

Review article:

Participation in, and Barriers to, Training: The Experience of Older Adults

Mark Cully, Adriana VandenHeuvel and Mark Wooden

National Institute of Labour Studies
Flinders University of South Australia

Richard Curtain

Curtain Consulting, Melbourne

Abstract. It is widely recognised that older workers are less likely to gain access to job-related training than younger workers. This article reviews evidence on the extent of age-based training differentials in Australia and the main barriers that inhibit older workers from accessing training. It is concluded that governments in Australia need to do far more in ensuring that older workers are not denied access to training opportunities.

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Introduction

Like other industrialised nations, it has been widely recognised in Australia that the creation of a highly skilled workforce is one of the key avenues to improving productivity and international competitiveness, including fostering social capital. Thus it is not surprising that we have witnessed a renewed focus on education and training during the last decade or so. The benefits of this focus, of course, go well beyond improvements in the ability of our economy to compete. Importantly, increased learning opportunities typically benefit those individuals who are able to gain access to such training. Most obviously, training is usually assumed to provide workers with increased promotional opportunities, improved job security and higher wages [1-6]. Perhaps more fundamentally, training and the role it can play in enhancing skill development is a crucial requirement for individual growth and achievement, factors which have long been assumed to motivate productive behaviour in the workplace and the community.

Access to job-related training, however, is not equal across different groups in our community. Instead, training incidence varies with individual characteristics, with one of these being age. Specifically, it is widely recognised that older workers are less likely to gain access to training than younger workers, a view that, as we shall see, is strongly supported in survey data. For a number of reasons, this situation is seen to be undesirable.

First, differential access to training raises concerns about equity. Lesser involvement in training among older workers places them at a relative disadvantage in the labour market due to the importance of training and skill levels for employability. As the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has: 'To the extent that skill acquisition is one determinant of social and economic mobility, then access to opportunities to acquire skills is an issue of social importance' [7, p. 136].

Second, it is widely accepted that changes in the demographic composition of the population may mean that it will become necessary in the future for many older workers to delay their exit from the workforce. As a result of declining mortality, declining fertility rates and the ageing of the baby boom generation, Australia's population (like that of other industrialised countries) is ageing [8]. This has led to widespread concern about the ability of the economically active to financially support the growing numbers of those in society who are not employed [9, 10]. In order to reduce the potential financial burden of those who are dependent on societal support, many governments are now encouraging older workers to remain in the labour force as long as possible. One strategy which would help encourage them to do so, as well as to optimise their value in the labour force, is to ensure that older workers are provided with the necessary training opportunities to maintain and enhance their employment potential and avoid skill obsolescence.

Third, the nature of jobs that exist today differs markedly from that of a few decades ago. Jobs are less likely to depend on physical strength, and are more likely to rely on cognitive and interpersonal skills. Further, the rapid introduction of computer-based technology into many jobs requires a new range of skills and abilities. Older workers, in particular, thus run the risk that of the skills and competencies they have developed during their working life becoming devalued as new technologies are introduced.

But how much is actually known about training participation by older persons? How large is the age-based training differential by age, what factors contribute to it, and what barriers do older persons face in gaining training? It is these questions which are the subject of this article.

Participation in Training

Evidence from the ABS Surveys of Training and Education

The major sources of training information in Australia, that also include extensive details on the characteristics of individuals, are the three surveys of training and education experience undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1989, 1993 and 1997, each of which involved relatively large nationally representative samples of households. A summary of published data from these three surveys, disaggregated by age group and training type, is provided in Table 1. The three types of training considered here are:

- (i) in-house training — defined by the ABS as formal training courses mainly attended by people working for the respondent's employer [13];
- (ii) external training — defined as attendance on formal training courses where the other course participants were not employees of the same business which employed the survey respondent; and
- (iii) unstructured on-the-job training — which covers any informal activities undertaken to improve job skills (e.g., being shown how to do the job, watching others, asking questions of co-workers, or teaching oneself).

Note that these data relate only to employed persons who had held a wage or salary job at some time during the 12 months preceding the survey.

Table 1 reveals that for all three types of training considered, the likelihood of receiving job-related training over the one-year reference period is much lower among older adult employees than among young adults. In the case of the two structured types of training, however, it is only the oldest cohort — aged 55 to 64 years — which appear to be at a sizeable disadvantage. Participation rates in training among 45 to 54 year olds are not substantially different from the rates among younger cohorts.

Of some interest is a comparison across the three surveys which suggests that the relative position of older workers has improved over time. This is especially true with respect to in-house training and unstructured training where participation rates for the oldest age groups are much higher in 1997 than they were 1989. In contrast, among the 25 to 34 year olds, participation rates in training have either remained steady or fallen slightly.

Where has this relative increase in training participation been most evident? Table 2 shows how changes over time in the training participation rate of both older adults (persons aged 45 years and over) and younger adult (persons aged between 25 and 44 years) workers have, for each of the main forms of training, varied with several personal and job characteristics. For example, among younger male adults participation in in-house training fell by 3.5 percentage points from 1989 to 1997, compared with an increase of 3.7 percentage points for older male adult workers. It still remained the case in 1997 that more younger male adults participated in in-house training than older male adults, but the gap in the rate of participation narrowed considerably (i.e., by 7.2 percentage points).

There is unevenness in the areas where relative improvements have occurred. For in-house training, participation rates fell for most categories of younger adult workers, but rose for all categories of older adult workers. The largest relative gains were made in the public sector where the participation gap between younger adult and older adult workers narrowed by 10.1 percentage points. The relative gains made by older workers was also much more pronounced among those without post-school qualifications and those employed in part-time jobs.

For training delivered external to the workplace, the picture is much less clear cut. Participation rates increased for all categories of both younger and older adult workers. For some categories (e.g., females and part-time workers) the participation gap between younger and older workers widened, while for most others the gains made by older workers were relatively small.

Finally, with respect to unstructured training in the workplace, participation rates increased for workers in both of the broad age categories, but in all cases the gain was much greater among the older workers, thus leading to a narrowing in the training participation gap.

Participation in Training: International Comparisons

An issue that has attracted widespread comment in the past is whether or not Australia is a low training country. The conventional wisdom during the 1980s and early 1990s was that this was so, and this belief was a major rationale for the introduction of the training levy by the federal government in 1990. Such views, however, were based, on limited quantitative evidence.

During the 1980s, however, many countries began to collect their own data on worker participation in job-related training, often via household surveys, thus providing an arguably more objective source of data for international comparisons. International data of this type were first assembled by the OECD [7] and, at first glance, suggest that Australia is actually one of the better training countries. However, as the OECD makes only too clear, the methods used for generating these data vary so greatly across the different countries that international comparisons are virtually useless. Different definitions, reference periods, population scopes and survey methods all combine to mean that observed cross-national differences in training incidence are more likely to reflect the differences in the way data are collected rather than differences in the incidence of training.

More recently, however, this problem has been at least partly overcome with the administration of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), in 1994 to 1995, which used almost identical survey methodologies and instruments in 11 different countries, including Australia. In terms of measuring training incidence, however, the IALS does have a major weakness. — the principal training question is extremely broad, covering a wide range of training activities. This is likely to have created considerable uncertainty among respondents about exactly what was meant by training and, in turn, is likely to have led to considerable variation across respondents in the types of training activities they included in their responses.

Leaving aside these measurement problems, the survey findings reveal that Australia ranks slightly above average in terms of incidence of job-related training participation of employed persons. O'Connell [14], for example, reported that 38.1 per cent of employed adults aged 25 to 64 years participated in job-related training in Australia during the year prior to survey. This compares with the ten-country mean of 34.4 per cent, with Australia ranking above Belgium, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland, but below the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States. Overall, such findings would appear to contradict the widely held view that Australia under-invests in training. That said, if the UK — the country measured as having the highest incidence of job-related training (51.9 per cent of all employed adults received training) — represents best practice, then Australia is still a long way from best practice. Further, the IALS only covered a small number of countries and there are good reasons to believe that some of the countries not represented, such as Japan and Germany, may have even higher rates of participation in training.

More important for this study, the IALS data can also be used to identify differences by age in the incidence of training. A summary of these data was again reported in O'Connell [14] and is reproduced here in Table 3. The key feature of this table is that in all countries, except Belgium, the probability of job-related training is lowest among the oldest cohort of adult workers. Again, Australia (at 31 per cent) ranks slightly above average in terms of the incidence of training of older workers. Older workers in the US were most likely to have undertaken job-related training (43 per cent) while older workers in Poland (14 per cent) were least likely. Australia, however, compares less favourably when ratios of training incidence between middle-age workers (35 to 44 years old) and older workers are compared. The ratio of 1.4 found for Australia, the Netherlands and the UK, is the highest observed — suggesting that inequality in training incidence between mid-career workers and older workers is greatest in these countries. In contrast, Belgium, Switzerland and the US score much better, with their oldest workers participating in training at a much closer rate to that of the middle-age workers.

In addition to the incidence of job-related training falling with age, the IALS data also suggest that time spent in training (among those who did participate in training) declines with age. As shown in Table 4, the mean average duration of training for 45 to 64 year old trainees for all countries (102 hours) was much lower than that for younger trainees. Further, this general pattern holds for all but two of the countries considered (Belgium and Ireland).

Multivariate Analysis

One problem with simple cross-tabulated data is that they sometimes hide more than they reveal. Older workers might have lower probabilities of training which reflect not their own attitudes or the attitudes of employers, but other factors. For example, training probabilities tend to rise with educational qualifications, and the oldest population cohort tends to have lower levels of educational attainment. Similarly, the accumulated experience of older workers resulting from on-the-job learning may reduce their need for more formal training.

It is, therefore, conventional to estimate statistical models of training probability which attempt to control for the many factors influencing training along with age. Such studies invariably find that the probability of training still declines with age. Indeed, if anything the differential is accentuated. That is, the more factors taken into account, the greater the gap in training participation rates between younger and older adults. This is demonstrated in Table 5 which reports results from regression analysis of data from the 1997 Survey of Education and Training Experience. Specifically, this table reports predicted probabilities of workers of different ages receiving training after controlling for a large range of personal and job-related characteristics (such as sex, education, the number of dependent children, hours worked, job tenure, occupation and firm size).

As can be clearly seen for each of the three types of training considered in this table (formal training comprises both in-house and external training), compared with the reference group — workers aged 30 to 34 years — the likelihood of participation falls with each successive age cohort. Thus, if we focus on formal training, the likelihood of a 45 year old receiving training is only 77 per cent that of a 30 year old; for a 55 year old the relative ratio is just 54 per cent; while for the oldest age group the comparable proportion is only a little more than one-third.

Perhaps more importantly, decomposition of results from the estimation of separate regression equations of participation in formal training for each age group suggest that only about two-fifths of the training differential between the oldest workers (55 to 64 years) and younger adults (25 to 44 years) is due to observable characteristics. The remaining three-

fifths arises from either unobserved characteristics or the differential treatment of older workers compared with their prime-age counterparts. This suggests, though certainly does not prove, discriminatory behaviour on the part of employers.

Barriers to Training

What then are the reasons why older workers appear less likely to participate in training? The literature suggests three main types of barriers: employer attitudes, differential learning ability, and the attitudes of older workers.

Employer Attitudes

It is well recognised that many managers (and indeed the community more broadly) hold stereotyped views about the productive potential of older workers. The existence of age-based stereotypes, for example, has been confirmed by a number of experimental studies [15, 16], with younger workers typically rated by the subjects in these studies as better performers and offering greater potential for development than otherwise comparable older workers. On the other hand, older workers typically score well in terms of loyalty and employment stability. Such views, however, often do not accord well with reality — certainly studies of the relationship between age and work performance have consistently struggled to find evidence of a significant relationship [17].

Of relevance to the issue of training is whether such views are reflected in employer perceptions that older workers as less suitable for training. Here the mainly survey-based evidence is quite mixed. In some surveys, significant proportions of employers describe older workers as ‘hard to train’ [18, 19], while in others there are just as many that disagree [20, 21]. Our own interpretation of the evidence (including studies not just from Australia, but from the UK and the US) is that, taken as a whole, it tends to confirm that managers as a group hold views that will ultimately mean reduced access of older workers to training. This, however, is not necessarily because managers believe older workers do not have the capacity for training. It may be because managers believe that older workers have more difficulties in learning new skills which, in turn, will impact on the expected relative cost of training older workers. While many might claim such views are discriminatory, they nevertheless have at least some scientific basis.

Learning Ability

As just stated, older workers are commonly characterised as more difficult, and hence more costly, to train. Such stylised views are not without foundation, and are consistent with predictions from psychological models of cognitive behaviour. According to this body of theory, motor and cognitive skills, which are assumed to be crucial determinants of training performance, decline with age for at least three reasons. These are:

- (i) a general slowing in information-processing abilities;
- (ii) a general reduction in attentional resources (such as the ability to divide attention among several tasks); and
- (iii) declining work memory capacity.

Most importantly, the predictions from this theory are supported by the weight of empirical evidence. Kubeck and colleagues [22] employed meta-analytic techniques to review and summarise the findings from 32 different studies measuring the relationship between age and various measures of job-related training performance. The mean correlations between age and three different types of training performance measures were all large and highly

significant, and all indicated that training performance declined with age. Further, these results were not simply the product of laboratory experiments. The key result was apparently unaffected by whether the study was undertaken in the laboratory or in the field (though the mean correlations were smaller in the field studies).

Overall, the weight of evidence suggests that training performance is adversely affected by age. Less clear is the cause, and importance, of this effect. The magnitude of the effect is almost certainly moderated by a number of other intervening variables including pre-existing skills, the type of learning activity involved and the context in which the training is delivered. Further, it has not been clearly established at what age this learning effect becomes sizeable. The bottom-line is that in many settings and contexts, the additional cost of training an older worker compared with a younger worker may be quite small.

Worker Attitudes

The disadvantageous position of older workers in terms of accessing job-related training may be further exacerbated by the attitudes of workers themselves. Data from the 1997 Survey of Education and Training Experience, for example, appear to confirm lower levels of interest in training among older workers. As reported in Table 6, among those workers who did not participate in any form of structured training during the previous year, 'no need' was by far the most frequently cited reason for that non-participation. Further, the incidence of these responses rose strongly with age. This result was also found to hold after controlling for a host of other demographic and work-related variables (such as gender, education, occupation, tenure and industry).

Such findings are consistent with recent US research. For example, in a study of 715 managerial and supervisory employees of a large public sector organisation, Guthrie and Schwoerer [23] found that those employees in late career stages were far more likely to indicate that they had lower needs for training.

What then are we to make of these sorts of findings? Perhaps the key point that needs emphasis here is that there is a range of possible explanations to account for the differences in responses across age groups. Lower levels of interest in training might simply reflect the lack of need for training due to accumulated skills and experience. Alternatively, it could just as easily reflect older employee perceptions about the relative value of participating in training, possibly conditioned by discriminatory management policies and practices. That is, older workers may see no pay-off to participation in such training in terms of enhanced future promotion prospects or employability.

Guthrie and Schwoerer [23], for example, found a measure of perceived training utility directly correlated with self-assessed training needs (and therefore inversely associated with age). For Guthrie and Schwoerer, such findings suggest a need for organisations to reassess the processes and priorities that guide investment in training and skills development.

Very differently, a lack of interest in training may reflect a fear of training and a lack of confidence in the ability to succeed in training. Numerous writers, for example, have pointed to the possibility that some or many older workers may be reluctant to participate in training programs, perhaps because they:

- do not feel confident about the likelihood of their succeeding in a training program;
- are unfamiliar with training environments; or
- fear that they will be unable to compete with younger and possibly better educated trainees.

Overall, there seems little doubt that the attitudes of older workers are a significant obstacle to their further participation in training. What is less clear is the extent to which these views reflect a lack of self-confidence in older persons' ability to train or a perception that training is no longer valuable. This distinction is critical given that the appropriate organisational response to redress this problem should vary depending on which factor is the more important. Further, if the problem is one of perceived lack of benefit from training due to retirement plans, then it seems unlikely that any organisational initiatives will have much success in altering such views for those workers who see themselves as nearing the end of their working careers. On the other hand, if it is an issue of lack of self confidence in relation to computer training, for example, specific steps can be taken to address the problem such as using older persons as trainers.

Conclusions

The bottom-line is that older persons are almost certainly missing out on training opportunities. While things do appear to be improving, a case for a greater role for government does appear to exist. Expounding on what that might involve goes beyond the scope of this article, but initiatives being tried in other countries, particularly the UK and its vigorous promotion of the Investors in People standard, provide some guide to the types of initiatives that might be possible.

This program is essentially built around an accreditation which, it is hoped, will become so valued by the community, that employers wishing to demonstrate their attractiveness as an employer will wish not to be accredited.

Key requirements for accreditation include:

- public commitment at a senior level to develop a written but flexible plan specifying how training and development needs will be assessed and met;
- an undertaking to regularly review the training and development needs of its employees through its planning process and make links where appropriate to publicly recognised qualifications; and
- commitment to training employees throughout their career.

Investors in People standard has been strongly promoted by the UK Government. It now covers a third of the UK workforce and it is mandatory for the Civil Service [24].

Other possible policy initiatives open to government include:

- individual learning accounts that provide tax incentives for investing in training or discounts for particular courses (possibly with matching contributions from employers);
- greater commitment by the government as an employer to the needs of older persons through promotion of a code of good practice; and
- greater incentives for employment service providers to focus on needs of mature age job seekers.

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Table 1: Participation in job-related training during past year by age and training type, 1989, 1993 and 1997, Australia (% of persons who had a wage or salary job in previous year)

Age group	In-house training			External training			Unstructured (on-the-job) training		
	1989	1993	1997	1989	1993	1997	1989	1993	1997
20–24	34.2	26.7	29.3	8.0	9.4	19.4	85.8	89.9	84.5
25–34	39.6	33.2	37.0	11.9	13.0	21.4	76.0	85.3	77.1
35–44	40.2	37.8	38.8	12.0	14.5	23.9	68.1	82.2	73.5
45–54	31.5	33.0	36.3	9.3	12.2	20.6	56.5	74.1	66.3
55–64	20.4	23.2	25.0	4.7	7.7	14.2	40.9	56.3	54.8
Total ^a	34.9	31.3	33.0	9.8	11.8	20.0	71.8	81.8	71.6

Note: a The 1997 survey is not directly comparable with the earlier two surveys, with the most important difference being that the first two surveys, but not the third, excluded persons aged 15 to 20 years who were still at school.

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics [11-13].

Table 2: Change in training participation, by selected personal and job characteristics, 1989–1997 (% point increase in participation)

	In-house training		External training		Unstructured training	
	Younger adults	Older adults	Younger adults	Older adults	Younger adults	Older adults
<i>Sex</i>						
Males	-3.5	3.7	5.9	8.3	3.4	11.8
Females	-0.1	7.7	10.7	9.9	2.6	11.3
<i>Education</i>						
Post-school quals	-4.9	0.3	8.5	10.4	2.0	11.0
No post-school quals	0.5	8.8	6.8	5.7	3.2	9.7
<i>Hours of work</i>						
Full-time	-1.9	5.1	8.4	9.9	3.5	12.8
Part-time	1.8	8.7	8.7	7.0	2.9	9.9
<i>Sector</i>						
Private	-1.3	3.4	8.6	9.1	2.0	11.7
Public	2.8	12.9	7.7	9.3	7.5	13.8
<i>All employees</i>	-2.0	5.4	8.2	9.0	3.0	11.7

Note: Sample restricted to persons with a wage or salary job in previous 12 months, excluding secondary school students.

Source: Unpublished data from ABS surveys of training and education.

Table 3: Participation by employed adults aged 25–64 in job-related training by age and country, 1994–95

Country	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 64 years
Australia	43	42	31
Belgium (Flanders)	21	17	22
Canada	41	40	32
Ireland	28	24	19
Netherlands	36	36	25
New Zealand	50	49	42
Poland	17	18	14
Switzerland	36	32	28
United Kingdom	59	58	41
United States	46	48	43
Unweighted mean	38	36	30

Source: O'Connell [14].

Table 4: Average hours of training undertaken by employed adults aged 25 to 64 in job-related training by age and country, 1994–95

Country	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 64 years
Australia	164	120	96
Belgium (Flanders)	111	147	110
Canada	152	114	102
Ireland	252	186	192
Netherlands	223	138	92
New Zealand	203	149	107
Poland	190	133	106
Switzerland	148	97	83
United Kingdom	132	103	71
United States	154	111	65
Unweighted mean	173	130	102

Source: O'Connell [14].

Table 5: Predicted probabilities of participating in employer sanctioned training by age, 1997 Survey of Education and Training Experience

Age group	Formal training	Unstructured on-the-job training	Educational study
15-19	0.71*	3.00*	3.70*
20-24	0.80*	1.62*	2.51*
25-29	0.93	1.10	1.11
30-34	1.00	1.00	1.00
35-39	0.95	0.95	0.75*
40-44	0.86	0.93	0.67*
45-49	0.77	0.76*	0.51*
50-54	0.70*	0.66*	0.33*
55-59	0.54*	0.61*	0.25*
60-64	0.35*	0.39*	0.13*

* P<0.05 (compared with reference group: persons aged 30-34 years)

Table 6: Main reason for not attending training courses, 1997
(% of persons who, in the past year, had held a wage and salary job and had not attended any training)

	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
No need for training	43.9	45.2	50.9	56.9	69.0
Too much work / Scheduling problems	11.5	12.5	9.4	8.3	3.0
Little difference to work prospects / Not required for job	9.7	7.6	7.8	9.6	8.8
No time	7.5	7.6	8.2	7.3	3.6
Lack of interest or motivation	5.5	4.0	3.7	3.7	3.7

Source: Unpublished data from ABS 1997 Surveys of Education and Training Experience.