills.