The Employers’ View on Older Adults as Staff in Early Childhood Education Services

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ABSTRACT. Changing demographics report increases in the number of older women that will modify the structure of the workforce. The aim of this qualitative study is to examine the employer’s views on employment for women, 50 years and above. It consists of interviews with 19 employers in New Zealand early childhood services. The findings show an acknowledgement of the strengths that the older women bring to their work. Further, a number of benefits of employing older adults are identified. The employers raised some issues and concerns, such as the older adult’s hesitancy in accepting changes. The findings also identify work conditions that might be unsuitable for older adults. Despite the challenges, older women have the potential to make a valid contribution, in which their skills and strengths are utilized in ways that do not exploit them. doi:10.1300/J194v04n03_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The HaworthPress, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Demographics will gradually restructure the workforce in most developed countries of the world. An expanding older age group requires opportunities for their gainful, productive employment. Two basic societal challenges underpin this study. First, there is growth in the number of healthier older adults. Second, an increasing number of parents with young children are joining the workforce, and there is a demand for quality childcare. Consequently, early childhood services will need more staff. Older adults are a potential source to meet this need. Therefore, it is imperative to examine whether policies and practices related to older adults are contributing towards opportunities for their employment.

The aim of this research was to explore New Zealand employers’ views about older adults as staff in early childhood education services. If an attempt is to be made to create social consciousness about the value of older adults in society, then involving employers is crucial. Employers are a major stakeholder in improving life chances and conditions for older adults as they control recruitment and working conditions for this age group. While there is a dearth of research related to the employment and training of older adults as childcare workers in New Zealand, this area is being actively explored overseas. Some earlier groundbreaking work was reported by: Johnston (1985), Newman (1989), Newman and Riess (1992), National Association for the Education of Young Children and Generations Together (1992), and Newman, Engel, Ward, Karip, and Faux (1994).

Additionally, experts worldwide have espoused the benefits of a variety of intergenerational programs. McDaniel (2002) stated that intergenerational transfers are the basis of societal cohesion and continuity. P. J. Whitehouse (2005) believed that intergenerational conversations create opportunities for learning, and enrich the lives of both young and old alike. Pinquart, Wenzel and Sorensen (2000) reported improvements in generational attitudes because of intergenerational intervention. Whitehouse, FallCreek, and Whitehouse (2005) stated that intergenerational programs give young people the opportunity to appreciate that they are part of the larger community. They shared the thoughts of their senior participants who said that being around young children made them feel young and vibrant again. Granville and Hatton-Yeo (2002) reported that in the U.K., intergenerational groups lobbied for changes in their community and this intergenerational voice was difficult to ignore. Pelaez (2002) identified similar benefits of intergenerational programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. These programs have created new
roles for older adults to participate in society and have been an effective and low-cost response to addressing social problems. The collectivist nature of the South African society influenced the intergenerational programs in that country (Gush, 2002), where home-based day care benefits both older women and children. Thang (2002), describing the intergenerational initiatives in Singapore, stated that healthy and educated retirees are serving as mentors to younger generations. Thang reported positive outcomes of these programs. In O’Sullivan’s (2002) opinion, intergenerational programs involve all parties in building social capital and community improvement. Kaplan and Larkin (2004) are of the opinion that, despite differences in intergenerational programs, these programs have been found to be beneficial. Camp, Orsulic-Jeras, Lee, and Judge (2005) concluded that children viewed taking part in the intergenerational program as a special event and older adults looked forward to working with children. The beneficial nature of intergenerational programs makes it appropriate to study older adults working in childcare in New Zealand.

The term “older adults” in this study refers to persons between the ages of 50 to 68 years of age. According to Paul and Townsend (cited in Allen & Hart, 1998) the current definition of “older worker” is anyone over fifty years of age. At this age, employment problems become more visible in New Zealand. Engagement in productive work is beneficial for older adults (World Health Organization [WHO], 1990). It is important to note that from February 1, 1999 there is no upper age limit for employment in New Zealand (Human Rights Commission). Despite this, older workers, particularly women, continue to face difficulties in employment. Rix (1990) suggested that older women face additional challenges in finding work since many of them have not had much work experience or have had a discontinuous work history. This reflects most of the older women working in early childhood education. For many older women, paid employment is a matter of necessity, not choice. Phillipson (cited in Biggs, 1993) pointed out that large numbers of women are in poorly paid occupations, and this income fails to provide adequately for retirement. Therefore, semi-skilled workers, particularly women, are more reluctant to retire. This is true for older women working in early childhood education. According to Harkness (2004), the wages in this field are as low as $4NZD per hour. This is an indication that this is not a highly paid profession. However, providing opportunities for older women to continue with their nurturing role in an employment situation becomes more important if they lack preparation for other types of employment when their prescribed role of nurturing the
family is over. This situation provided further impetus to gain an understanding of this issue from the employers’ perspective. There is a need to examine the match between older employees in childcare and requirements of employers. Accordingly, this study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the qualities, attributes, skills, competencies required in early childhood education staff as reflected in older workers?
2. What are the benefits for early childhood education services in employing older staff?
3. What are the issues and concerns related to employing older staff?
4. What types of working conditions are available to older adults?

**METHODS**

This study used qualitative research methods to examine the issues related to the employment of older adults as early childhood staff. The participants were employers, owners and directors of early childhood education services in New Zealand. The older adults discussed in this study had been employed in early childhood education for at least six years prior to the study. A letter inviting participation in the study was sent to 40 early childhood centers in the Auckland region. The centers covered a wide range of the socio-economic environment, from the most affluent to the least privileged. A telephone call followed the letter to set up a date and time for an interview. Nineteen participants were interviewed in person. The interview format was semi-structured based on an interview guide. The questions were specific to the topic being explored and the participants had the opportunity to add their voice. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee has granted permission for this study.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

In this study, data gathering and analysis were complementary rather than in discrete stages. The interview transcripts were read and re-read to discover whether the research objectives were being addressed. A contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was designed for each interview. A contact summary sheet included focusing questions about each field contact and summarized the main points of the contact.
The contact summary sheet was found to be useful for future interviews to explore a particular strand and was found helpful in suggesting and modifying codes, the next step in the study’s data analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) clarified that codes or units are the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself. Codes were given a name closest to the concept they were describing, e.g., time management. Coding and recoding for the present study ran its course when a sufficient number of regularities emerged in all the categories.

After the first level of coding, rigorous and systematic coding of interview transcripts allowed pattern codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to emerge. To identify pattern codes, the underlying similarities of the data were noted and compiled. For example, “work ethic” was an abstract concept which cannot be directly observed, but the data collected for this study contained indicators of this concept. The indicators identified were initiative, punctuality, time-management and commitment. These indicators combined together resulted in the pattern code labeled “work ethic.” Pattern coding was found useful for reducing large amounts of data into a smaller number of units, which helped to focus the fieldwork. The data presented answer the research questions. The participants’ interview quotations are verbatim to ensure authenticity of their voice.

**FINDINGS**

The employers in this study identified a variety of skills and attributes that make older adults suitable for working in early childhood education services. Further, they reported the benefits of employing older adults in an early childhood environment for the service, children, parents, younger staff, and older adults themselves. The employers also raised a number of issues and concerns related to older adults (see Issues and Concerns section). On the other hand, the employment conditions offered (such as full-time work and the expectation of similar job duties) could be a matter of concern for the older employees.

**Attributes and Competencies**

**Life Experiences**

Employers considered older women at a developmental stage in their life where they made good employees. Prior experiences of running a
home and child rearing, multi-tasking, and the ability to nurture were considered useful in their positions as early childhood educators:

More mature women are more responsible. They brought up a family they have run a home. They come here with these attitudes that makes a big difference.

They’ve got eyes in the back of their head and they’ve got an extra pair of arms; they can see what’s going to happen. Often a young person doesn’t see what’s happening around them if it is not on their job list, “I am not doing it.” Whereas an experienced person can hold a conversation, wipe the floor, blow a nose, greet a parent and write down at the same time.

In comparison to younger workers, they were said to have more common sense, which they use in various aspects of their work—such as, ensuring safety for the children or ensuring that they themselves are adequately rested before a working day. An employer who was an older adult herself said:

We (older staff) are not just fazed out if we get sick. We know to get a decent night sleep [so] we can cope with early morning. You have to get up very early to get to work at 8 o’clock. I do find that older staff can manage that more than the younger staff. It is very upsetting if you see that a staff member is not on par that day and later on, you find out that they are partying the night before. You are not getting the quality work out of that.

Work Ethic

There was universal praise for the work ethic of the older staff: reliability; commitment to the job; using initiative; going beyond the job description; punctuality and good time management were all experienced as positives of employing older adults. Their commitment to work even extended to their coming in to work when they were not feeling well. According to the employers, the older staff are more willing to go the extra mile:

The older person doesn’t want to let anybody down. They want to be there. They want to be there for the kids. Younger staff might say “I can take a sickie because I don’t feel 100%.” It’s a slightly different attitude.
Older people generally have more initiative. It’s a dying skill, initiative.

Time management is a fairly important disposition to be good at. They are managing their time effectively and putting the children’s needs first.

The desirable attributes that strongly emerged from the interviews were responsibility, good time management, initiative, and commitment to their jobs. Earlier, Johnston (1985) identified that older workers have a greater sense of organizational commitment and job involvement than workers in any other age group. The findings of the present research also show that older adults are punctual and show a great deal of commitment to their work to the extent of coming to work even if they feel unwell. Newman, Vander Ven, and Ward (1992), Latimer (1995) and Johnston (1985) confirmed this finding. The above suggests that desirable characteristics of older workers in childcare settings span across decades and continents.

**Benefits**

**To Parents**

Parents of children attending the program are important stakeholders in an early childhood education service. The employers acknowledged the contribution of the older staff in establishing and maintaining a positive working relationship with parents. The older staff’s life experiences were considered very useful in this regard:

The thing that they (parents) see as more important is a person who has experienced life and who has experienced different situations with children and handling different situations. That’s why I think it is more important for parents to put their little baby with (an older woman).

The parent will go to the older person naturally; you presume somebody who is older is more experienced.

Older staff offered much to the parents, young or older. They could also advise parents:
It gives a confidence to young parents who often have difficulty with their first child when they are putting their child into childcare. . . . And also very often for the older parent in particular it is a good thing for them because it settles them and gives them a feeling of confidence and somebody to talk to.

Parents will often ask questions about their children and they (older staff) can say “I went through that” and not only talk about the exact early childhood stage now but [what to expect in future stages].

The parents want a nurturing person to look after their child and older staff meet this need by providing a more home-like environment:

It is mostly older parents who have babies. [Many parents] prefer to have an older woman. I suppose to a lot of parents the nurturing is more important than education.

In childcare, parents like that element of care. People want to imitate more the home life and children are here the full day. The people they are interacting with are more important than their educational experience. My older staff are good at that.

Further, the changing nature of today’s families means that grandparents are not always available. Therefore, the older staff are sometimes seen in this role:

Some of the grand parents are not around, so [parents] can talk to staff who have got years and years of experience.

Parents of the children attending an early childhood education service are the customers. Employers have to keep their customers satisfied and happy. In this area, older staff were seen to have a positive impact for the service. Older adults’ ability to relate to children’s parents was considered a major strength of this age group. The employers reported that parents were naturally drawn to older adults for advice and appreciated the input from them. Employers felt that the older adults had an advantage is this area as they could guide the parents about the child who was attending the center but also about his or her siblings. The findings indicate that parents of infants especially value the affective nurturing role of older adults. Furthermore, older adults were good at settling new children and reassuring parents. Newman, Vander Ven,
and Ward (1992) have stated that older adults have insight and understanding of parent issues and can provide support in rearing children. According to Newman (1989), the notion of older persons as childcare workers appeals to many young parents, who, because of fragmentation and instability in their lives and their work schedules, need the support and nurturing that an older person can provide to their children and themselves. Latimer (1995) also confirmed the role of the older adult in sharing their skills and wisdom with young, insecure parents. Both these authors have emphasized the benefits for young parents. However, the findings of this study reveal that not only young parents but also mature-aged parents seek the advice of older adults. More people are choosing parenthood at a later stage of their lives now and, according to the employers, mature parents are more comfortable asking advice from an older staff member than a younger staff member. Further, employers reported that many children did not have grandparents and older adults are sometimes seen as surrogate grandparents. This was an added benefit of having older staff.

**Generational Benefits**

Generational benefits of employing older staff also were reported in the data. According to the employers, younger staff advance in their practical knowledge and skills by working and observing older staff:

Older people have experience in quite practical things like if there was an emergency or something that an older person is more likely to know how to deal with it. For example, a kid might be having an asthma attack. You might find an older person has experienced that and they may be able to advise others.

Working with older staff guides the younger staff towards more professional behavior by discouraging discussion of superficial topics:

It stops the younger ones gossiping about their private lives. By having a mixture of age groups you tend to talk about other things as well, rather than boyfriends and girlfriends and which pub to go to.

The relationship with older staff members can help the younger staff members personally by offering advice and support from someone other than a family member:
It is an adult to talk to but not like mum so they can use the adult as a sounding board or have a moan about mum. Older staff can perhaps turn them around a bit to some things more positive.

To Children

Children also benefit from the older staff in many ways:

When they are dealing with (sick) babies, they can recognize symptoms probably slightly quicker than us younger persons and have the confidence to deal with them. If a child’s temperature shoots up very high, they know that this can just be something that is there for a short time though you need to take it seriously. It is not something to go into a sheer panic about.

I think children feel quite secure with them. I’ve noticed that children will often go to the older woman, if they want a cuddle or to ask for something.

To Older Staff Members

In the employers’ view, older adults themselves profit from working in early childhood education settings:

I think that probably the biggest advantage of early childhood services for older women is that they can stay on. They are not expected to be “dolly birds” like in some corporation where they look for the younger image to promote.

Working in early childhood services can be mentally stimulating and emotionally fulfilling for older adults:

...exposure to new ways of thinking. I think there has been really some good growth in a couple of our older staff members by talking to younger staff members about changes in early childhood education.

This study reveals multi-generational benefits. McDaniel (2002) has pointed out that caring by older women is undervalued even though it is known to benefit in cementing social relations among generations. The findings show that children, their parents, younger staff, and older
adults all benefited from this intergenerational exchange. According to Larkin and Newman (2001), a well-functioning intergenerational team benefits children and families. The data also pointed to the benefits of old and young women working with each other. In Papertsian’s (2002) opinion, women at opposite edges of adulthood have fewer generational or familial obligations so there can be a uniqueness of exchange between young women and older women. There are benefits for older adults themselves as it helps them towards positive aging. Having paid employment and working in an intergenerational environment ensures continuous and reciprocal engagement with society.

Staff Stability

A major advantage of employing older staff was that they were more stable employees. This stability is good for the center, families, and employers and more specifically for the children. Stability in an early childhood environment leads to security, an important element for the well-being of children and an enhanced relationship with families:

I’ve found that older woman do tend to stay, by the time you are fifty, you’ve decided that’s what you want to do.

Partnership with parents is perhaps enhanced because the older teachers stay a long time.

The low staff turnover because of older adult employees has many positive outcomes. Another reason for their stability in the workplace is that older adults are hesitant to change jobs, fearing they might not find another position:

Who would employ me over a younger one? So maybe that has some thing to do with the reason that they stay longer in their jobs.

The employers reported that older adults are more stable in their jobs. This is a positive aspect of employing older staff. This pattern of stability has been identified over the years by a number of experts, such as Johnston (1985) and Allen and Hart (1998). A reason for the markedly lower turnover in older staff identified in the data was that older adults generally have lower qualifications. This leads to lack of employment opportunities for them. Newman, Engel, Ward, Karip, and Faux (1994), reported that of those persons who continue to work, 45.3% had formal
pre-service training. Of those who left, 65.1% had formal training. This supports the fact that staff with less training stay longer, confirming the findings of the present study. Lower level qualifications mean that there are fewer opportunities for older adults to move into new jobs. Moreover, it is likely that older adults under-value their skills and strengths. Therefore, they do not risk moving to another job even within this field. The last two reasons, lack of relevant qualifications and older adults under-valuing themselves, need serious consideration. Parallels of lower-qualified workforce stability can also be seen in other fields. Klein (2000), reported that 25 percent of non-management Canadian retail workers had been with the same company for eleven years or more. The early childhood education sector should question the low turnover of older staff and address the underlying causes. For example, if some older staff are staying in their jobs because of their diminished value in the labor market then it is exploitation of a disadvantaged group. Stability in a job for older workers should be a matter of choice. Staff stability because of lack of choices for employment should be discouraged no matter what the benefits.

**Issues and Concerns**

**Generational Differences**

The employers, while acknowledging the positives of employing older adults, also voiced some concerns. The perception that older adults were set in their ways came through strongly. This was an area that employers found difficult with older adults. Some employers reported that older adults found it safer and easier not to make changes in familiar practices and ideas. They gave the example of some kindergarten staff who had been in their jobs for a number of years and did not take to change easily:

One issue to look at is maybe a rigidity of thinking. Maybe if they have done something a certain way and they just want to do the same thing the same way. That is easier and safe and they don’t have the energy or the enthusiasm to go on to something new.

Older staff’s openness to learning was questioned. It was the employer’s view that many older staff had reached a point in their lives where they relied on experience and it was difficult to convince them to learn new ways of doing things or to participate in further education:
I didn’t find that there was openness to learning. In fact, I think there was possibly little bit of feeling threatened in that area.

There was a concern among the participants of this study that older adults do not want to keep up with the demands of the present and instead focus on looking back. Coleman (1990) referred to this as moral siege. This, in his opinion, is a way of coping with social change, which enables individuals to remain satisfied with their own past lives. In this set of attitudes, old people actively compared the past with the present, emphasizing differences between generations rather than similarities; it appears that many of these people feel obliged to condemn present society. Older adults in the present study who were hesitant to accept changes were perhaps reflecting the idea put forward by Coleman to cope with the present.

The older staff’s “mothers know best” attitude was also considered problematic. This manifested itself mainly through parenting or child rearing issues, rather than in education related matters. Early childhood education is a combination of care and education. Older staff were more certain about care practices as opposed to education, where they considered themselves less expert:

It is more about child rearing practices, the health thing. I was a parent, I did this with my child, and it worked whether it be about potty training, temperature or sickness rather than to do with a learning experience.

Inflexibility of Attitudes

In this study, employers felt that older adults could be unwilling to change their attitudes—especially about parenting and child rearing practices. This can be a likely source of conflict in the workplace. Newman, Vander Ven, and Ward (1992) and Smith and Newman (1993) cautioned about the perspectives of older adults towards childcare. According to these experts, there can be a feeling that having been a parent is sufficient preparation for employment as a childcare worker or that instinct, common sense, or the way they treated their own children is sufficient. Here the older adults’ perspectives can be related to meaning schemes and structures (Imel, 1998). In Imel’s opinion, meaning structures are frames of reference that are based on the totality of individuals’ cultural and contextual experiences, how they behave and interpret events. Older staff in this study who were said to be set in their ways of
child rearing practices were influenced by their meaning schemes and structures. Older adults interpreted child rearing as they had experienced it. Their understanding of these practices was situated in their knowledge and experience. Therefore, their interpretation of children’s learning and development differed from the interpretations of younger staff. Consequently, older staff were perceived as being inflexible.

There is a common recognition that people belonging to different generations have different values and priorities. These differences can be more visible in a workplace where consistent practices are needed. For example, in early childhood education settings it is essential that all adults have consistent behavior management and child guidance practices. However, as the employers pointed out, the reality is that older and younger staff are people from different generations who tend to have varying ideas about discipline or child guidance. The consistency of practices in this case can be difficult and these differences can cause conflicts in the workplace:

I mean the life experience that the older staff member [has in contrast to] younger staff is always going to be different. And it can at times cause a wee bit of friction because the young ones can be a wee bit flighty and the older ones get a wee bit ahh!!

Generational differences can be exacerbated if older adults are unwilling to accept ideas and practices from younger staff:

I’ve found that there is a little bit of hesitancy in accepting the knowledge that is coming through the younger person.

Older adults’ life experiences were seen as strengths but in some areas of their work, this had caused conflict with younger workers. Differences in work ethic were often a source of conflict. Smith and Newman (1993) have pointed out that attitudes towards work also vary from generation to generation and these can become a source of friction. A suggestion to decrease this workplace friction is to provide ownership of intergenerational programs to both groups. Larkin and Newman (2001) have emphasized that for the success of intergenerational programs, older adults and younger staff should be provided opportunities to express their concerns and plan the agenda. Hanks and Icenogle (2001) have discussed another aspect of intergenerational differences. These authors point out that societal perception of intergenerational equity are not the sole influence on intergenerational attitudes in the workplace.
Competition for jobs, benefits, promotions all affect these attitudes. Further, the gender-specific nature of intergenerational relations should also be considered. McDaniel (2002) stated that intergenerational issues among women are crucial but ignored. All of the above can be seen as influencing multi-generational relations in work environments.

**Working Conditions**

*Full-Time Staff*

The working conditions available to older adults were less than optimal. The findings indicated that the employers did not consider flexible working hours or modifying the job content as feasible. Seventeen employers out of the 19 interviewed wanted full-time staff. The reasons given for preferring full-time staff were: parents want to see the same people, children need continuity, and staff members who work part-time do not feel completely responsible for their job. The quality of work suffers and it puts undue pressure on staff who work full-time. Managing more workers creates more complications as well, as it can have a negative impact on the team dynamics:

> I would rather have everybody full time than a lot of staff with bits and pieces. Nobody likes it. It is hard on the staff; it is hard on the children. It is hard on the teacher. It is hard on the parent.

All but two of the participants explained their preference for full-time workers. This issue is current in New Zealand employment practices. Earlier, Johnston (1985) discussed the employers’ preference for full-time staff. He has pointed out that traditionally, staff in early childhood services are employed for the full day. Additionally, experts in this field have repeatedly suggested that full-time, part-time, and flextime options should be available (Newman, Vander Ven & Ward, 1992; Latimer, 1995; Smith & Newman, 1993). If early childhood services want to benefit fully from strengths and skills of older adults, then this basic requirement needs to be met, requiring a change in employment practices. Johnston (1985) argued that the issue here is not one of preferential treatment of older employees but rather one of utilizing older employees in ways that are beneficial to the program and the employee as well. Flexibility of working conditions for older adults is an important consideration. However, as Klein (2000) cautioned, flexibility should not
be used as a loophole to keep wages down and to avoid benefits. The point is that working conditions should be a matter of individual choice and older workers should not be exploited.

**Same Job Duties**

A further issue related to working conditions for older adults was identified. The data revealed that employers want all their employees to be able to perform the same job duties. Similar job duties were required because it was considered part of teamwork and it was felt that if older adults were seen to do less physically demanding work, there might be some resentment from other staff members. In an interview, one of the employers gave an example of her male staff. She explained that other female staff expected him to do heavy lifting etc. He refused, saying that it was their job also. The employer totally agreed with her male staff member’s refusal and similarly expects her older adult staff to be able to do their share equally:

> No, they have to take a turn everyone has to do it. That’s part of teamwork.

> You have to be very careful that you don’t get resentment between the two ages. Oh! she doesn’t do that because she is too old to lift, that sort of thing. Everybody has to be able to do the same work. It’s important so that everything is shared as a team.

To counter the point that younger staff will resent older staff if all duties are not shared equally, Smith and Newman (1993) made a suggestion that shorter hours, exemption from some duties or chores, and more frequent breaks are acceptable trade-offs in view of the older adults’ special value. In addition, employers must find ways to communicate this attitude to younger staff members while striving to improve working conditions for everyone. The participants of the present study have all emphasized that equal distribution of work will lead to good teamwork. However, it can be argued that a good team utilizes the strengths of all its members to the fullest, not expecting each individual to perform exactly the same task. Opportunities for older adults to specialize, such as one-to-one interaction, storytelling, art, or special skill areas, can be provided (Newman, Vander Ven, & Ward, 1992; Latimer, 1995). In light of the findings and the experts’ opinion, early childhood education services are encouraged to reconsider the practice of allocating older
adults exactly the same type of work as younger staff. A conscious effort should be made to make this field attractive for this age group by improving the employment conditions available to them.

Older adults in this study were viewed both as a resource (stable and reliable employees) and an impediment (resistant to the introduction of new practices), and a low priority when their basic needs, such as suitable working conditions, were ignored.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Population projections for this century have indicated that more older women will be participating in the workforce. It is evident that older workers are making a positive contribution to their jobs and the employers appreciated this. However, in practical terms, there is an unwillingness to consider the needs of older employees. A number of positive attributes of older adults were acknowledged; however, negative myths about older adults continue to overshadow the positives. These mixed messages result in implicit discrimination against older adults, thus furthering their disadvantaged position in society. It is particularly important for government policies to pay attention to the changing demographics and consequently the changes in the workforce.

The employers, without government policy changes, can implement the following recommendations based on this study. They should:

- Use the strengths of older workers, so they can share their expertise such as sharing their knowledge about parenting with younger staff.
- Provide a work environment that is responsive to the variations that result from normal aging. These could include ergonomically designed workstations. For example, diaper changing tables that does not require the toddler to be lifted.
- Provide for sharing of jobs between older and younger workers to utilize the strengths of each age group. Further, recognize that a good team will capitalize on the strengths of each person rather than each person doing exactly the same job duties.
- Provide older workers flexibility in hours and work conditions, such as the possibility to work part-time, job rotation, self-regulation of pace and appropriate workloads, for instance, doing less physically demanding tasks.
The broad recommendations that follow will help older workers contribute to their work environment. Employers should:

- Analyze the employee profile of their organization to ensure that there is a fair representation of older workers in the workplace.
- Encourage older employees to participate in relevant professional development so that their knowledge and skills remain up-dated.
- Provide professional development incentives specifically aimed at older workers.
- Provide age awareness programs within the work environment to bring about attitudinal change and to further an understanding of aging staff.

In New Zealand, there is a paucity of research that examines the benefits of intergenerational engagement. Therefore, an initial recommendation from this study is for more research in this area. Studies on older workers and volunteers in early childhood education services can be a starting point to inform policies. Research on intergenerational settings is likely to result in a positive impact on subsequent employment opportunities for older women, which was the underlying premise of this study. There is also a need for further research that addresses employment practices, such as full-time work and equal job sharing. Further, in light of the findings of this study it is important to explore why older adults stay in their jobs. Employers benefit from staff stability when employing older adults. However, it is important to understand the reasons underlying this stability. To deal with issues confronting the growing population of older women now and in the near future, it is important that there should be support for older women to find employment opportunities that use their strengths. It is critical to consider the vast potential of older adults. Meaningful roles and opportunities are crucial—people can then age with autonomy and as valuable members of society.

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