



Research into small business
employment of mature age workers
Final Report

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

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1. Project methodology
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Executive Summary

Introduction

Outpost Consulting was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (the Department) to work with 15 small businesses to explore whether small businesses would be more inclined to employ mature age workers if supported by targeted approaches.

The businesses were recruited from the care, hospitality and wholesale and retail industries, and were based in a range of regional and metropolitan locations across the country. Baseline data was collected through surveys and interviews with the business owners. A suite of interventions was designed based on findings from a literature review and the baseline data. Six interventions were agreed on, including five tools for participants to access in their own time, along with tailored support provided for this project by Employment Facilitators operating under the Australian Government's Local Jobs Program. The tools were:

1. Series of good news stories
2. Series of one-page fact sheets
3. Links for job-matching websites focussed on mature age workers
4. Excerpts from the DEWR Investing in Experience Toolkit
5. Two DEWR interactive training modules on addressing bias and managing mature age workers

The interventions were implemented over a three month period in late 2022, and then participants were re-interviewed and re-surveyed. Additional data was gathered through a focus group and interviews with the Employment Facilitators as well as a Delphi process with experts on small business and mature age employment.

This report documents the findings of the project and presents suggestions on where to focus collective effort in supporting small businesses to employ mature age people.

Findings on the research questions

1. Effectiveness of targeted awareness raising in increasing employment

In terms of measuring preparedness to employ mature age workers, the research looked at changes in:

- interest in employing mature age workers
- perceptions about mature age workers
- awareness of age-related employment issues, and
- understanding of age management practices.

For a short duration intervention with 15 volunteering small businesses, using only sample tools, the employment outcomes (measured by both preparedness to employ and subsequent employment) were significant, particularly as not all subsequent employment outcomes would have been captured because many employers were still in the process of searching for a mature age worker at the time of the final data collection. While understanding the sample size is small, the results still indicate that targeted interventions can increase employment of mature age workers in small businesses.

2. Small business response to DEWR materials

The project sought to understand whether the small businesses in the sample had been using the material developed by the Department to hire and retain mature age workers. If so, what is helpful about the material, and if not, why not?

The research data shows that larger small businesses responded better to the tested DEWR materials about mature age workers, than smaller businesses. Smaller businesses felt these resources had less relevance to their operations, but larger employers found them useful guides to updating policies and procedures. None of the 15 small businesses were aware of the Department's online Mature Age Hub at the commencement of the research.

3. Most effective interventions

The third question the research sought to answer was: what are the most effective interventions in encouraging the sample of small businesses to take steps to hire and retain mature age people?

The research data shows that for the small businesses involved, interventions that had most impact on their views and actions around mature age workers were -

- **Concise factual information** such as fact sheets. This was the most popular intervention overall, and particularly appreciated by the smaller of the small businesses and the regional small businesses.
- **Tailored support** – for this research, this was provided by local Employment Facilitators. This was the second most highly rated intervention, with the smallest businesses rating it slightly higher than the larger small businesses.
- **Good news stories.** These rated third most popular overall. This intervention was most appreciated by businesses that were in the same industry as the subject of the stories.

Additional issues

Eight additional issues emerged from analysis and synthesis of the data collected through the project.

1. Assumptions about physical limitations and technological capability persist

While none of the employers in the sample initially thought they had any attitudinal barriers to hiring mature age workers, upon engaging with the information most realised they had some preconceived assumptions and had been inadvertently missing this group of job seekers in their recruitment practices.

Our conclusion from the research is that approaches to addressing assumptions about physical limitations and technological capability of mature age workers should include:

- Highlighting the concept that people may hold preconceptions they may not be aware of, or that they might be unconsciously perpetuating.
- Normalising mature age employment so that these workers are seen as individuals like any other employee, and like any employee may need some accommodations to maximise productivity

2. Job redesign is not well understood amongst small businesses

Related to the above issue is that many small businesses in the sample had not thought more laterally about redesigning jobs and employment arrangements to match their workforces' abilities and preferences. The project prompted some employers to try new approaches.

Our conclusion from the research is that understanding of job redesign for mature age workers within small businesses can be improved by:

- Developing short, simple information, examples targeted specifically at small business in a variety of industries, and avoiding technical jargon, like 'job redesign', to assist small businesses to think laterally about how to modify work to get the most out of all employees.
- Encouraging employers to offer these flexibilities as not all mature age workers will feel comfortable to ask for adjustments.

3. Pension thresholds are seen as a barrier

Many employers pointed to broader barriers for mature age workers entering the job market, including housing, transport and superannuation rules. Additionally, pension thresholds were raised as a particular issue by employers. Employers raised this concern even though pension settings are only relevant to a smaller subset of mature age job seekers and it is incumbent on the employee or candidate to understand the thresholds.

Our conclusion from the research is that there could be value in clear messaging targeted to smaller employers that clarifies pension settings to help reduce confusion and anxiety amongst businesses around income support thresholds.

4. There is no clear mechanism for finding mature age workers

The small employers were looking for a way to tap into the mature age workforce, particularly as the labour market was and remains tight, but they struggled to find an easy way to do this, and they were concerned about publicly specifying that they want a mature age job seeker in case it is discriminatory.

We conclude from the research that additional strategies could be implemented to better support small businesses find and target mature age workers, including:

- Undertaking research with mature age workers to have a better understanding of where they look for employment
- Providing information/tools for people who work with small businesses on recruitment about where to search and how to advertise and recruit mature age workers
- Supporting local job boards and local events as mechanisms for employers and mature age job seekers to find each other
- Collaborating with employment services providers, SEEK or other commercial services to explore opportunities for connecting employers with mature age workers.

5. When significant training is needed, training costs are a barrier

Another key barrier identified by employers at the start of the research was having limited resources to train workers. Fourteen of the fifteen employers in the study nominated this as a key barrier to employment of mature age workers. In later interviews, three businesses said they struggle with the cost of upskilling existing staff when significant training is needed.

The research concludes that the barrier of training costs can be addressed by developing, or where already existing promoting, specific programs (e.g. digital literacy programs, or the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers program) accessible to small business to subsidise training for existing mature age workers. Small businesses may also need support in finding appropriate training programs for their needs, including navigating access to free and low-cost training options for existing workers.

6. Information needs of the smallest businesses are different.

It was clear from the research that micro businesses need to be distinguished from SMEs when designing information and support. We conclude that ideally, materials would be developed for the smallest businesses that recruitment intermediaries, government websites and others in the employment ecosystem would be able to use and promote when assisting micro businesses, rather than expecting micro businesses to interact with materials that are too dense and less relevant to their circumstances.

7. Pooling similar employers may offer cost effectiveness and better matching

The research indicates that whatever the format, initiatives that pool similar employers need to be accessible to small and micro businesses, be industry and location specific and be incentivised fairly to encourage a variety of employment intermediaries to invest the time in using them to assist small business. There may be potential for leveraging local government, employment services and industry networks by providing them with seed funding or other forms of support for initiatives that connect groups of small employers with mature age workers.

8. Small employers need local contacts, place-based initiatives and regular outreach

The research reinforces that providing local, place-based support is likely to make the most difference on any employment issue for small business, including employment of mature age workers. Small businesses generally operate in and recruit from local markets using simple recruitment channels.

They often value personal relationships as a support resource and are likely to engage with professionals that they know and trust. Regular outreach initiatives from service providers can establish a connection for small businesses that enables them to reach out for targeted information at times when they need it.

Suggested actions

1. Develop tools specifically for small business audiences to encourage the employment and support of Mature Age Workers.
2. Publish tools then disseminate and promote within employment ecosystems
3. Realise the potential of local networks of employment intermediaries as a central point of support and referral for small businesses to employ mature age workers.
4. Assist employment intermediaries to engage with small businesses in a structured and timely way.

1. Project overview

1.1 Introduction

Outpost Consulting was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (the Department) to undertake research into approaches to support small businesses to employ mature age workers. The project involved working with 15 small businesses to explore whether small businesses would be more inclined to employ mature age workers if supported by targeted approaches.

Research questions included:

- Do targeted awareness-raising approaches lead to increased preparedness to employ, and to subsequent employment of, mature age workers in the sample of small businesses?
- Are the small businesses in the sample using the material developed by the Department to hire and retain mature age workers? If so, what is helpful about the material? If not, why not?
- What are the most effective interventions in encouraging the sample of small businesses to take steps to hire and retain mature age people?

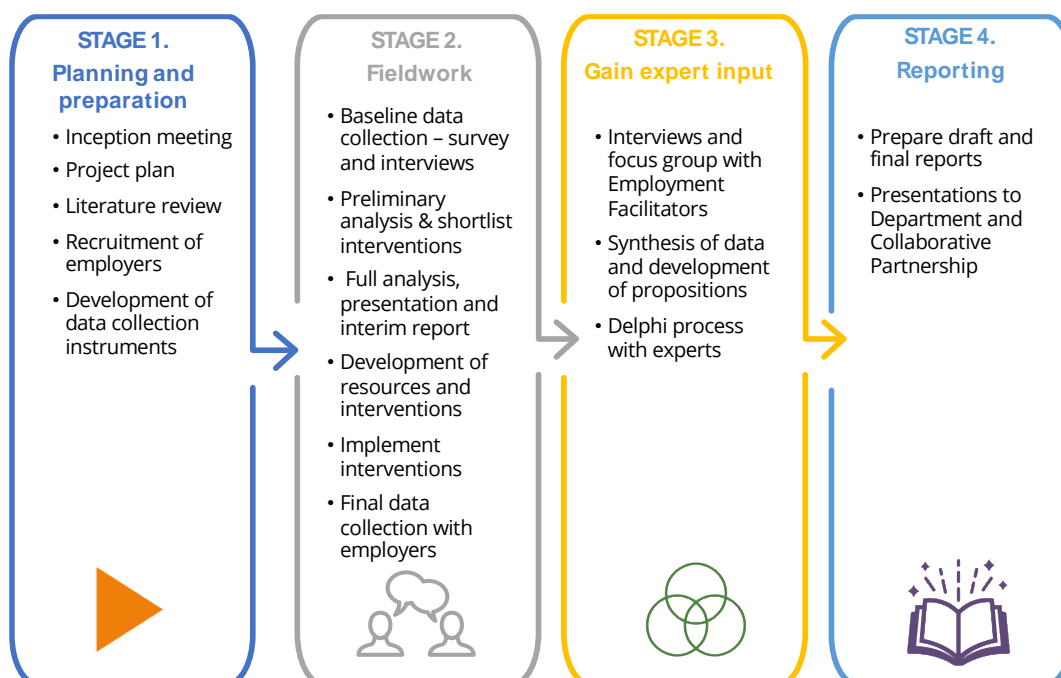
The project recruited five small businesses from each of three industries – hospitality, wholesale and retail, and care services. The businesses were located across Australia in metropolitan and regional locations. A literature review was conducted to understand the dimensions of the issue and what interventions might work to support businesses. Baseline data for each participating business was gathered through an online survey and interview to enable comparison with results from a final survey and interview conducted after implementation of a set of interventions. The interventions included a set of tools and resources and tailored support from Employment Facilitators. Data was also collected from the Employment Facilitators and from a group of experts on mature age employment after the interventions.

This report documents the findings of the project and presents suggestions on where to focus collective effort in supporting small businesses to employ mature age people.

1.2 Methodology

The project was conducted in 4-stages as summarised in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Project methodology stages



More detail on the methodology for this research project is provided below and at Appendix 1.

1.3 Context

Findings from this project should be considered in the context of the tight Australian labour market in 2022. ABS data shows that advertised positions had risen 14% over the 3 months to March 2022 and that job vacancies reached a record 480,000 positions in March 2022. According to the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, large and small businesses in every industry were facing enormous pressure to recruit and retain staff at that time.¹ Even towards the end of 2022, when the final data collection took place, the labour market remained very tight with unemployment at 3.5% and forecast to remain that low until mid-2023. Demand for labour was still strong at the end of year but moderated with the reopening of Australia’s international borders.²

Survey data from the National Skills Commission (NSC) indicated that 67% of employers were reporting recruitment difficulty in June 2022. While this was down slightly from May 2022, it was 15 percentage points higher than June 2021. The NSC survey³ also showed that in June 2022, 28% of employers expected to increase staffing levels over the next three months.

The tight labour market was an ideal opportunity for mature age workers because employers were keen to employ any staff and open to opportunities for accessing support.

In March 2022, approximately 2,043,900 Australians aged 55-64 and 637,700 aged 65+ were employed in the labour force. In the 20 years to March 2022, the participation rate of 55-64 year olds increased by 37%, with 70% of people in this age group now in the labour market. The increase in participation by

¹ <https://www.australianchamber.com.au/news/labour-and-skills-crunch-worsens/>

² <https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/smp/2023/feb/economic-outlook.html>

³ The NSC’s Recruitment Experiences and Outlook Survey surveys approximately 1,200 employers each month to find out about their experience when recruiting staff as well as whether they are expecting to increase staff levels <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/recruitment-experiences-and-outlook-survey>

people over 65 years, more than doubled from 6.7% in March 2002 to 14.8% in March 2022. Female participation by over 65s almost tripled in this time to 10.8%.⁴ October 2022 data shows that 25% of females (64,945 individuals) and 21% of males (49,115 individuals) being case managed by Workforce Australia providers are 55 years or over. Twenty percent (20%) of female jobseekers registered with Workforce Australia Online are over 55 years and 15% of males registered are over 55 years.⁵

After the May 2022 Australian federal election, there was an intense focus on employment by the new Government. A Jobs and Skills Summit was convened during the research period, which brought together unions, employers and civil society to discuss employment, training and economic challenges. Amongst other topics, the Summit participants discussed boosting workforce participation and tackling discrimination.

Broad government policy considerations now under way which may impact small businesses and mature age workers include:

- The development of an [Employment White paper](#) by Treasury, which includes in its Terms of Reference the improvement of labour market outcomes for older Australians.
- The [Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services](#) by a House of Representatives Select Committee, including an identified issue of “Meeting the needs of employers and demand-led approaches”
- The [Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training \(VET\)](#) by a House of Representatives Select Committee, which includes employer views and practices in relation to engagement with VET and encouraging partnerships between VET providers and employers
- The establishment of an [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee](#) to provide advice on economic inclusion, effectiveness and the sustainability of income payments ahead of each Budget, including advice on boosting economic participation and reducing barriers to work
- Promoting affordability and access to skills training, particularly in priority industries within States and Territories, and the national effort underway to improve digital literacy skills.

This renewed policy focus on the workforce opens up opportunities for research such as this to generate change.

1.4 Literature review

A literature review⁶ was undertaken at the beginning of the project to provide a theoretical foundation upon which to design and implement the project. The review provided a broad scan of national and international research, predominantly from the last decade, to gather insights into organisations’ behaviour in relation to the employment of mature age workers and, where possible, insights into the behaviour characteristics of small businesses and the challenges they face.

Insights from the reviewed literature informed development of the survey and interview questions used with participants to establish baseline data.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023, February). *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed*. ABS.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia-detailed/latest-release>.

⁵ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2022, October) Workforce Australia Caseload Data.

<https://www.dewr.gov.au/workforce-australia-caseload-data>

⁶ The literature review is provided in the accompanying set of Appendices, as Appendix 2.

The literature review found that mature age workers are a highly diverse group, and that employers and managers of small businesses tend to think in terms of individuals rather than a specific cohort. Best practice organisations tend to use an ‘age-neutral’ approach that supports flexibility, learning and well-being of all workers, regardless of age. However, stereotypes around older workers still need to be challenged, with research suggesting that the normalisation of mature age employment may be more effective than specific ‘myth busting’ approaches, which may unintentionally over-emphasise age related differences.

To increase the sustainable employment of workers as they age, the literature suggested a need to avoid referencing negative stereotypes of older workers and inadvertent discrimination against younger people. Emphasising the business case for employing older workers seems to be less effective in influencing behaviour than support for the implementation of age management practices.

In small businesses, age management practices tend to be individualised and ad hoc, rather than based on policy and strategy. While the literature seems to indicate that this flexible and tailored approach is an effective one, there is a need for resources and good practice examples tailored specifically to small business and recognition of the specific challenges they face – such as lack of time, lack of specialist human resources (HR) expertise and lack of awareness of available supports.

The literature suggests that the strategies small businesses prefer for supporting the employment and retention of mature age workers include subsidised training, financial incentives, support from recruitment agencies, tailored advice and success stories. See Appendix 2.

1.5 Recruitment process

Small businesses were recruited to participate in the research project with assistance from Departmental networks, industry associations and support from members of the Collaborative Partnership on Mature Age Employment. A multi-pronged recruitment plan was developed with messages and various methods for seeking nominations from different types of small businesses around the country.

The offer to small businesses included an incentive in the form of a \$1,000 gift card for those who complete the research program. Small businesses were invited to self-nominate by providing basic information via a registration form. Almost 90 small businesses expressed interest. The Department requested that the hospitality, wholesale and retail, and care industries be targeted as industry sectors with particular labour market pressures, particularly in the post-COVID lockdown environment.

Criteria for inclusion included:

- genuine interest in the research
- mix of regional and metropolitan businesses in each industry sector
- mix of States and Territories represented
- mix of business size, history and type.

After a desk review of shortlisted businesses, including ABN checks, initial screening interviews identified 15 suitable businesses that were invited to participate.

1.6 Participating businesses

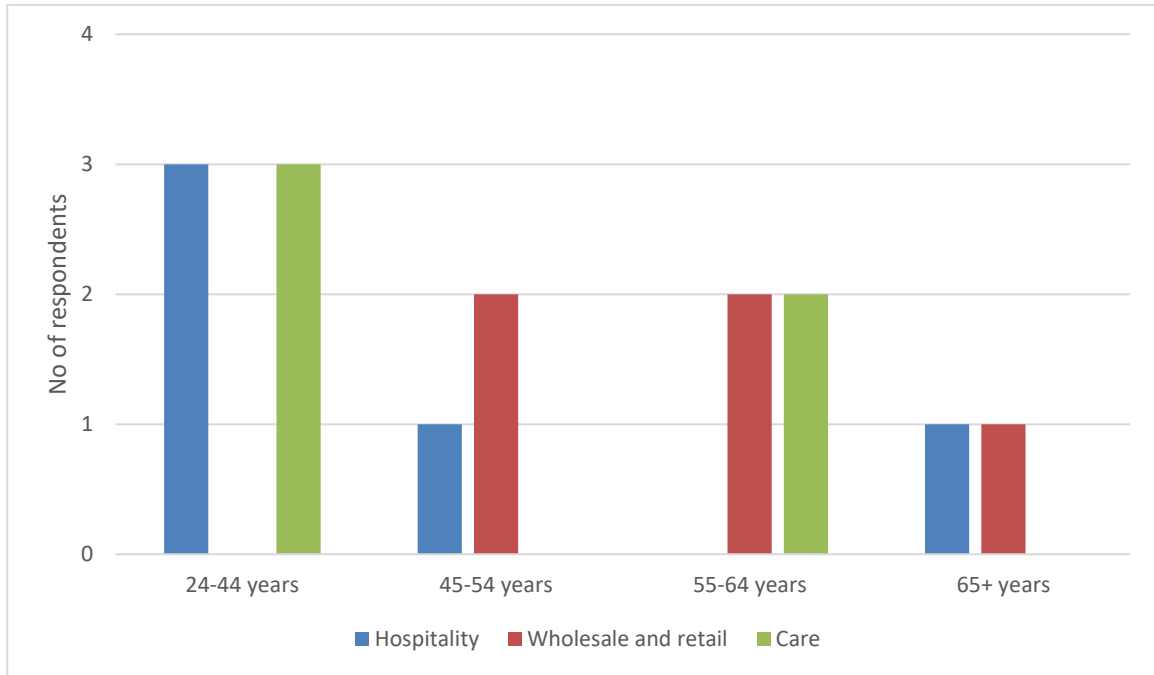
The 15 participating businesses comprised five small businesses from each of the hospitality, wholesale and retail, and care services industries. Nine of the participating small businesses were from regional locations and six from metropolitan locations. See Table 1.

Table 1: List of participating businesses

Business	Description	State	Metro/ Regional
Hospitality			
H1	Holiday apartments – 12 staff	NSW	R
H2	Catering business – 22 staff (under 20 FTE)	SA	M
H3	Hotel – 28 staff (under 20 FTE)	VIC	R
H4	Catering business – 15 staff	SA	R
H5	Café restaurant – 7 staff	NSW	M
Wholesale and retail			
W&R 1	Retail gift shop – 3 staff	VIC	R
W&R 2	Retail shoe shop – 1 staff	NSW	R
W&R 3	Wholesale packaging materials – 7 staff	NSW	M
W&R 4	Retail toy shop – 1 staff	VIC	R
W&R 5	Retail/wholesale carpets and rugs – 17 staff	NSW	M
Care services			
C1	NDIS plan management – 3 staff	QLD	R
C2	Community nursing – 4 staff	WA	M
C3	Children’s therapy – 16 staff	QLD	M
C4	Home care – 8 staff	WA	R
C5	Home care – 12 staff	VIC	R

Nine of the respondents (business owners or managers) were over 45 years old, with two over 65 years of age. More of the younger respondents were from the care services and hospitality industries, while more of the older respondents were from the wholesale and retail industry.

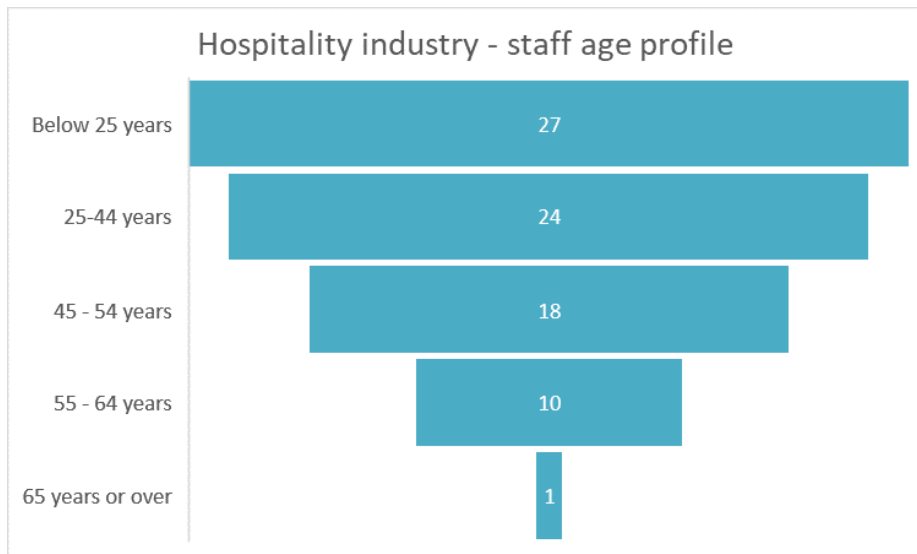
Figure 2: Age of respondent



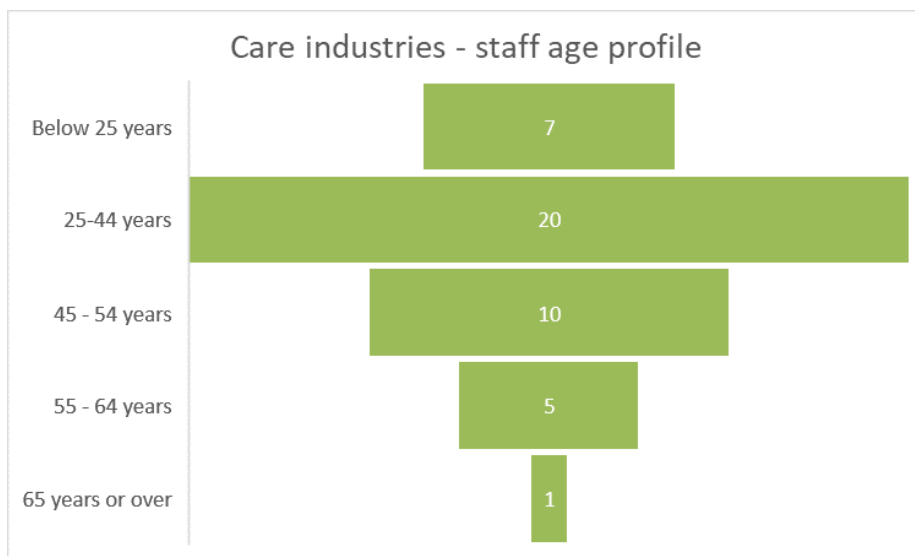
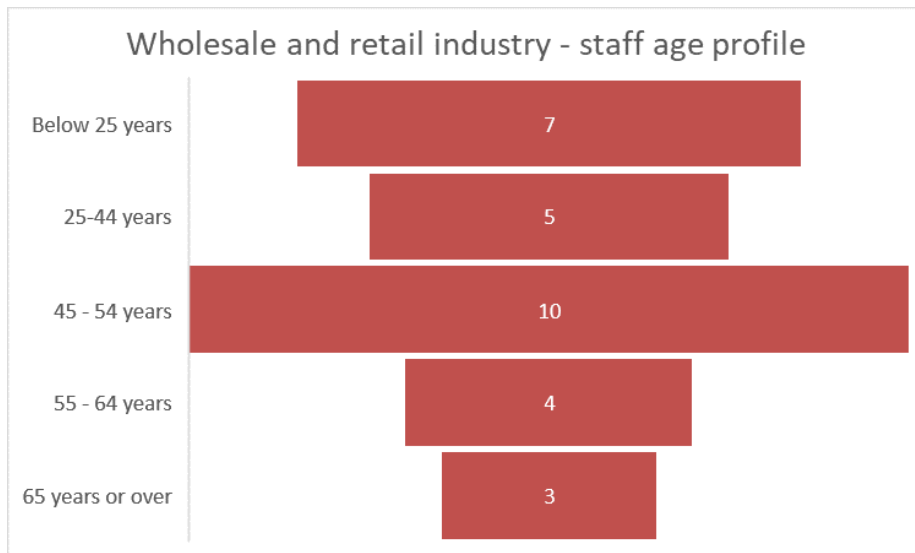
In 12 of the businesses, the business owner was responsible for human resources, in two businesses the business owner shared this responsibility with a staff member and in one business a staff member had responsibility for human resources.

In terms of the current age profile of the businesses, 10 of the businesses already had 1, 2 or 3 employees who were over 55 years. Four of these businesses had a staff member who was over 65 years of age.⁷ Industry age profiles show a larger proportion of younger staff in hospitality businesses and a larger proportion of older staff in the wholesale and retail businesses. See Figure 3.

Figure 2: Staff age profiles by industry



⁷ Note that many small businesses tend to count the business owner among their 'staff' when reporting on the age profile of their workforce.



Survey responses indicated that the top three reasons the businesses decided to participate in the project were:

1. Mature age workers make good workers for their business (10/15 respondents)
2. They need to recruit new employees (8/15 respondents)
3. They are interested in getting tailored recruitment support from government (5/15 respondents)

A one-page summary about each participating business is provided at Appendix 3.

1.7 Summary of baseline data

The following themes emerged from the baseline data on participating businesses, representing the views held at the beginning of the research, prior to interventions being implemented. They provide a foundation from which to compare behaviour or attitude change.

Awareness. The baseline data revealed that participants had a strong awareness of the impact and implications of an ageing workforce and recognise the benefits of employing mature age workers. The

views of some participants had been informed by personal experiences of discrimination against mature age workers. Perspectives on mature age workers were also influenced by the age of participants themselves, with older business owners being more aware of the issues for older workers.

Benefits. Many participants identified benefits from their experiences in employing mature age workers, such as stability, loyalty, customer service skills, and the capacity of mature age workers to act as mentors and role models. However, some participants expressed concern about the physical capability of mature age workers and their capacity for learning to use digital technologies.

Perceptions. While participants generally expressed positive views about mature age workers in the baseline survey, they did not regard age as a key factor in employment decisions and were open to employing anyone who was a good fit for the business regardless of age. There was variation between the industries in participants' perception of what age is considered 'mature'. Participants from the hospitality industry have a younger age profile in their businesses and regard workers over 45 as mature age, while some participants from the retail industry have a median age of 50 in their business.

Recruitment approaches: Most participants had not previously specifically targeted mature age workers in their recruitment processes and were unsure how to find them. Some felt they would like access to a service that matched them to mature age jobseekers. Participants reported using a range of recruitment avenues to find employees in a tight labour market including SEEK, social media, notices in shop windows, word-of-mouth, industry-specific online platforms, commercial recruitment agencies and jobactive (now Workforce Australia) providers. Approaches that the businesses had identified specifically for attracting mature age workers included offering shorter hours, advertising through traditional media, and using employee and customer networks.

Age management practices: Overall, the participants were supportive of age management practices and about half had applied one or more of these practices in their business. The participants identified few issues arising from age diversity in the workplace. Many identified benefits from having an age diverse workforce.

Job redesign: Participants from the wholesale and retail industry identified greater capacity to accommodate job redesign than businesses in the hospitality and care services industries. This was due to the greater physical demands and time pressures experienced in hospitality and care services businesses. Many participants conflated the concepts of job redesign and job flexibility, with less propensity for considering job redesign. This is possibly because small businesses tend to consider the flexibility needed for each worker individually rather than take a systemic approach to job redesign, as described in the literature review. Most participants acknowledged the need for flexibility, particularly to accommodate the caring responsibilities and health concerns of mature age workers. Many also identified adjustments they could make for mature age workers transitioning toward retirement. However, some businesses had more rigid views on the need for full time work hours.

Upskilling: Some participants from the wholesale and retail industry felt that mature age workers required less training than younger workers due to their superior life skills, while hospitality businesses reported that upskilling was required in digital skills. Higher skill levels are often required in care industries, sometimes via regulation, although some participants were willing to provide on-the-job training or to employ graduates with little experience.

Support: Participants identified a range of advice channels, but few had accessed Australian Government funded supports and resources. Few participants had accessed subsidies for mature age workers. However, those that had used the former Restart wage subsidy found it was beneficial for introducing a mature age worker to the business by enabling a risk-free trial process or subsidising the cost of getting the mature age worker up to speed with digital platforms.

Barriers: Survey responses indicated that most of the businesses experienced barriers to employing mature age workers at least sometimes. Barriers that participants reported through the interviews included: willingness of the worker to undertake hours of work compatible with the business, and perceptions about physical ability and digital competence. Participants also identified issues that were impacting their ability to take on workers of any age, such as the inconsistent hours they could offer workers in the catering services, and housing accessibility and affordability in regional areas.

1.8 Interventions

A suite of interventions was designed based on findings from the literature review and participant baseline data. Table 2 below outlines the type of intervention which was developed to respond to emerging themes.

Table 2: Interventions to respond to baseline findings

Implications of emerging themes	Type of assistance
<p>Businesses may respond to personal stories and examples from other businesses and from mature age workers because baseline data indicates that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their past personal experiences influence their current attitudes to mature age workers • they take an individual approach to managing workers but, as small businesses, there are many worker characteristics or needs that they have not yet confronted in their business • some expressed interest in learning about what other businesses do. 	Good news or success stories
<p>Participants would value simple answers, instructions and advice on aspects of employing mature age workers, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • templates and examples for inclusive job advertisements • information on industrial relations, training and supervision expectations • facts on managing employment packages that accommodate pension and super requirements. <p>Some businesses may also benefit from facts on injury risks for older workers and other information that challenges current views.</p>	Brief, targeted factual information
<p>Participants reported that they thought it would be a good idea if there was an online platform for finding mature age workers. Some suggested filters on existing recruitment sites and others thought a separate service was needed. There were different thoughts about whether these should be government-operated or industry-operated.</p>	Information on online matching services
<p>Some participants indicated that employment of mature age workers is not an area they have given much thought to previously and found the interview process a valuable opportunity to consider their current practices. They may benefit from a guided process that helps them to think about their current approach to identify where they could make changes.</p>	Opportunities for self-assessment and reflection

Implications of emerging themes	Type of assistance
<p>Participants are interested in learning more about employing mature age workers. In the current labour market, they are keen to ensure that their workplace practices are inclusive, and they can attract and retain mature age workers.</p> <p>Most participants have yet to fully explore what they could achieve through job flexibility, job redesign and age management practices and would value learning more about what is possible.</p>	Training modules
<p>The participants varied in their attitudes to, and experience in, employing mature age workers. While some differences seemed to relate to their industry, their unique perspectives and requirements were also driven by the business location, current workforce, and the approach and experience of the business owner/manager. As a result, they would benefit from tailored advice that could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help them to connect with mature age jobseekers in their area • identify available programs, incentives and training opportunities that suit their needs • direct them to other sources of information that address their specific concerns. 	Tailored advice

Six interventions were agreed on, including five tools for participants to access in their own time, along with tailored support provided for this project by Employment Facilitators operating under the Australian Government’s Local Jobs Program. The tools were:

1. Series of good news stories
2. Series of one-page fact sheets
3. Links for job-matching websites focussed on mature age workers
4. Excerpts from the DEWR Investing in Experience Toolkit
5. Two DEWR interactive training modules on addressing bias and managing mature age workers

These tools were samples of a category or type for research purposes, not comprehensively designed or finalised products. They were developed and modified from existing published information. The tools were made available to employers to access via a website.

Employment Facilitators are on the ground in 51 employment regions and support tailored, local approaches to reskilling and upskilling individuals to meet local employer needs. The local Employment Facilitator contacted each employer directly to make arrangements to provide the tailored support. Note that the Employment Facilitator’s role is not the same as an employment service provider in that they do not manage recruitment, job matching or support participants on the caseload. Rather, for this project, the Employment Facilitator was asked to work with the employer to understand their needs and make appropriate referrals or provide information to support them to employ or manage mature age workers, to support the research.

The interventions were implemented between August and October 2022. Participants were also provided with a worksheet to help them keep track of their reactions to each of the interventions as they engaged with them.

More detail on each of the interventions is provided in Appendix 4.

1.9 Final data collection

Following the implementation of the interventions, information on their impact was gathered from each participant via an online survey and interview as well as interviews and a focus group with the Employment Facilitators who were involved.

The participants answered some of the same questions that were put to them prior to the intervention period to assess how their views may have changed as a result of the interventions. They were also asked about how they engaged with each of the interventions, the value of each intervention and any suggestions for improvement. The employer surveys and discussion guides for the interviews are provided at Appendices 5 and 6.

The interviews and focus group with Employment Facilitators gathered data on how each Employment Facilitator assisted their small business employer and what the opportunities and challenges are for the whole employment support ecosystem in working with small business to support the employment of mature age workers.

1.10 Delphi process

Following the final data collection, a list of propositions was developed to discuss with a group of experts on mature age employment through a Delphi process.

The aim of the Delphi process was to explore the perspectives of experts in small business and mature age employment and find consensus on approaches to encourage and support small businesses to employ mature age workers.

The Delphi process had three rounds. The first two rounds were conducted in a survey format. The first round sought experts' responses to nine propositions, which emerged from the data collection with businesses and Employment Facilitators.

The second round presented a summary of responses from the first round and asked experts to provide further feedback by responding to others' answers or refining or elaborating on their own contributions.

The final round was in the form of an online focus group in which experts were asked to reflect on responses to rounds 1 and 2 and interrogate both the implications and opportunities arising from the research findings.

1.11 Analysis and synthesis

The data from each of the processes outlined above was synthesised and analysed by the research team to produce the findings against the research questions, as well as additional issues raised that may impact on employment of mature age workers by small businesses.

The conclusions and suggested actions in this report are drawn from these findings.

2. Findings on the research questions

2.1 Effectiveness of targeted awareness raising in increasing employment

The research looked at whether targeted awareness-raising approaches (i.e. the interventions described in section 1.8) led to increased preparedness to employ, and to subsequent employment of, mature age workers in the sample of small businesses.

In terms of measuring preparedness to employ mature age workers, we looked at changes in:

- interest in employing mature age workers
- perceptions about mature age workers
- awareness of age-related employment issues,
- understanding of age management practices.

Preparedness: interest in employing mature age workers

Upon being recruited to the project, all businesses were asked to rate their interest in employing mature age workers on a scale from 0 to 10. They were asked this same question again at the end of the interventions. The results are provided in Table 3 below.

While some businesses were very interested in employing mature age workers from the start, others were much less so. A third of the businesses rated their interest at 5 out of 10 at the outset of the project. By the end of the project the ratings were much higher, with all employers either still just as interested or becoming more interested, except for one care industry employer who lost some interest because his contact with the Employment Facilitator opened him up to other avenues for recruitment, such as graduating school students. On average, the level of interest rose from 7.3 out of 10 at the beginning of the project to 8.8 at the end.

For some employers the change in level of interest was dramatic, for others it was marginal. The interviews revealed that there are many factors underlying this, including:

- Changes in the labour market during the course of the project taking pressure off some employers
- Business changes resulting in less demand for employees
- Learning about the business case and opportunities
- Learning about flexibility and/or job redesign
- Positive experiences with mature age recruits
- Learning about new channels for recruitment or methods of engagement

Some of these factors are unpacked further below.

Table 3: Interest in mature age workers prior to recruitment and following interventions

Small Business	Initial interest rating	Final interest rating	Change in rating
Care employer 1	5	9	+4
Care employer 2	10	10	-
Care employer 3	10	10	-
Care employer 4	10	10	-
Care employer 5	10	8	-2
Retail/wholesale employer 1	5	10	+5

Small Business	Initial interest rating	Final interest rating	Change in rating
Retail/wholesale employer 2	5	8	+3
Retail/wholesale employer 3	8	8	-
Retail/wholesale employer 4	8	9	+1
Retail/wholesale employer 5	9	10	+1
Hospitality employer 1	7	10	+3
Hospitality employer 2	6	8	+2
Hospitality employer 3	5	7	+2
Hospitality employer 4	5	7	+2
Hospitality employer 5	7	8	+1
Average	7.3	8.8	+2

Preparedness: perceptions about mature age workers

After engaging with the interventions, positive views of mature age workers stayed the same or increased slightly while negative views decreased. See Figures 4 and 5.

It is notable that at the beginning of the research, all employers already had positive views of mature age workers in terms of reliability, loyalty and commitment and productivity, but only a few believed that mature age workers have fewer accidents. This result didn't change much as a result of the interventions. By the end of the study 4 of the 15 employers still felt that mature age workers are less physically able. There was no significant difference between the views of regional businesses and metropolitan businesses on these issues.

Figure 4: Number of respondents who agree or strongly agree with positive statements about mature age workers

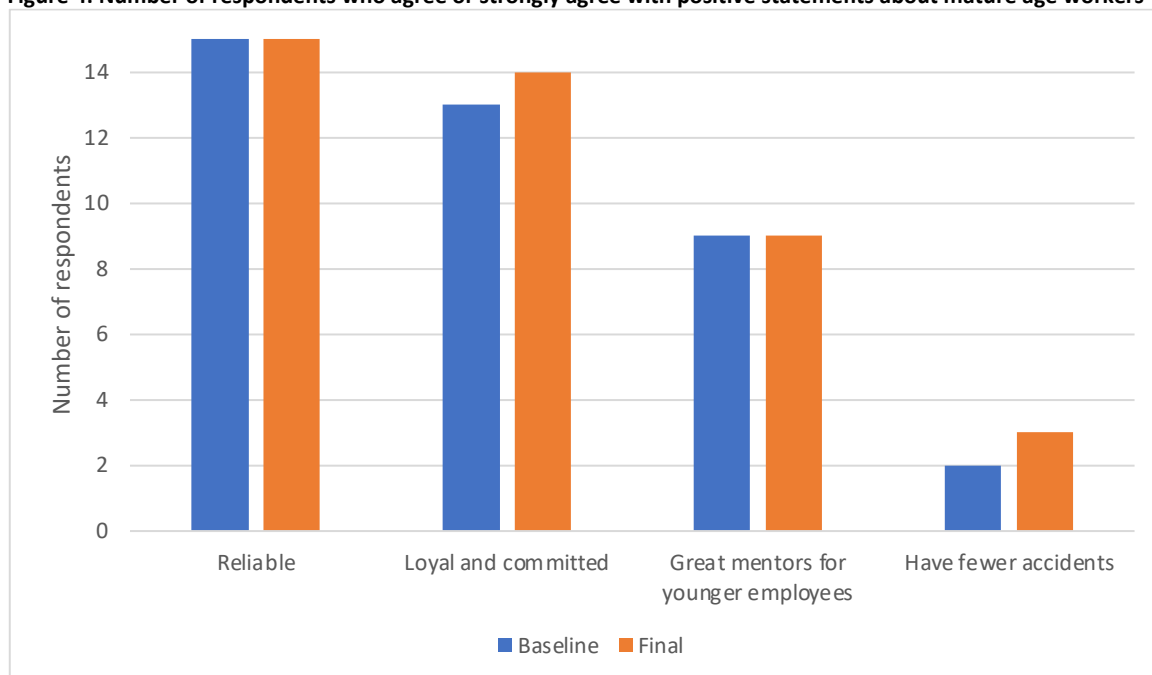
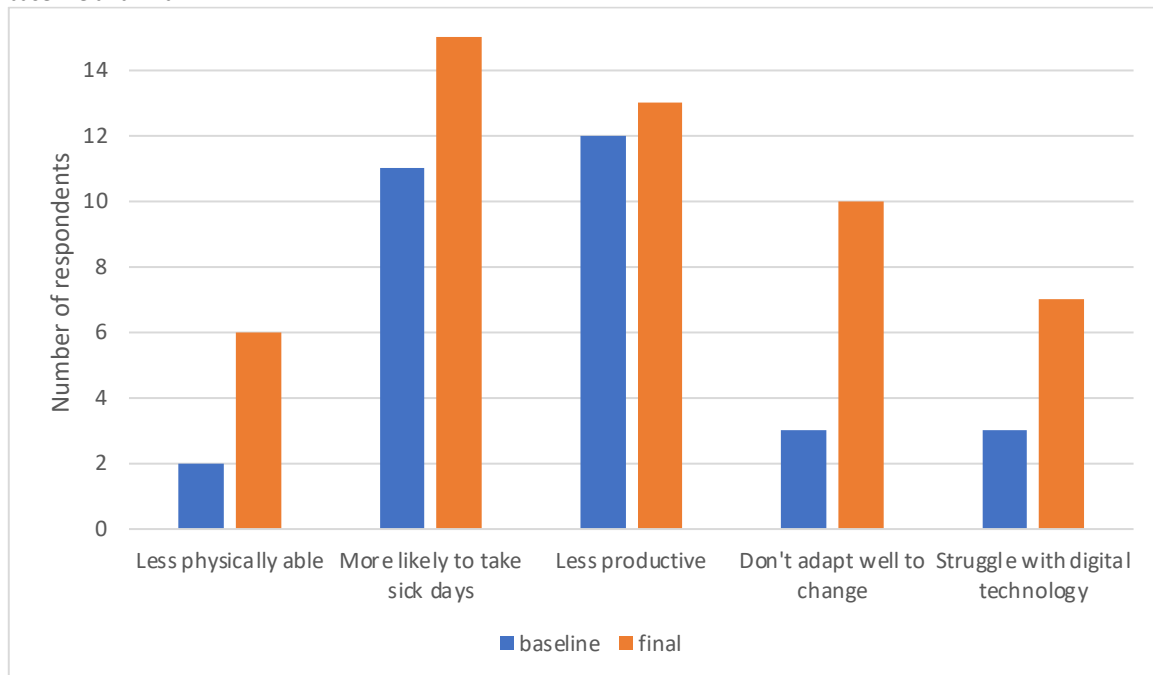


Figure 5 shows how many employers disagreed with negative statements before and after the interventions. There was a distinct change on almost all measures amongst both regional and metropolitan businesses. Seven employers changed their views on whether mature age workers adapt to well to change, and four employers changed their views on older workers' physical ability and competence with digital technology. Nevertheless, more than half the employers still did not disagree with those two sentiments by the end of the study.

Figure 5: Number of respondents who disagree or strongly disagree with negative statements about mature age workers: baseline and final

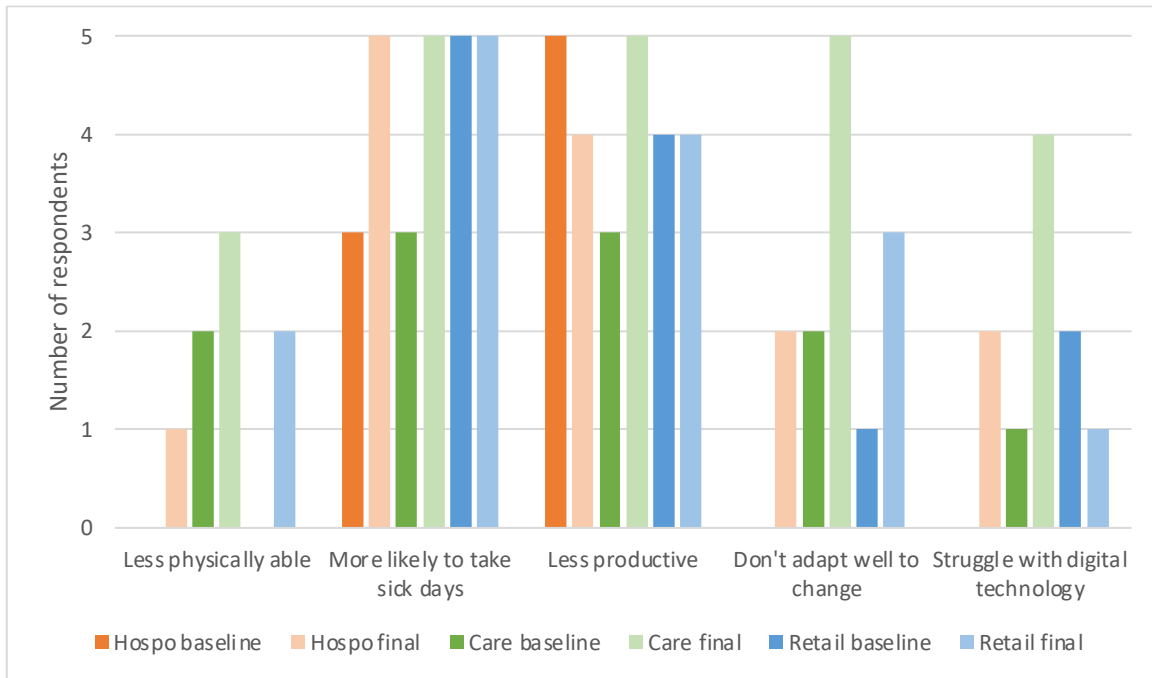


The reactions to the negative statements vary by industry. Figure 6 below shows hospitality industry employers (orange) were least likely to disagree with the negative statements about physical ability, adaptation to change and digital technology before and after the interventions, however fewer of them disagreed after the interventions. Care employers (green) had the biggest positive change in their views across all dimensions. Retail/wholesale employers (blue) remained sceptical about older workers competence with digital technology even by the end of the project.

For the most part, employers moved from a neutral position to disagreeing with these negative statements, or from disagreeing to strongly disagreeing. However, two employers changed their minds from agree to disagree in relation to struggling with digital technology, one moved from agree to disagree in relation to physical ability and one moved from agree to disagree in relation to likelihood of taking sick days.

Despite the occasional change of mindset, these findings indicate that perceptions about mature age workers' ability with digital technology and their physical ability are still the most resistant to change, and therefore perhaps best addressed in managing mature age workers, rather than trying to change perceptions.

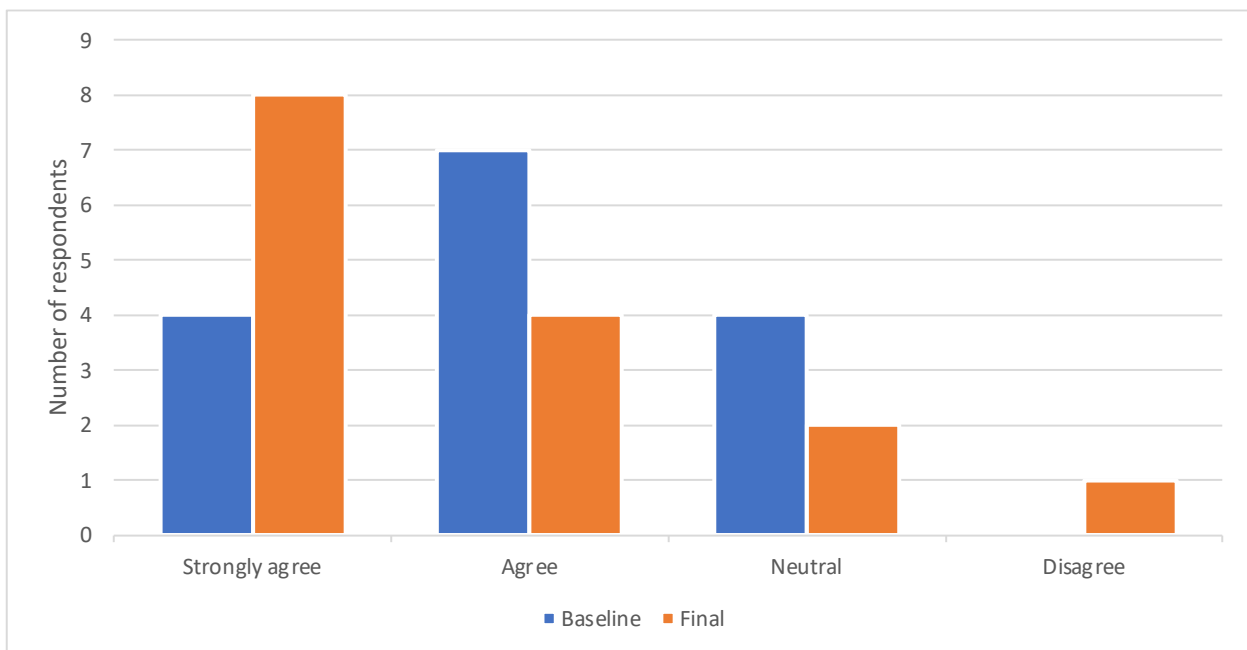
Figure 6: Number of respondents who disagree or strongly disagree with negative statements about mature age workers: baseline and final by industry



Also interesting is the number of employers who agree that age doesn't matter when employing someone. At the beginning of the research 11 of the 15 agreed with the statement, while 4 employers remained neutral, suggesting some reservations. By the end of the research, 12 of the employers agreed with the statement, but the number that strongly agreed increased by 4. However, one employer from retail/wholesale industry changed their mind from agree to disagree. See Figure 7.

Regional businesses were more likely to think that the age of the worker doesn't matter with 6 of the 9 regional businesses strongly agreeing with this statement in the final survey.

Figure 7: Number of employers who agreed that age doesn't matter: baseline and final



Preparedness: awareness of age-related employment issues

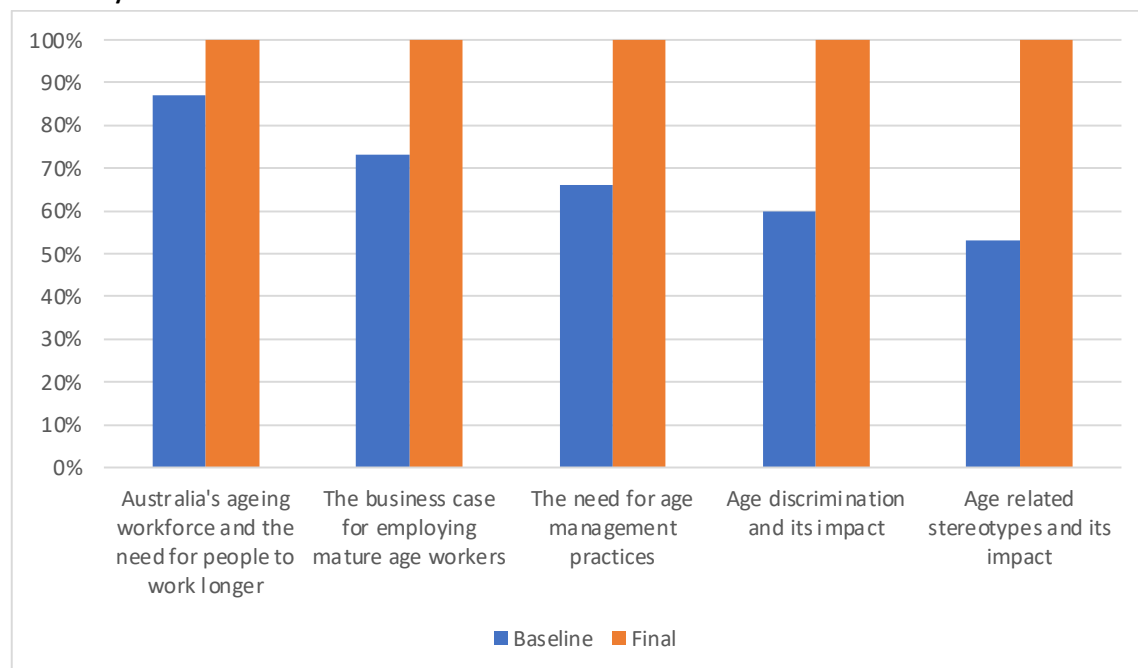
There was a change in the small business' awareness of age-related employment issues over the course of the interventions. It is important to note that, as explained in section 1.3 above, there was a strong media focus on mature age workers at the time of the research in the lead up to the Jobs and Skills Summit and proposed changes to pension thresholds. Thus, it could not be concluded that the increase in awareness could be fully attributed to the business' involvement in the project.

The businesses were asked how closely they had been following the media coverage on the issue, and nine of them said they were regularly or sometimes reading or listening to content on the issue. Four were occasionally engaging with the issue and two remained unaware of the recent media coverage. The hospitality businesses were more aware of age-related employment issues than the businesses from care and retail/wholesale industries.

Figure 8 shows the increase in awareness about various age-related employment issues. While most employers understood from the beginning of the project that the workforce was ageing and there was a need for people to work longer, and were also aware of the business case for, or benefits from, employing mature age workers, there was less awareness about the need for age management practices, the impact of age discrimination and the impact of age-related stereotypes. By the end of the project all employers were well aware of each of these issues.

On most of these issues there was no significant difference in the views of regional and metropolitan employers. However, at the beginning of the project, regional employers had a slightly better awareness of the business case of employing mature age workers and metropolitan employers were slightly more aware of Australia's ageing workforce and the need for people to work longer.

Figure 8: Awareness of age-related employment issues: percent of businesses who were aware or very aware at baseline and final surveys



Preparedness: understanding of age management practices

Employers were asked if they supported and/or used a range of age management practices to assess whether there would be more support and use of these practices after the interventions.

Table 4 shows the results at baseline and final surveys for each of the practices. There were only a few practices that some employers didn't support at the baseline – offering flexible times and locations (2 employers); offering carers' leave (2 employers); offering health and wellbeing programs (1 employer) and job redesign (4 employers). By the end of the interventions, support had increased for most of these practices.

The biggest changes in behaviour amongst employers were in offering part time work (from 8 to 14 employers); ensuring advertising and recruitment is free from age bias (from 7 to 11 employers); using multi-age work teams (from 5 to 12 employers) and employing retirees (from 2 to 7 employers). By the end of the project, all except three employers were offering flexible times or locations for work (one employer still did not support this practice) and all but three had implemented multi-age work teams.

There was no significant difference in responses between regional and metropolitan employers, but generally speaking, regional employers were slightly more likely to support and/or be using age management practices than metropolitan employers at the beginning and at the end of the research.

Table 4: Support for and use of various age-management employment practices: at baseline and final surveys

Age management practice	Not supported		Supported but not used		Used in the past or currently	
	Baseline	Final	Baseline	Final	Baseline	Final
Using mature age workers to mentor younger workers	0	0	7	5	8	10
Part-time work options	0	0	7	1	8	14
Flexible working times or locations	2	1	5	2	8	12
Training for all workers, regardless of age	0	0	8	3	7	10
Ensuring advertising and recruitment are free from age bias	0	0	8	4	7	11
Multi-age work teams	0	0	10	3	5	12
Carers leave for employees to care for elderly relatives	2	2	8	3	5	10
Employment of retirees	0	0	13	6	2	9
Employee health and wellbeing programs	1	1	10	0	4	5
Job-redesign (e.g. reducing physical requirements of job)	4	1	6	6	5	8
Phased retirement	0	0	15	12	0	3

Subsequent employment of mature age people

At the end of the project thirteen more mature age people had been employed within this sample of businesses - 9 in the care industry, 1 in retail/wholesale and 3 in hospitality. Note that while the original definition of mature age workers used was people over 55 years, the definition used by some Departmental programs is over 45 years. Some businesses themselves categorised a number of new recruits who were over 45 years as mature age workers. These workers have been included in the employment outcomes. See Table 5.

Also included are two employment outcomes – one in retail and one in hospitality – where the recruitment process began before the interventions started. These were included because the employers reported that they decided to actively look for a mature age worker once they agreed to participate in the project. Therefore, the project was a trigger to explore workers within this pool.

The care industry employers were much more likely to find suitable mature age workers than the retail/wholesale or hospitality industry employers, with all five employers engaging mature age workers during the project period. Care industries are identified as having growing job and career opportunities from entry level to professional positions, and are more likely than retail/wholesale or hospitality to attract training incentives to counter skills shortages.

The stronger result in the care industry also reflects the age profile of the industry. The average age in the health care and social assistance industry is 41 years, compared to 40 years across all industries and the average age of an aged care or disability support worker is 47 years. In contrast, the average age of people working in accommodation and food services is 26 years and for retail/wholesale it is 33 years.⁸ In comparing across industries, it is also important to keep in mind that most of the employers in the retail/wholesale industry were very small and not in a position to hire a new worker immediately.

Table 5: Employment of mature age workers during the project period

Industry	No. mature age recruits	Details
Care	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 x employees over 55 years • 3 x employees over 45 years • 3 x independent contractors
Retail/wholesale	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 x employee over 55 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Process started prior to project but completed within project period
Hospitality	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 x employees over 55 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Process for one started prior to project but idea was sparked by project and recruitment completed within project period • 1 x employee over 45

For a short duration intervention with 15 volunteering small businesses, using only sample tools, the employment outcomes (measured by both preparedness to employ and subsequent employment) were significant, particularly as not all subsequent employment outcomes would have been captured because many employers were still in the process of searching for a mature age worker at the time of the final data collection. While understanding the sample size is small, the results still indicate that targeted interventions can increase employment of mature age workers in small businesses.

Finding 1

The research data indicates that preparedness to employ and employment of mature age workers amongst small businesses can be increased through targeted resources and support.

⁸ Australian Government (2023) Labour Market Insights. <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/>

2.2 Small business response to DEWR materials

The project sought to understand whether the small businesses in the sample had been using the material developed by the Department to hire and retain mature age workers. If so, what is helpful about the material, and if not, why not?

Employers were asked in the baseline survey whether they were aware of the Mature Age Hub which included material developed by the Department such as a toolkit, videos and a training program on employing mature age workers. None of the 15 small businesses were aware of the Mature Age Hub.

As part of the interventions, we introduced the small businesses to elements from two of the resources developed by the Department aimed at helping businesses employ mature age workers, which are available on the Mature Age Hub (<https://www.dewr.gov.au/mature-age-hub>):

- a self-assessment tool, which was part of the Investing in Experience Toolkit, and
- two modules from the Interactive Training Modules – Module 2 on identifying and addressing biases and misconceptions and Module 3 on managing mature age workers for high performance.

The reaction to these resources varied. On the whole, we observed a distinction between larger small employers (those with 10 or more employees) and smaller small employers (those with less than 10 employees). The larger small employers valued both of the DEWR resources because they were well structured, detailed and helpful in updating their policies and procedures. The smaller employers found the resources somewhat overwhelming and not relevant to their businesses. One of the larger small employers suggested that it would be useful to include some templates and guides which are specific to small businesses because they found it hard to determine ‘where the line is’ in terms of what a small business should be able to implement. A couple of employers said that because managers and employees in small businesses are talking to each other all the time, the need for detailed written policies is less relevant than it is for larger businesses.

I felt this resource (toolkit) was a bit ‘name and shame’. You need something more humane. From a factual perspective I think it was good and useful, just a bit discouraging to use. It didn’t leave me with a positive emotional feel. – Smaller business. – Smaller small business

I found this easy to use, quick and gave really short sharp answers about things you might look into and is this something you’ve got covered. It was handy to consider where we might look at our policies again. – Larger small business

Table 6 shows how different businesses rated these resources and the comments they provided about them in the final survey. Businesses with fewer than 10 employees gave the toolkit an average rating of 4.3 while the larger small businesses gave the toolkit an average rating of 8.7. The smallest businesses gave the training modules an average rating of 4.5, while the larger small businesses gave the training modules a rating of 7.7.

Regional businesses found these resources slightly more useful than metropolitan businesses did. The average rating for regional businesses on the training modules was 5.8 versus 5 for metropolitan businesses. Regional businesses rated the toolkit 6.4 while metropolitan businesses rated it 5.8.

Table 6: How useful did you find the tool? Please comment.

Small Business	No of employees	Toolkit rating	Comments	Modules rating	Comments
Smallest employers					
Care employer 2	4	5/10	aimed at large business and not for small businesses	5/10	Not very beneficial, maybe if a certificate was obtained at the end it would be better
Care employer 3	8	10/10	Very useful	10/10	Very useful in assessing our business
Care employer 4	3	2/10	Better suited to a medium to large size organisation	2/10	-
Retail/wholesale employer 2	3	3/10	Designed for bigger small businesses. Micro businesses are really under catered for by govt in general. Report generated has some value	3/10	-
Retail/wholesale employer 3	2	8/10	All a bit much for a small business with only a couple of employees	5/10	I was pretty well aware of the topics covered
Retail/wholesale employer 4	1	6/10	-	3/10	Users can easily fudge the results, and could be simply used to tick boxes.
Retail/wholesale employer 5	7	5/10	It was ok	5/10	Pretty standard
Hospitality employer 2	7	1/10	Too over complicated for my situation. Too in depth.	3/10	Just a bit too much. My workplace is age inclusive.
Larger small employers					
Care employer 1	12	-	Didn't use	-	Didn't use
Care employer 5	16	9/10	The most in-depth resource, but quite time-consuming to work through.	6/10	Module 2 I didn't find that useful. Module 3 was more informative and practical
Retail/wholesale employer 1	17	7/10	Useful although it can leave one with feelings of guilt. The wording could be somewhat softer/less clinical	5/10	Too simplistic and naive. The reality is far more nuanced. The modules seem to focus on white collar employment only.
Hospitality employer 1	24	10/10	Predominantly helpful with job descriptions and expectations and being flexible on job sharing.	10/10	
Hospitality employer 3	12	10/10	Very useful to identify policies and procedures that we may need to consider. May not be able to include everything as a small business but can start to implement some	10/10	Helped with awareness of age inclusivity in our workplace and ways we can improve. Also be helpful for training staff
Hospitality employer 4	22	8/10	Broadened my horizons	6/10	-
Hospitality employer 5	15	8/10	Very useful at identifying actions	9/10	Makes management aware of things which could be improved

Finding 2

The research data shows that larger small businesses responded better to the tested DEWR materials about mature age workers, than smaller businesses. Smaller businesses felt these resources had less relevance to their operations, but larger employers found them useful guides to updating policies and procedures.

None of the 15 small businesses were aware of the Department's online Mature Age Hub at the commencement of the research.

2.3 Most effective interventions

The third question the research sought to answer was: what are the most effective interventions in encouraging the sample of small businesses to take steps to hire and retain mature age people?

In the baseline study, we asked participants what barriers they faced in employing mature age workers and what types of information and support might assist them. This data was used to develop the set of interventions for testing. As noted above, we tested six categories of intervention:

- Good news stories
- Concise fact sheets
- Mature age job matching websites
- Self-assessment tool
- Online training modules
- Tailored support provided by a local Employment Facilitator

At the end of the intervention period, the 15 small businesses were asked to rate each category out of 10 and comment if they wished. The average ratings for each intervention are presented in Figure 9 below, including the averages for larger small employers (those with 10 or more employees) and smaller small employers (those with less than 10 employees). Figure 10 shows which interventions were most effective for:

- Teaching businesses something new
- Changing their outlook in relation to mature age workers
- Inspiring them to take steps to recruit mature age workers
- Inspiring them to change HR practices to be more inclusive of mature age workers.

Figure 9: Employer perception on usefulness of intervention. Average ratings out of 10 for each intervention

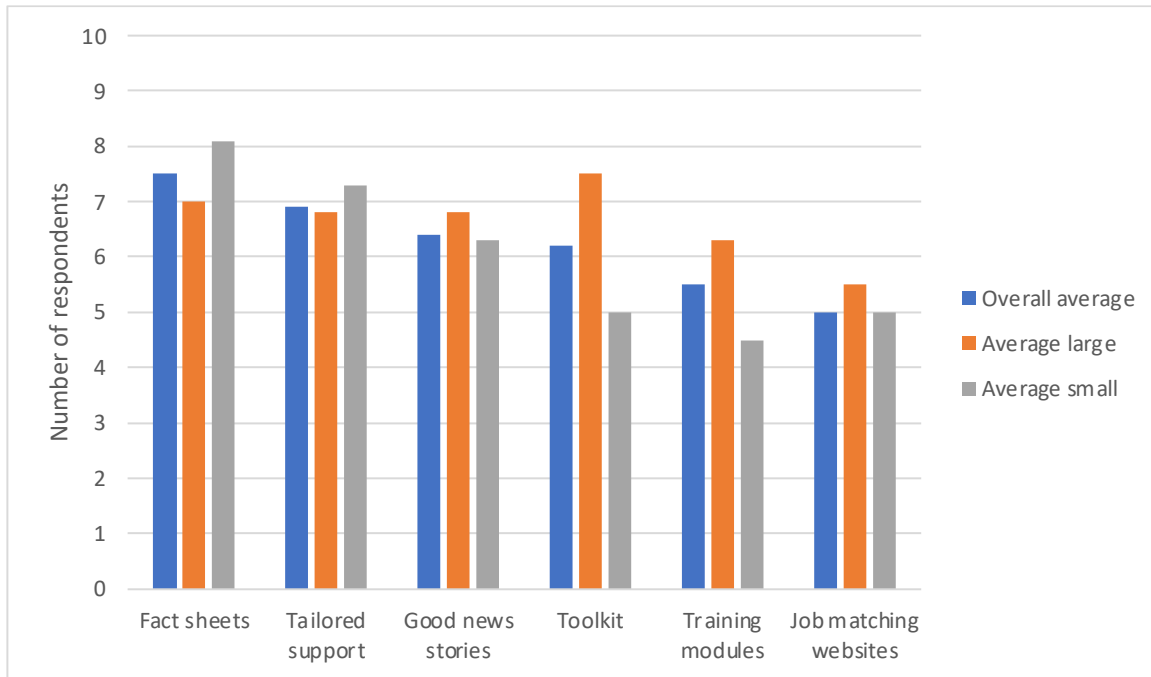
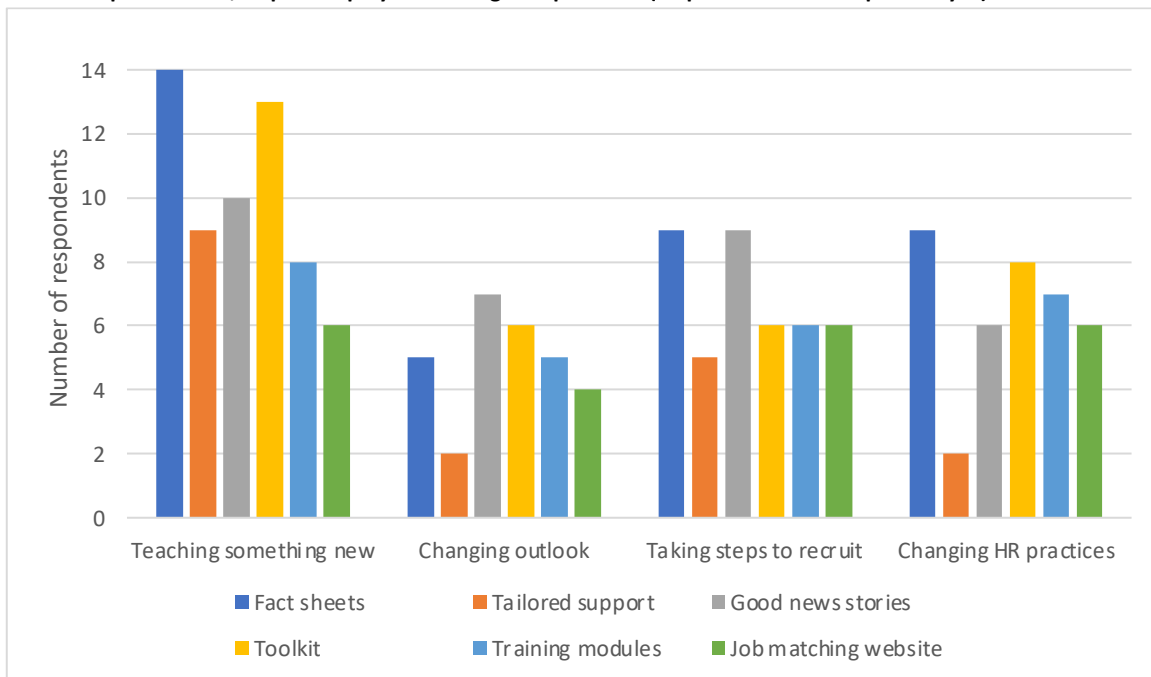


Figure 10: Effectiveness of each intervention. Did the intervention teach something new, change outlook, inspire employer to take steps to recruit, inspire employer to change HR practices (respondents who responded yes).



As shown in Figure 9, the **concise factual information** was the most popular intervention overall, and particularly appreciated by the smaller of the small businesses which rated it 8.1 out of 10. Regional employers also rated this intervention strongly at 7.7 out of 10. Comments included:

Most useful, lots of links to click to, can look into things further from hyperlinks. – Small business

Straight to the point. – Small business

The format worked well for a busy small business. – Small business

The How to Recruit checklist is very useful and prompts the right questions to be asked. The How to Retain checklist would be useful for a large organisation but need a simpler version for small business. – Small business

Figure 10 shows that the fact sheets were also the most effective in terms of teaching businesses something new, with 14 businesses saying they learnt something new. This intervention was also the most effective at inspiring businesses to take steps to recruit mature age workers (together with the good news stories) and inspiring businesses to change their HR practices. The 'how to recruit' fact sheet was most useful in this regard, with a number of businesses highlighting how they have taken these simple suggestions on board.

The takeaway for us was through unconscious bias, selection criteria and wording of ads – we'd talked about things like 'energetic' and 'passionate'. The adjectives we use could describe more of the functions of the role, to be more welcoming to attract people through a different lens. And specifically acknowledging that we are open to employing people who are mature age. Those are the big changes. – Small business

We used some of the fact sheets and check lists for the last job ad in getting a worker. They would have made a contribution to [the] person we recruited – even in the interview process, we knew what to ask. – Small business

We took out some of those biases from the ad such as not requiring full time and providing breaks in work. We also looked at applications in a different way. Instead of having specific customer service experience, we looked at areas that might equate. – Small business

I think I've learned about trying to make roles of interest to wider group of potential employees. – Small business

The **tailored support**, in this research provided by local Employment Facilitators, was the second most highly rated intervention, with the smaller small businesses rating it slightly higher than the larger small businesses (7.3 versus 6.8 out of 10). Regional employers rated this service much higher than metropolitan employers (7.3 versus 5.4 out of 10).

It is important to note here that there was a wide range of responses to this intervention as each business received a slightly different service, depending on their needs and the Employment Facilitators' availability and accessibility. Two metropolitan businesses rated this intervention '1' because they did not receive a service at all.⁹ If these outliers were removed, the average rating for this intervention would increase to 8 out of 10, making it the favourite intervention (the fact sheets rated 7.5 overall).

Note also that this intervention only considered Employment Facilitator support and did not consider the support that other employment intermediaries or programs offer.

⁹ In one case this was due to the Employment Facilitator becoming ill then going on leave. In the other, the employer and Employment Facilitator were not able to make a time to connect during the research period.

In terms of effectiveness, the tailored support rated well on teaching something new but only a few employers changed their outlook or were inspired to change their HR practices as a result of this intervention.

Very few of the businesses were aware of the role of the Employment Facilitator prior to the project and appreciated having a local person to connect with on employment issues. The most beneficial aspects of the support were being connected to local employment services providers and using the Employment Facilitators' newsletters and networks to advertise on behalf of businesses. Some hospitality businesses that were involved in customised training and recruitment programs appreciated the effort but felt that the process moved too slowly because they needed workers immediately.

Comments included:

Great, but overwhelming with all the leads, only selected a few. – Small business

Very helpful in getting contacts and linking with job matching service provider. – Small business

I enjoyed the meeting ...(but) our conversation covered general issues, rather than drilling down to how he could assist me. – Small business

The best thing is that she is now an ongoing resource, plus she understands our business. – Small business

(she) was an excellent help. I found that she listened to our specific needs and connected me with local employment agencies that were relevant for the roles in our business. – Small business

The content itself was not useful, their ability to broadcast our advertisement was helpful. – Small business

Discovering we had an Employment Facilitator was great – prior to the project I was unaware of this. – Small business

The **good news stories** rated third most popular. This intervention was most appreciated by businesses that were in the same industry as the subject of the stories. A number of the stories were about hospitality businesses and these resonated with the hospitality employers. Regional businesses rated the good news stories higher than metropolitan businesses did (7 versus 5.5 out of 10). Good news stories rated comparatively well in terms of inspiring businesses to recruit mature age workers. This type of intervention appears to be quite subjective, working for some individuals, but not others. Comments included:

I tend not to read good news stories in any form of media as they are not of particular interest and inevitably one-sided. – Small business

This has opened my eyes to more opportunities in the business for mature age workers. – Small business

Motivated out of the box thinking. – Small business

Nice to read true life stories. – Small business

Enjoyable. Served as a good prompt to consider mature age candidates. – Small business

It was useful to see the challenges other industries faced and how they overcame them. – Small business

They were nice to read but did not change my existing views or provide information I wasn't already aware of. – Small business

The COTA SA link provided some good insight and inspiration. – Small business

The response to the **toolkit and the training modules** are discussed above in section 2.2. As is clear in Figure 12, these interventions were clearly favoured by the larger small employers, particularly the toolkit. The toolkit also rated well in terms of teaching businesses something new. While the training modules were one of the less popular resources, about half the employers said completing the modules inspired them to recruit mature age workers and to change their HR practices. Once again, the material on advertising resonated with employers

Overall, there was some insightful info in Module 3 and the toolkit, which will definitely influence how we approach advertising roles. – Small business

The **job matching websites** specialising in mature age workers were the least favoured of all interventions. There was no difference in average ratings between metropolitan and regional businesses for this intervention. During the baseline interviews, employers talked about wanting an online approach to finding mature age workers. They also talked about potential ways of tapping into the grey nomad workforce (i.e. retired people who travel around Australia for an extended period). Four existing commercially-run job boards/talent matching websites were put forward to see if they might be effective. Two promoted mature age candidates generally, and two were specific to grey nomads.

Generally, employers liked the concept of these websites, but did not want to invest in advertising on a platform that was untested and appeared too narrow (i.e. not a lot of applicants, metro-focussed), compared to large sites like SEEK, which attract thousands of potential candidates. Some said they would have more faith in a government run website. In terms of effectiveness, this intervention did not rate well on any of the dimensions, as illustrated in Figure 13 above, with only about a third of employers realising a benefit. That is not to say the concept of online matching does not have value, but more thinking is needed on how to channel businesses to services that fit their needs. Comments included:

When I looked at the site, it seemed only for metro towns so did not explore. – Small business

(grey nomads site) not applicable for my business. I need long term workers, not people passing through. I'd have to be continually training. – Small business

Quite useful and informative. We were not aware about these websites at all. – Small business

It's great that these exist but hard for me to consider using them, especially with a financial cost attached when I have no concrete evidence that this will work for recruiting in my small restaurant. – Small business

Not as user friendly as the one-page resources. – Small business

I liked the idea of having alternatives to the more popular recruitment channels, however I found that some of the sites were probably too niche for what we were after. – Small business

They don't have as far a reach. I don't see as being as useful as larger sites such as SEEK, Jora, Indeed etc. – Small business

I found that while the websites may be suitable for major towns or cities, they weren't helpful in smaller towns or remote areas. – Small business

Finding 3

The research data shows that for the small businesses involved, interventions that had most impact on their views and actions around mature age workers were -

- **Concise factual information** such as fact sheets, was the most popular intervention overall, and particularly appreciated by the smaller of the small businesses and the regional small businesses.
- **Tailored support** – for this research provided by local Employment Facilitators, was the second most highly rated intervention, with the smallest businesses rating it slightly higher than the larger small businesses.
- **Good news stories** rated third most popular overall. This intervention was most appreciated by businesses that were in the same industry as the subject of the stories.

3. Additional issues

The eight issues below are assembled from analysis and synthesis of all of the data collected throughout the project, but may not respond directly to each of the research questions. The substance of these issues was put to Delphi participants as a list of propositions, and all participants agreed that they cover the key barriers and solutions for small business in employing mature age workers. Following the Delphi process and further analysis of the data, the propositions were reframed to reflect the issues more precisely, and these are discussed further below.

3.1 Assumptions about physical limitations and technological capability persist

While none of the employers in the sample initially thought they had any attitudinal barriers to hiring mature age workers, upon engaging with the information most realised they had some preconceived assumptions and had been inadvertently missing this group of job seekers in their recruitment practices.

The pre-conceived assumptions mostly related to mature age workers' ability to adapt to change, physical limitations, and skills with technology, and for many it was not so much about excluding them, but just not having mature age workers on their radar as a valuable pool of workers.

I think it's been a bit of a relief for us to know now that mature age workers are a really good pool for our kind of business. – Small business

The interventions made inroads on changing these negative attitudes to varying extents, notably improving perceptions about the ability to adapt to change. However, three assumptions persisted despite the interventions - that mature age workers are less physically able, that they don't have fewer accidents and that they struggle with technology, with more than half of employers still agreeing with or remaining neutral on these issues by the end of the research.

This same finding also emerged from the literature review which found evidence that lack of digital literacy and physical limitations were issues in the employment of mature age workers more broadly. Delphi participants and Employment Facilitators agreed that some of these negative assumptions still exist amongst employers in Australia.

Based on employers I've spoken to attitude and perception are the key barriers preventing them from even considering hiring a mature age worker – Delphi Participant

These barriers resonate with the findings from our own research with older workers and stakeholders, especially those re: work redesign, and assumptions about mature age workers – Delphi participant

There is a perception that mature age workers aren't digitally literate and may have more physical limitations, which means they won't be able to complete the same amount/quality of work that they perceive younger employees are able to do. – Delphi participant

There are often limits around what mature age workers want to do – they can be limited by their physical capabilities, their need for flexibility on time and hours, whether they are tech savvy. And there is still a lot of age discrimination out there among employers. – Employment Facilitator

However, the literature and Delphi findings suggests that myth busting is not necessarily the best response to changing these more fixed perceptions. There were findings in the literature that the normalisation of mature age employment may be more effective than myth busting, which can actually highlight age-related differences. Delphi participants also pointed out that myth busting is a passive intervention, while engagement with small business is more powerful.

The interviews with employers highlighted that, with some guidance, employers are often happy to make adjustments to accommodate physical limitations or invest in (limited) training to address skill gaps with technology. This was true even for those employers who held negative beliefs about physical and technological capability. The general perception from the small employers was that if the mature age worker can do the job, even if some flexibility or job redesign is required, then employers are happy to employ them, particularly because they bring certain positive attributes that younger people don't.

Now I'm open to whoever is keen and available. The resources have helped me with that. Previously older people have said "I can't do this, can't do that." So I've been unsure of them. Now I'm open to working on what works for them. – Small business

It's not necessarily about being (biased) based on age but how it reflects physical ability. My attitude hasn't changed but we've definitely started to try and come up with new solutions a bit more. – Small business

Potentially I will be recruiting soon, but sadly it will be a role where I would be unlikely to look for a mature age worker. It's a physical warehouse role and I will look for someone in their 30s. I don't want a stupid 20 year old, but a 35 year old who can think and can put knee pads on and do the job. I will want to keep them for 10 to 15 years, so you have to think long term about how long they can keep going in that role. – Small business

I think if they tell me what they can't do, that's good enough. There's things they can do, so I work around that. – Small business

Persistent assumptions

Our conclusion from the research is that approaches to addressing assumptions about physical limitations and technological capability of mature age workers should include:

- Highlighting the concept that people may hold preconceptions they may not be aware of, or that they might be unconsciously perpetuating.
- Normalising mature age employment so that these workers are seen as individuals like any other employee, and like any employee may need some accommodations to maximise productivity.

3.2 Job redesign is not well understood amongst small businesses

Related to the above finding is that many small businesses in the sample had not thought more laterally about redesigning jobs and employment arrangements to match their workforces' abilities and preferences. The project prompted some employers to try new approaches.

The information about flexibility was useful – those suggestions will help us think about what we can potentially offer them – what works for them and us. – Small business

I know now that I need to see where they need support and keep helping them out. Being accommodating about what they can and can't do. – Small business

The increase in support for and use of age management practices, including job redesign approaches, following the interventions is shown in Figure 9 above. Prior to the interventions about a quarter of employers (4 employers) said they didn't support job redesign, but after the interventions, only one employer said they didn't support job redesign. Job redesign was the only age management practice that this particular employer did not support, which suggests perhaps that they did not understand the options for job redesign, and that it doesn't need to involve major changes. The employer said:

To me it seems much easier for a big operation with hundreds of roles to find roles for mature workers and be able to change hours etc. For me I can't budge on what I'm looking for. I can't change the job. – Small business

Others in interviews became much more open to job redesign options following the interventions.

I liked the job redesign ideas... Many people don't realise how customisable jobs are. They think they're quite fixed, but most roles can be whatever you need them to be. – Small business

The job redesign one was great but needs some simpler examples. – Small business

We started thinking how can we as an organisation do things differently. For example, the big linen trolley carts that they need to take to rooms, some of the women said it was heavy to push by themselves, so we thought let's change it – it's a two person job at that point. Just because we've done something one way, doesn't mean it's the best way to do it. Definitely, in ways like that, it's opened everyone up to being more solution focused. – Small business

I maybe wasn't as open to a mature age worker without the resources I looked at, I had some assumptions. But with the current worker she says she can't do heavy lifting, so I've tailored her clients to those that don't need that. – Small business

My preferred method is employment (over contracting), but in this day and age people want more variety, hybrid and multiple arrangements. Mature age workers want more flexibility like this... I'm being flexible in the mode of inclusion in the business. – Small business

The literature showed that for small businesses generally job redesign was individualised and ad hoc but innovative organisations were offering flexible arrangements in a more strategic or policy-based way. Employment Facilitators indicated that the term 'job redesign' was somewhat daunting for small businesses. They said a number of employers in the project had not thought about small changes that could be made to tasks and they were able to assist them with this. The experts in the Delphi process agreed that it may be more of an issue of knowledge and capacity than a willingness to make changes. They also pointed out that not all employees would be comfortable in asking for adjustments.

We got him to think about modifying his work – he has highly skilled staff. Some of the tasks could be done by someone else. Schedule the rosters so that unskilled resource could clean glasses, wash dishes etc. The benefit to him was challenging him to think about workplace fit and splitting up roles. – Employment Facilitator

I think the term 'work redesign' might sound daunting to a small business owner when in fact a mature age person might only be looking for quite a simple change like offering more flexible work hours. Raising awareness of the possibilities must be the first step. – Delphi participant

Understanding job redesign

Our conclusion from the research is that understanding of job redesign for mature age workers within small businesses can be improved by:

- Developing short, simple information, examples targeted specifically at small business in a variety of industries, and avoiding technical jargon, like 'job redesign', to assist small businesses to think laterally about how to modify work to get the most out of all employees.
- Encouraging employers to offer these flexibilities as not all mature age workers will feel comfortable to ask for adjustments.

3.3 Pension thresholds are seen as a barrier

Many employers pointed to broader barriers for mature age workers entering the job market, including housing, transport and superannuation rules. Additionally, pension thresholds were raised as a particular issue by employers. Employers raised this concern even though pension settings are only relevant to a smaller subset of mature age job seekers and it is incumbent on the employee or candidate to understand the thresholds.

Several participants in each of the industries said that pension requirements influenced how and whether mature age workers were prepared to engage in paid work. Some participants reported that they would try to limit work hours for their mature age workers so that their pension would not be affected. Others reported actively helping their mature age workers to navigate bureaucratic systems to understand pension requirements.

We had to figure out how many hours she can legally work, without it impacting her pension. We worked on it, she did most of the figuring out. We now limit her hours to 15 only. – Small business

Even with recent increases to the amount of income pensioners can earn before a reduction in their pension, the small businesses in this research still believe the threshold is too low and this makes it difficult to recruit mature age workers. It was an issue for small businesses because many had had experiences with pensioners being unwilling to work any hours beyond the threshold and for some this was an impost on their business.

Just make it easier for mature age workers to be able to come back to work. Even if just for a few hours a fortnight, maybe not getting their benefits reduced. – Small business

Also, older people need to be given more room with how much they can work so their pension isn't reduced. It's too much work for me to employ someone if we then discover they can only work 2 hours a week before they go over their limit. – Small business

There was another possibility, but their accountant said their pension would be affected, and that it wasn't a good idea for them. So that didn't work out. – Small business

If she lost money from pension she would recoup it in wages but she doesn't want to jump through hoops to get back on the pension. – Small business

Even though it is incumbent on the employee or job candidate, rather than the employer, to understand their pension thresholds, the fact sheet on pension and superannuation rules was popular with the small businesses because it helped them understand what the limitations are. Some businesses said that employees need simpler, clearer information about pensions too.

I've learnt more about how many hours they can work without affecting pension. It is worrying. I can foresee that's a problem for many over 65s. – Small business

More information about pensions would be helpful for employees. There is a need for more concise information for mature age workers to digest to make them aware they can still work. – Small business

We need clear rules, that are written in plain simple English that blind Freddy and his mate can understand. Things are so convoluted that people are put off. – Small business

One of the Delphi participants suggested that all thresholds on government income support payments have been creating friction for people trying to get into job market. Delphi participants agreed increased thresholds could potentially improve older workers' engagement, and employers need to know about any changes.

Pension clarity

Our conclusion from the research is that clear messaging which targets smaller employers to clarify pension settings could help reduce confusion and anxiety amongst businesses around income support thresholds.

3.4 There is no clear mechanism for finding mature age workers

The small employers were looking for a way to tap into the mature age workforce, particularly as the labour market was and remains tight, but they struggled to find an easy way to do this, and they were concerned about publicly specifying that they want a mature age job seeker in case it is discriminatory.

In the baseline study, 'being unable to find mature age workers with the right skills' was one of the three main barriers identified by survey respondents, with 14 of the 15 employers indicating that this was often or sometimes a barrier.

In the final survey, employers were asked to nominate their single biggest barrier to employing mature age workers. Twelve of the 15 raised issues related to finding them, attracting them or targeting them. See Table 7 (note the three other 'biggest barriers' are also included in the Table for completeness).

Table 7: Biggest barriers to employing mature age workers: employer comments final survey (one per employer)

Category	Comments
Finding, attracting or targeting workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Locating them. What is the avenue they use to seek employment</i> • <i>In the past mature age workers do not apply for jobs in our industry due to perceived views of targeting younger workers</i> • <i>Letting them know they can work safely in the industry</i> • <i>Finding them. I can train and work with them.</i> • <i>Finding them and assisting them navigate pension issues</i> • <i>Finding them without spending a fortune on recruitment and advertising</i> • <i>Remembering they're a good group to target</i> • <i>Attracting candidates to roles</i> • <i>They do not apply for sales assistant roles</i> • <i>Finding them</i> • <i>Finding appropriate mature age workers who meet the job requirements</i> • <i>Getting the right person with the right mindset</i>
Physical ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Due to our industry and job tasks, physical ability is usually the biggest barrier</i>
Having enough employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Being able to offer more people employment</i>
No barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>No barriers</i>

Comments in the interviews with employers indicated that they just don't know where to look. The fact sheet on reducing bias in recruitment advertising was helpful in making their processes more inclusive, but employers would still like to be able to specifically target interested candidates within their area. Those who knew about and had engaged with local employment providers, said they were rarely sent mature age candidates, and when they were, most of the candidates were not suitable.

We still need to find better ways to identify and look for mature age workers- some sort of medium or link to get in touch. – Small business

It's slow and arduous to find the right channels. – Small business

The information was really positive in terms of getting more insights, but it's still hard to find them. – Small business

There's people out there, we can't find. How do we get to those people locally? – Small business

I learnt there's more mature age workers out there than I thought. But how do I find them. I'm still not confident about that. – Small business

The literature about loyalty, productivity etc is true. Mature workers are far more employable than younger workers – it's just finding them. – Small business

The mature age job matching websites included as part of the interventions did not solve the problem for most of the employers, due to being untested and too narrow or metro-focused. Some employers and a Delphi participant suggested improvements to the Workforce Australia website to allow filtering

for categories, such as 'mature aged'. Others were concerned that specifically targeting mature aged workers might be discriminatory, or that people might not want to identify as mature aged for fear of discrimination.

If the (Workforce Australia) website improves, perhaps we can target and search better. – Small business

I'm not allowed to discriminate. When I advertise, I can't say mature age workers will be given priority. I've got to be aware about that. – Small business

On the mature age workers hub, it could provide a link for employers to a filtered list of job seeker profiles. – Delphi participant

While many of the small employers were enthusiastic about being introduced to their local Workforce Australia provider as a channel for finding mature age workers, others assumed that most potential mature age candidates may not be registered with Workforce Australia and many may not use online job boards. The Workforce Australia recent caseload data cited in section 1.3 above indicates that over 100,000 mature age jobseekers are registered with this service. Nevertheless, some of the Employment Facilitators agree that innovative approaches are often needed to identify the right candidates.

I present to Probus and aged care organisations. I might try radio – country radio stations. We need to think outside the box to reach individuals who wouldn't ordinarily go online. – Small business

I deal with SMEs regularly because they just can't find what they want. I would go where the (mature age) people are – for example community centres doing cooking classes... returned service men and women – and use networks more than anything. – Employment Facilitator

One employer suggested working with the large online recruitment platforms, such as SEEK and Indeed to better understand how mature age workers are engaging with these platforms and use the platforms to get messages across about employment of mature age workers.

With a big macro issue like this you really need to look at what are the biggest recruitment platforms, get demographics from SEEK and Indeed because it really is a numbers game. What advice can you give to the market that gets to the most number of people over 55? – Small business

The Delphi participants pointed out that there are low cost and free supports available to find mature age workers but employers do not know about them. The employment support market is crowded and hard to navigate.

Mechanisms to find mature age workers

We conclude from the research that additional strategies could be implemented to better support small businesses find and target mature age workers, including:

- Undertaking research with mature age workers to have a better understanding of where they look for employment

- Providing information/tools for people who work with small businesses on recruitment about where to search and how to advertise and recruit mature age workers
- Supporting local job boards and local events as mechanisms for employers and mature age job seekers to find each other
- Collaborating with employment services providers, SEEK or other commercial services to explore opportunities for connecting employers with mature age workers.

3.5 When significant training is needed, training costs are a barrier

Another key barrier identified by employers at the start of the research was having limited resources to train workers. Fourteen of the fifteen employers in the study nominated this as a key barrier to employment of mature age workers.

In interviews, three businesses said they struggle with the cost of upskilling existing staff when significant training is needed. In the aged care industry, workers can access free training to gain the mandatory qualification to become a support worker. This opportunity is greatly appreciated by businesses in that industry, but upskilling was still raised as a barrier by one employer. In retail and hospitality, some employers said that they needed support for training existing workers on job-related skills, such as specific IT platforms.

Once you've got the worker, how do you keep upskilling them? That's horrendously expensive, 5 or 6 thousand dollars. – Small business

We'll do some product training, but not skills for doing the job. – Small business

If TAFE was going to run some software training ... being able to access that for staff that are already employed would be good. A lot of training programs are for people who don't have employment. With extra training we could turn someone from 10 hours a week to 20 hours. – Small business

The literature review found that small employers are willing to invest in a limited amount of on-the-job training but do not have the resources for significant retraining or providing time off for training. Delphi participants said that absorbing these costs is a widespread issue for small business, not just in relation to mature age workers, and that small employers should be supported to take a risk with employing someone who may need additional training once they start the job. However, some experts pointed out that once again, small employers and older workers are often not aware of free and low cost training available. For example, the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers and the associated Skills and Training Incentive (which matches funding up to \$2,200 for identified training needs) can be accessed by employers or employed mature age workers, and State/Territory priority skills lists (which trigger free or subsidised training) now cover more industries and can be accessed by existing and new employees.

Delphi participants also proposed that there might be a perception that mature age workers will retire and therefore the investment in training will not be realised. This issue came up in the literature as well but it was not raised by any of the small employers during the project.

Training costs

The research concludes that the barrier of training costs can be addressed by developing, or where already existing promoting, specific programs (e.g. digital literacy programs, Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers program) accessible to small business to subsidise training for existing mature age workers. Small businesses may also need support in finding appropriate training programs for their needs, including navigating access to free and low-cost training options for existing workers.

3.6 Information needs of the smallest businesses are different

While the larger small businesses (10 plus staff) appreciated tools and templates that support them in designing policies and procedures, very small and micro businesses found this information overwhelming, and unnecessary.

I found it hard to determine where was the line for a small business... what is reasonable to do. – Small business

For a business as small as mine there is too much documentation and data management in this resource. If it's for a workforce of 30 employees then it makes sense, but when there are only 3 employees you are so close to the people you are working with that recording that level of data seems unnecessary. – Small business

I thought this was more of an overkill. We don't need as much depth in policies etc as what bigger companies have to have. For example, if something is dangerous, they might need to run a workshop for all staff, we just say 'watch that crack in the step'. – Small business

The short, sharp fact sheets were preferred by these very small employers.

I like that you could use the fact sheets as checklists. It's practical stuff, they were all useful. – Small business

This was my favourite because I'm so time poor. The facts are set out in front of you. And you can dive deeper if you need to. – Small business

Small employers were also conscious that information is probably available online but it is not easy for them to find, and they don't have time to search for it.

I think the information is out there but on different sites, depending on which newsletter you're signed up to. Is there a hub where it could all go together? I don't have time to go searching. – Small business

Delphi participants said that simple, direct information was required, and that it should be assumed there is no HR department to find and interpret information.

It was clear from the research that micro businesses need to be distinguished from SMEs when designing information and support. Micro businesses tend to take a different approach to human resources and networking and many lack the time to engage in formal planning processes, being immersed in day-to-day operational activities. Much of the existing information is targeted at businesses

with at least 10 employees, with more structured management practices and undertaking more regular recruitment.

When I go to Business Victoria, they are not targeting programs at us – maybe to small businesses with 30 employees but not to micro businesses. – Small business

As a microbusiness I don't have HR managers etc. Some questions were aimed at large companies. It would be nice to have it more tailored to very small businesses. – Small business

There has to be a portal for small business where you go to one place. Then, as you make your choices of what type of business you are and the size of your business, it funnels you toward advice and choices that are meaningful for your business. – Small business

Different needs of smallest businesses

We conclude that ideally, materials would be developed for the smallest businesses that recruitment intermediaries, government websites and others in the employment ecosystem would be able to use and promote when assisting micro businesses, rather than expecting micro businesses to interact with materials that are too dense and not relevant to their circumstances.

3.7 Pooling similar employers may offer cost effectiveness and better matching

The Employment Facilitators' role includes bringing together local stakeholders to work collaboratively to address the priorities for their region. In this project Employment Facilitators worked one-on-one with individual businesses. Due to the broad range of priorities and stakeholders in a region, it is noted Employment Facilitators are not able to devote this level of attention to all small businesses in an ongoing way. Employment Facilitators also pointed out that it is resource-intensive for employment services to support individual small businesses when just recruiting for one or two workers.

If you were a consultant doing the (recruiting) work, it wouldn't be cost beneficial to help a small business to hire one person when a large business might be looking for 15 - Employment Facilitator

Approaches that pool similar employers within an industry and/or region provide economies of scale for providers, creating incentives to work with small business. They also have more options for matching candidates with the right employer.

(the small employer) wasn't the only one in that industry needing recruitment. If you pull together candidates in a region and see where they best fit with small businesses who need workers, you could streamline resources - Employment Facilitator

If we had a group of employers in a geographically similar location in similar industries taking part, this would have allowed for more local small business collaboration and promotion of the employers - Employment Facilitator

It can also sometimes be easier for the EF to work with employers as a group rather than individually – Employment Facilitator

Small business networks are great as there are opportunities that even if a participant is not a culture match to employer A, they may be a perfect culture match for employer B or C. – Employment Facilitator

Various initiatives were suggested that bring together employers and jobseekers, such as speed-dating style events, jobs fairs, morning teas and employment panels.

Set up "employment panels" where a range of small businesses can interview pre-selected/well matched mature aged workers - it could increase the likelihood that job seekers get an offer of employment, while reducing the admin burden of recruitment for employers, particularly small businesses - Delphi participant

Pooling similar small businesses

The research indicates that whatever the format, initiatives need to be accessible to small and micro businesses, be industry and location specific and be incentivised fairly to encourage a variety of employment intermediaries to invest the time in using them to assist small business. There may be potential for leveraging local government and industry networks by providing them with seed funding or other forms of support for initiatives that connect groups of small employers with mature age workers.

4.8: Small employers need local contacts, place-based initiatives and regular outreach

The small businesses in this research who received quality outreach from a local Employment Facilitator, spoke highly of the experience and the outcomes. Having someone ask about their specific recruitment and retention needs and help them brainstorm solutions was greatly appreciated. Being connected to a local Workforce Australia provider was a great help for many. Some said they didn't know the service existed.

Small employers in the study also benefited from access to local recruitment channels, facilitated by Employment Facilitators, for example advertising in their newsletters and social media. They said it was great to have a single point of contact to be able to call about employment issues.

I prefer to talk directly to people. A lot of queries are very specific to our business. It's good to have a person to speak to. – Small business

The real success was after talking to (the Employment Facilitator) She designed a special flyer, she sent it to all her contacts. We got a lot of applicants. That was probably the most successful campaign we've had. – Small business

The biggest benefit from that was the connections she introduced us to, local reps from (Workforce Australia provider). I've started working with them. – Small business

I valued that someone made appointment to come and see me. They didn't just email me. The face-to-face contact made me think these people really are looking out for us. – Small business

The greatest asset for this was (the Employment Facilitator). He opened up lots of doors, he flooded me with so many options. – Small business

Employment Facilitators agreed that the one-on-one conversations, linking employers up with employment services providers and providing support with advertising were of most benefit.

He was putting stuff in the paper, spending \$400-\$500 on an ad – but he hadn't linked to social media at all. I could share on Instagram and Facebook and email to stakeholders then share on to local jobs pages across region. – Employment Facilitator

One good thing for businesses is to partner with a provider. Workforce Australia act like a free recruiter – but they've got to know they're there in the first place. – Employment Facilitator

It is about that human conversation... it's very challenging for people to navigate programs subsidies etc online. It helps to have the conversation and support the application process, bring in the employment services providers, it's all relational... having a go-to person. – Employment Facilitator

Even though he has knowledge about recruitment, he doesn't know how to connect with unemployed people and navigate around all those different services. For the average person, their mind explodes. – Employment Facilitator

It was clear from the project that small businesses need regular communication as they will engage when the time is right for them. Some businesses in the study were not ready to recruit at the time of the interventions and as a result were less engaged with the information and support than those who could put it to use straight away. Hence there is a need for regular outreach. Employment Facilitators had also experienced this.

There was not much he could do because we had just recruited someone. He gave me an overview of who he is and what he does. He could possibly be useful in the future. They know things that I don't know, so could possibly make introductions or open doors. – Small business

In a small business environment, if someone's not regularly reaching out, I'm not going to get back to them. All of the onus was on me to do something. She might've thought like she was doing us a favour. She wasn't persistent enough. – Small business

Ongoing, small engagements are needed. Giving too much information at any one time to a small business can be time consuming and they often don't have the resources to implement too much at any one time. Being a 'concierge' service for a small business would work well as they can then come to you when they need certain information and support. - Employment Facilitator

Delphi participants were unanimous and emphatic in their view that place based, interpersonal support would have the most impact for small employers. In this study Employment Facilitators were used to provide small businesses with personalised support, although this was not intended to be an ongoing role for them. Nevertheless, the project highlighted that local, interpersonal support could be identified as a preference amongst the broader ecosystem of supports available for small businesses.

Locally based, locally led and supported measures that take account of the needs to simplify arrangements for small and micro businesses are likely to be most effective - but this is not a new finding. – Delphi participant

These propositions very much reflect the findings from our research in terms of the importance of place-based activities and being able to call someone locally. The strength of these propositions is that each is a common sense approach to practical challenges clearly felt and articulated by small business. – Delphi participant

Perhaps we need to provide additional resources to Employment Facilitators to allow them to do more outreach to small businesses and allow them to navigate the available services/supports more easily. – Delphi participant

Small businesses need one key point of contact, rather than approaches from multiple services. – Delphi participant

Local outreach services make it easier for businesses and increases likelihood of take up. – Delphi participant

Invest more in a network of local employment liaison officers. – Delphi participant

Delphi participants also pointed out that there are a range of services that exist to support small businesses and more could be done to collaborate.

Could partner with other relevant Gov agencies (eg Fair Work Ombudsman) to help small businesses with other key info / changes - eg to understand changes through Secure Jobs, Secure Pay legislation or their obligations. – Delphi participant

Industry associations, the small business ombudsman, small businesses commissioners in states and territories can all provide support in building job market for small business. – Employment Facilitator

Local, place-based, regular outreach

The research reinforces that providing local, place-based support is likely to make the most difference on any employment issue for small business, including employment of mature age workers. Small businesses generally operate in and recruit from local markets using simple recruitment channels.

They often value personal relationships as a support resource and are likely to engage with professionals that they know and trust. Regular outreach initiatives from service providers can establish a connection for small businesses that enables them to reach out for targeted information at times when they need it.

4. Suggested actions

Collaboratively create fit for purpose products

1. Develop tools specifically for small business audiences to encourage the employment and support of Mature Age Workers.

Design considerations include:

- Engaging with employment intermediaries to assist in the development of tools, spreading ownership and encouraging their use of the tools when supporting small businesses
- Using formats that are concise, easy to use and practical eg. fact sheets, checklists, short stories and targeted examples
- Addressing the specific needs of the smallest businesses as a sub-group of small business
- Designing materials and messages that are targeted to particular industries
- Developing these tools within a wider objective of creating diverse workforces, helping to normalise employment of mature age workers
- Involving and testing with target audiences before finalisation of tools

Content considerations include:

- Including particular content on workplace flexibility and job redesign, advertising and recruitment for age diversity, raising awareness of age bias and inadvertent age discrimination, accessing training and support for training, accessing support for the employment of mature age workers
- Concentrating on positive messages eg. success stories, benefits

2. Publish tools then disseminate and promote within employment ecosystems

This includes:

- Maximising opportunities for small businesses and their intermediaries to access the tools on Departmental websites, by designing navigation and content specifically targeted to the small business audience and bringing together other relevant content developed by a range of organisations and agencies.
- Developing a strategy for dissemination and promotion of the tools, including working with employment intermediaries who can support small businesses to access and use the tools at times when they are most likely to engage with them.

Provide structured and timely support through local networks

3. Realise the potential of local networks of employment intermediaries as a central point of support and referral for small businesses to employ mature age workers.

Considerations include:

- Collaborating with all local employment intermediaries to facilitate local events that bring small businesses and mature age workers together
- Supporting them to conduct regular outreach to small businesses
- Highlighting success stories and positive outcomes in local media

4. Assist employment intermediaries to engage with small businesses in a structured and timely way.

This can be achieved by:

- Providing access to the tools developed for small businesses and advice on how to use them to support small businesses
- Supporting employment intermediaries to access additional resources for pilot projects targeting mature age workers, including in partnership with other small business intermediaries in their region
- Encouraging ongoing sharing between employment intermediaries to create new knowledge and approaches to mature age employment issues.