

## Press Release

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### **Demearing stereotypes a threat to older workers, study finds**

Perceived long-held stereotypes such as frailty, inflexibility and a fear of technology are pushing older workers towards premature retirement, reveals research released today.

According to the National Seniors report, *Stereotype Threat and Mature Age Workers*, older employees who experience “stereotype threat” - a belief that they’re the target of demeaning stereotypes - lose enthusiasm for the job to the point of quitting.

This suggests that the experience of stereotype threat at work can counteract long-espoused policy efforts to keep older Australians in the workforce longer.

National Seniors chief executive Michael O’Neill said it was vital to incorporate the report’s findings in official moves to keep the over-50s gainfully employed.

“Whilst it’s great to see a growing commitment from business and government towards this group, the research shows that stereotype threat remains a significant psychological obstacle for mature age employees,” O’Neill said.

“Unfounded assumptions around the energy, potential or job suitability of older workers only serve to undermine their confidence, work performance and, ultimately, commitment.

“If businesses want to keep their mature-age talent and help them reach their full potential, they need to understand and combat these stereotype threats,” he said.

In the study, conducted by Queensland University for the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 1428 employees aged 50 to 75 were asked to assess how they felt they had been treated on the basis of their age.

The majority experienced medium (44%) levels of stereotype threat. A minority (14%) experienced high levels of stereotype threat and 42% experienced low stereotype threat.

The experience of stereotype threat was linked with negative workplace attitudes and behaviours including: lower job satisfaction; lower emotional commitment to the organisation; lower job involvement; higher retirement intentions; and greater intentions to quit.

Personal responses included:

- “I have loved the job I’ve done for many years but now I feel there is no place for me or what I believe in or am passionate about.”
- “I sometimes feel that I am invisible because of my age. I have difficulty at times with getting people to include me and listen to me.”
- “My co-workers seem to think that because I’m over 50, I am inept with computers. This isn’t true. My job deals constantly with computers and their breakdowns....”
- “I’m constantly overlooked in favour of younger people, I’m starting to think I’m hopeless and useless.”
- “Retirement is often used as a rejection of the ‘mature’ by the new management style. Many older people retire out of despair, not out of desire.”

The paper calls for more positive older role models, stronger anti-discrimination policies, increased training opportunities and greater recognition of mature age staff.

**Chief executive Michael O'Neill is available for interview on 0448 125 898**

*With 250,000 members Australia-wide, National Seniors is the consumer lobby for the over-50s. It's the fourth largest organisation of its type in the world.*

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*A copy of the report is available on request.*

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