

## Jobs for young librarians

The current controversy raging about junior pay rates highlights an interesting contradiction in Australian employment policy. Government and business are arguing strenuously for lower pay for young people, based on their age. Yet many of those most in favour of lowering youth wages are also arguing for abolition of all age-based retirement on the grounds that it is discriminatory.

The principal argument in favour of junior pay rates is that they would increase job opportunities. Perhaps they would. But it is easy to see why younger people regard baby-boomers as hypocrites when they justify lower wages by professing concern for more youth employment opportunities. Generation X might well feel this is just another insult from an age-group that has had it all and now wants to cling to its own jobs past the traditional retirement at sixty-five. Distinctions based on age are apparently fine when they disadvantage the young; but they constitute discrimination when they affect the elderly. And we wonder why young people are cynical.

Different treatment based purely on a person's innate characteristics constitutes unlawful discrimination, whether this involves age, gender, race or physical factors. Compulsory retirement is being progressively outlawed in the various Australian industrial jurisdictions and in most is already a thing of the past. But in many other ways age discrimination is alive and well. Junior pay rates are a high-profile example, but there are numerous other less-obvious examples. They all result from certain basic assumptions which are applied uncritically to a whole class of employees. Thus, all young people may be viewed as immature, inexperienced and not ready for responsibility; thirty-plus people (especially women) may be seen as not young enough for some jobs; employees past forty-five are routinely assumed to lack drive and imagination; while those in their sixties are often regarded as just time-servers waiting for retirement. The fact that we may all be able to cite individual cases which purport to validate such assumptions is absolutely no justification for their extension to all workers.

As far as young people are concerned, the need for more employment opportunities for them involves much more than mere fairness. Right across the labour market in recent years — and especially in the public sector — staff costs have often been cut by slashing jobs at the bottom to enable retention of conditions at higher levels. In many organisations and across whole occupational groups, this approach is storing up huge problems for coming years. When so-called baby boomers do eventually drop out of the workforce *en masse* we are likely to face a severe succession-planning cri-

sis in many industry sectors. Throughout this decade, there has clearly been insufficient base and training-level employment to enable adequate supply of the well-trained, experienced younger people who will be needed when my generation is forced finally to accept that we are not all Peter Pan.

High on the list of potential problem areas is Australia's library and information sector. Despite generally positive forecasts for jobs in the future, young librarians are finding sustainable work stubbornly elusive. Arguably, this results as much from general employment policy within organisations as from library-specific factors. Without conscious decisions to employ for the future, it will always be easy to overlook the young, well-qualified graduate on the grounds that they are 'inexperienced and immature'. It is doubtful if relative pay levels have much to do with this attitude. A short-term (and short-sighted) staffing policy is probably much more significant.

When ALIA surveyed the library and information sector in 1998, it established that seventy-two per cent of all Australian library workers are more than forty years old. Less than eight per cent are under thirty. [see *Profile of Australian library workers*, Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research & Training, 1998]. It is really indisputable that this age profile threatens major difficulty in just a few years time. And, despite the efforts of many to suggest that youth wages are the major factor in young people being overlooked, these data make nonsense of such claims.

Creation of a more realistic age profile in this sector would generate, in itself, a major reduction in wage costs, given the large difference between rates for professionals in the first five years of practice and those with longer service. To give just one example: a practising public sector librarian with three years experience typically receives a salary at least \$6000 below that of an older professional doing similar if not identical work. It follows that a more balanced age profile would not only provide for more stable organisations in terms of succession and human resource planning, but would reduce costs at the same time by a factor far in excess of any gain from slashing youth wages.

Nobody should favour discrimination against older workers. But action to employ more young people is clearly desirable on sheer good practice grounds. If the library and information sector wishes to ensure a continuing skilled workforce in the future — as it surely must — it has a vested interest in ensuring employers take early action to develop plans for increased employment opportunities for our many bright young graduates. Not just to be fair, but to be efficient. ■



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