

WHAT WORKS:

Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Older Workers

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Statistics

Life expectancy in Canada	78.1 years for men 82.9 years for women ¹
Unemployment rate in 2008 in Alberta	3.6% for working-age population ² 2.4% for older workers ³
Workers over 45 of total employment in Alberta in 2008	44% ⁴
Workers over 45 of total employment in Alberta between 1998 and 2008	+47% ⁵
Participation rate for workers over 45 in Alberta compared to national rate in 2008	+9.5% ⁶
Growth of participation rate of workers over 45 in Alberta compared to national rate in 2008	+12.4% ⁷
Older workers in Alberta who are employed	61.5% in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industry ⁸ 17.9% in the accommodation and food services industry ⁹
Employment rate of older workers in Alberta in 2008	86.9% ages 45–54 ¹⁰ 70.6% ages 55–64 ¹¹ 15.9% ages 65 and older ¹²

Context

What do I wish I had known when I started working with older workers?

“I wish I had understood more about the emotional part of things. I didn’t really understand how hard people were hit with job loss.”

Faye Haney
Career Management Specialist

Older workers are described as those workers over 45, over 50, over 55, over 60, or over 65. In other words, *older worker* can be defined generally as someone over 45. Older workers are also known as mature workers, near retirees, experienced workers, midlife adults and working seniors. In this resource, *older workers* refers to workers or job seekers 45 years and older.

In general, Canadians are living longer, healthier lives. The pattern and potential of their career span is changing. People in midlife may be placed on a continuum of those who are healthy and experiencing satisfying work to those who are vulnerable and unable to secure gainful employment.

Adults in late midlife may

- choose to retire and then embark on a new path in their career
- stay in the workforce because they find the work satisfying and rewarding
- stay in the workforce because they do not have sufficient funds to retire
- stay in the workforce but fear layoff
- lose their jobs involuntarily and need to seek new employment
- want or need to care for family members
- want to combine work and other lifestyle options

People at midlife may reflect on whether or not there is going to be another opportunity to change what they've been doing or another chance to follow a dream. They may want their later years to become a time for searching and experimenting.

Older workers in the job market can be categorized as *voluntary* or *involuntary career changers*.

Voluntary career changers are seeking more meaningful, more enjoyable or different employment. They challenge the belief that decisions made in midlife should not be changed before retirement.¹³

Involuntary career changers are people who, despite their satisfactory or exemplary employment records, may have been

- laid off because of cutbacks, downsizing, mergers and organizational restructuring
- laid off because of outdated skills
- laid off because of outmoded work roles or job classifications
- required to change work due to health issues that have emerged
- required to change work to meet the need for increased income
- unable to secure a job despite their best efforts
- forced into early retirement¹⁴

When older workers experience deteriorating health and cannot return to the work that they saw as an important role in life, their self-esteem may go down. Those who were immigrants, seasonally employed, semi-skilled or skilled in one kind of work may have a history of job loss and periods of unemployment. Many of these people spend years saving for and looking forward to retirement. Therefore, an unplanned loss of employment income can result in a significant loss in savings. This financial loss also changes their view of their future and their sense of their ability to control their quality of life.

Other older workers, primarily women, may enter or re-enter the workforce as an adjustment to a major life transition, such as

- child-launching, particularly when the last child leaves home
- widowhood, to supplement a pension or to build a pension
- divorce, to replace the income that was supplied by the former spouse
- retirement, to supplement income and to find meaningful work

New beginnings at midlife

“Many of the people we work with are women, suddenly single. They have been moms and wives, have raised a family and contributed through volunteer work, but they may not have held jobs for years. The majority of men were divorced and now are in a second family. They worked predominantly in the oilfields, away a lot and don't want to go down that road again. They are looking at what they can do with the rest of their life that will help them to sustain the first family and give them quality of life with the second family.”

Barb Sheppard
Career Assistance Network

Whether older workers are voluntary or involuntary career changers, they often share common challenges:

- their lack of experience with changing technology
- their need to update their skills
- their lack of current work search skills
- views about when it is suitable to retire
- concern about having enough retirement income
- concern about being hired
- concern about being too old to make significant changes
- concern about being redundant¹⁵

Facing forward

"I tell pre-retirement workshop participants that nobody owes them a job. Sometimes they think they are retirement planning but really they are escape planning. I say this because I really want them to evaluate whether they should leave their job. Until their focus is forward instead of back, it's really hard to do career counselling with them. When the focus is forward, you can get them thinking about 'What could I be doing that will generate a life that is better than what I have?'"

Rein Selles

Retirement/Life Challenge Ltd.

Retirement

Issues that focus on the older worker inevitably overlap with issues related to retirement. Canada does not have a statutory retirement age, but age 65 is used most often in collective agreements and corporate human resources practices.

Many older people make retirement a process, not a single event. A study on the participation of older workers noted a shift toward non-standard work arrangements among older workers, such as self-employment or contract work. This shift suggests that some workers are making a conscious transition towards retirement.¹⁶ Retirement is changing and may no longer be the culmination of one's working years or the complete cessation of working for financial gain.

Midlife

The aging process can be viewed in terms of change and continuity. The normal aging process unfolds so gradually that most people are not aware of it.

Many of the myths attributed to age actually describe abnormal processes of disease experienced by only a small portion of the older population. According to Rein Selles, a retirement planner, the ability to adapt to the physiological changes that occur with age develops gradually, like a seventh sense that allows us "to look at aging not as a disease but as a normal process."¹⁷

In a survey of studies, it was concluded that "there is no significant overall difference between the job performance of older and younger workers. In almost every study, variations within an age group far exceed the average differences between age groups."¹⁸

One study summarizes these midlife issues, pointing out that older workers

- can work for personal and/or financial reasons
- are less subject to work-related accidents
- can be as productive as younger workers
- are capable of learning new technologies
- can acquire new skills effectively when appropriate training programs are available¹⁹

Indeed, it seems that there is a shift in focus from helping older workers to retire to helping them keep their jobs or search for new jobs.

In working with clients during their midlife stage, counsellors need to consider these areas:

- employment practices
- personal circumstances
- financial concerns
- emotional crises
- self-limiting attitudes

Employment practices

Employment practices are sometimes based on fallacies and misperceptions about older workers. Older workers may have to convince employers they do not fit the stereotypes. Counsellors can help older workers prepare to challenge these misperceptions by encouraging older workers to examine their own beliefs about aging and to identify the assets they bring to the workplace.

Personal circumstances

Older workers who have been laid off or forced into early retirement may be trying to navigate a maze of personal challenges. The percentage of older adults who are healthy is growing, but health problems do increase steadily with age. Incidents of chronic illness, functional impairment and physical disability increase as people live longer. In addition, older adults may become caregivers for aging parents, ailing spouses and dependent grandchildren.

Financial concerns

Older unemployed workers with dependents, a mortgage and debt may feel anxious about the prospect of financial crisis. The longer they are out of work, the more their resources will be depleted.

Emotional crises

Job loss can be traumatic for people as it may stir up deep feelings of shame and inadequacy.

The loss of a job may cause older workers to

- lose their sense of identity
- lose their sense of self-worth
- lower their assessment of their abilities

- experience embarrassment about being unemployed, collecting employment insurance or looking for work
- withdraw from friends and family at a time when they most need support

Self-limiting attitudes

Older workers may need to examine what they believe about themselves to identify and challenge self-limiting attitudes that work against their favour.

Examples of self-limiting attitudes include

- *Tunnel vision.* Older workers who have been in one work role for many years may have a limited view of their potential and may lack confidence in moving beyond that previous work role.
- *Fear of risk-taking.* Some older workers focus on minimizing risk and maximizing security. The thought of venturing out in any new direction may cause them anxiety about changing established routines for themselves and their families.²⁰
- *Age bias.* Some older workers believe they are declining mentally and physically with age. This attitude can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than viewing problems in the workplace as related to changes in themselves, their work or their environment, some workers blame their age.²¹

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

Career development looks at the whole person throughout the lifespan. At a time when 70-year-olds run marathons and start new businesses, counsellors may wish to re-examine their own beliefs about aging and retirement. Healthy older workers face a bright future with many opportunities. However, if they have lost their jobs, they may need to manage their grief in order to be ready again for employment.

Helping older workers cope with job loss

Older workers are far less likely than younger workers to experience job loss. However, according to a 2008 survey, unemployed older workers in Alberta experienced longer periods of unemployment compared to other unemployed workers.²²

Clients aged 55 to 64 generally have difficulties finding replacement jobs for several reasons:

- They have worked in traditional industries that are growing more slowly than in previous decades.
- They had jobs that required limited qualifications and lower levels of education compared to current qualifications.
- They tend to look for jobs that are similar to those they've recently held.²³

The first step in helping clients with job loss is to help them understand their reactions. Clients may experience a range of normal responses, including anger, depression, anxiety, loss, fear, confusion, frustration and in some instances, relief. Clients may also have physical symptoms, including insomnia, fatigue, high blood pressure, headaches, colds and changes in appetite.

According to Faye Haney, a career management specialist, clients usually experience stages of recovery from job loss. First, clients experience emotions that range from shock to anger to relief. Second, clients become resigned to the job loss. Finally, clients experience growth and begin to move forward in new directions.

Clients need to realize that they are not alone in these kinds of responses: job loss is traumatic. In some cases, clients may require individual psychological counselling. Assist by providing referrals to appropriate agencies or professionals whenever possible.

Older clients may also need to be referred to financial experts with whom they can discuss money and lifestyle issues. Older workers exploring alternatives need to be realistic about their current financial situation and retirement plans.

In addition to psychological or financial counselling, the following strategies and lifestyle changes may benefit older workers coping with job loss.

Encourage *angry* clients to

- channel anger into non-violent physical activities, such as exercising or playing a favourite sport or game
- write a letter about their anger and later destroy the letter
- take anger management training if needed

Encourage *depressed* clients to

- exercise regularly
- seek relief in laughter with comedies and humour
- create a schedule for each day and stick to it
- volunteer
- focus on adequate sleep and relaxation
- eat a balanced diet
- stay connected with family and friends who are positive and encouraging

Encourage clients needing *emotional support* to

- distinguish between temporary rejection as a worker and rejection as a human being
- discuss the actual reasons for job loss
- clarify why they are now, temporarily, not working
- begin to work on identifying their strengths

When they don't get the job...

"Sometimes people feel that if they don't get the job, it's ageism. Employers have high demands and want to hire people who are entrepreneurial in nature."

Barb Sheppard

Career Assistance Network

Helping older workers identify their strengths

When older workers acknowledge the strengths they bring to the workplace, they will rebuild or enhance their self-esteem and gain confidence. The resulting changes in attitude may make a significant difference to the success of their work search.

Older workers bring skills, motivation, experience and flexibility to the workplace. Counsellors play a significant role in helping these experienced workers find new career strategies to find work that will provide meaning and challenge in their lives.

The values that older workers embody can be strong selling points in today's job market. Many older workers tend to have these characteristics:

- *Loyal.* They are more likely to stay in their position than to look for new jobs and more likely to be committed to the organization's goals.
- *Reliable.* They have lower rates of absenteeism and turnover than younger workers.
- *Productive.* They are as productive as younger workers and may outperform younger workers in some white-collar positions.
- *Safety conscious.* They take fewer risks, have fewer accidents and accomplish as much in a workday as younger workers.
- *Literate.* With their education in the three R's, they possess the basic skills employers need.
- *Flexible.* Older people faced numerous changes in later life and have had to cope with advances or changes in technology, globalization and workplace diversity.²⁴

Older workers often possess a wealth of experience and abilities. However, older workers may be reluctant to discuss their experiences or may be unaware that the skills they take for granted are highly marketable. Older workers need to know how to articulate their strengths and use those strengths to help them in their job search.

Identifying and discussing transferable skills will help clients to

- regain lost confidence
- discover more strengths
- start thinking about possible career alternatives
- recognize what they have to offer an employer
- articulate their skills and other assets during a job search
- prepare effective resumés, letters and other marketing tools
- begin to prepare for self-employment

Identifying strengths

"People have many skills and when they leave, these skills don't stay behind in their old job but are portable. It is so important to help them identify their skills and things they are proud of having done—peak moments in their lives and when they worked with passion."

Nell Smith

Nell Smith Career Services

The following are some attributes that older workers have to offer employers:

- employment experience
- maturity and level-headedness
- commitment to the company's goals or products and services
- experience working with teams
- track record with responsibility and dependability
- statistically lower accident rates
- low absenteeism rates
- proven ability to meet deadlines
- experience with diversity in the workplace
- experience with stress management²⁵

A variety of instruments and strategies may help older clients explore their values, needs, wants, skills, interests, personality characteristics, beliefs and career satisfactions. Here is a sample list²⁶ of instruments and strategies:

- reframe self-defeating thoughts²⁷
- create a self-portrait²⁸
- build an inventory of strengths using questionnaires²⁹
- create a career path analysis³⁰
- draw a lifeline³¹
- use a life wheel³²
- complete assessment tools such as the Quester questionnaire³³
- read publications directed to workers making midlife career moves³⁴
- use a variety of self-assessment activities on values, beliefs, skills, personality characteristics, personal style, needs, desires and dreams³⁵

Exploring values, interests, beliefs and goals are just as vital as identifying marketable skills. This is because many older workers are looking for more meaning in their working lives.

The purpose of these, and other tools and techniques, is to help the client and counsellor to

- examine responses to major life events, whether positive or negative
- analyze clients' adaptability to change
- recognize and acknowledge client successes
- discuss and clarify client skills
- coach clients to transfer their strengths to new situations
- help clients think about which strengths they want to take into the future³⁶

What is satisfying about counselling older workers?

"It's hearing wonderful stories of careers and the interesting things that people have done. Older adults know what they want—they give you indicators of their success. Everyone has strengths and I let people know that I'm wowed by what they can do. You just can't give people too much positive feedback—everybody is aching for it."

Bonnie Young
Career Transition Counsellor

Support groups and social networks

Another important asset to examine is the support group or network of associates and contacts of older clients. Counsellors often need to help people identify sources of support, and clients may need to learn how to ask for the help they need. Effective marketing starts with those friends, colleagues and contacts that are closest to clients. In so doing, clients will focus on identifying supportive people and engaging them in the job search campaign.

If you are working with older clients, you may want to refer them to programs in the community that offer peer support. Alternatively, explore the possibility of setting up a support group or helping clients to do so. Support groups can be the most effective strategy for providing moral support and encouragement as well as information and contacts.

Helping older workers build self-confidence

One of the key predictors of whether a person will choose to pursue a task or goal is the sense of self-efficacy, which can be defined as self-confidence or positive beliefs about one's capability to perform a task. Todd J. Maurer's work in this area³⁷ suggests that focusing on specific skills, such as self-management skills, idea generation and use of technology, helps older clients to counter self-limiting beliefs and build self-efficacy.

Focusing on the future

“You need to learn how to read a person to connect with them. You can crush a person’s self-esteem if you don’t tune into their pride. An expression I’ve heard others use seems appropriate, ‘You have to rip that rear-view mirror off the windshield and move forward. Let’s focus on where we’re going.’”

Barb Sheppard

Career Assistance Network

Counsellors need to find ways to challenge older workers’ self-limiting beliefs in order to help them build confidence and move forward. Self-confidence rises when older clients tackle tasks that previously made them anxious. Offering functional technology literacy to older workers helps them overcome their fears. Joining organizations, such as Toastmasters, or volunteering can make a difference in self-confidence. Once older workers become comfortable, their self-confidence soars.

Helping older workers stay current

Informed decisions are the most creative and effective. Helping clients gain access to the information they need is particularly important for older workers who may be, or who may feel they are, out of date. Provide older clients with relevant information or with strategies to find out more about

- occupations in the local economy
- local, regional and national labour markets
- training and possible funding sources for training programs

Information interviews

Older workers are wary of making a wrong choice or wasting time by pursuing a job they won’t like. Information interviews³⁸ provide an opportunity to gather information directly from people who are currently in the career, who are working for a particular company or who are taking a training program.

Some clients are reluctant to conduct this type of research. Try to determine the amount of support clients require. You may need to facilitate an initial contact for a client and help the client develop skills for managing an information interview.

To help clients prepare for an information interview, suggest that the client first read about the work option and then write a list of questions that are not answered in published information. Next, help the client to arrange the questions in order of importance. Remind the client that the person being interviewed probably is busy and would appreciate a short interview.

You might also prepare the client by role-playing in a practice session. An effective strategy is to videotape the practice session for review with the client.

A successful information interview will provide more than information; it will increase social contacts and build confidence in the client’s ability to make a change in their career.

Focusing on Employment

Here are some strategies and practices for helping older workers to update their work search skills and to prepare themselves for work-related concerns about aging. Older workers may want to explore alternatives to full-time work. To convince employers they are productive, now and in the future, they will also find ways to stay current with job skills.

Helping older workers update work search skills

Counsellors need to help older clients see that the work search process is one of creativity, communication and planning.

Focusing on the next opportunity

“I encourage people to get current. Look at temporary employment agencies and part-time work or contracting—anything can lead to other opportunities. Older workers need encouragement to try different things. What might you do next? Work on the attitude shift to focus on the next thing.”

Nell Smith

Nell Smith Career Services

Creativity and work search

Being creative in work search means scanning all information sources for clues to potential employment. For example, an older worker might read the business section of a newspaper to see which companies are planning expansions, opening new branches or taking over other companies. The older worker can then research these events by finding a person to talk to about what is coming in the next few months. This strategy helps to identify opportunities before they are advertised.

Sometimes conversations will lead to a discussion of how busy the employees are, which gives the opportunity for the client to ask if additional help might be needed. Perhaps the client can take a short-term contract or work part time. Some companies have a policy of advertising only full-time positions, and so networking can sometimes be the best source of information about contract or part-time work.

Some older workers may still have old beliefs about how one looks for work. One of those beliefs might be that they should not bother employers. These kinds of assumptions can get in the way of people being creative in their job search. Older clients may need some help in understanding the difference between bragging and legitimately promoting their skills by speaking confidently about what they can offer an employer.

Communication and work search

Working with clients on communication skills spans the entire work search process, from coaching clients about staying current about the labour market to preparing clients to communicate with employers.

An important beginning is to focus on the way clients promote themselves. Listen carefully to what clients say and how they say it. Be alert to potential problems for clients.

Listening to older workers

“The purpose of [listening to clients talk about themselves] is that you cannot let clients go off on their job search if they might turn people off, annoy them or burn bridges. For example, a potential supervisor does not want to hear about ‘the way we used to do that.’ People usually have very little patience for that kind of explanation. If we’re going to prepare people, we need to not set them up for failure.”

Bonnie Young

Career Transition Counsellor

Counsellors also need to coach older clients to focus on talking about experiences when they have initiated change or responded to change. Help clients to become aware of the breadth of changes they’ve made in their lives and of the many skills they have developed. Older clients may minimize what they’ve done and take their accomplishments for granted.

The counsellor and client both require persistence to take apart the resumé and rebuild it several times, to discuss the content for specific cover letters and to practise interview scenarios. These activities are all important because clients must prepare to respond to specific employer needs.

It is crucial to coach clients to answer interview questions with results-based evidence. Communication with potential future employers must stress results and accomplishments. Clients who have worked in only one sector or for only one company must be helped to promote their ability to adapt in order to counter any perceptions that they are too limited.

Coping with constant change

“When you are counselling older clients, you’ll hear them say, ‘Oh, I’ve done that, and I’ve lived through four bosses in the last eight years, or I’ve had to change my way of doing things because I had to report to managers at a distance.’ What are all these events if not coping with constant change?”

Bonnie Young

Career Transition Counsellor

Follow-up after applying for work is essential. During the work search, any number of events can happen without the client being notified. There may be changes in the company that impact job availability, such as an internal employee being moved into another job. The client must check back regularly to remind the employer of the client’s interest in the job. Usually the only way a client will find out about the status of an application is for the client to engage in that often-neglected task in work search: follow-up.

Planning and work search

Job seekers need to consider timelines and to plan their work search accordingly. Preparing their plan may depend upon their needs and the requirements in the sectors and communities in which they’re looking. Also, job seekers need to be aware of the job search season. It’s not unusual to respond to an ad or pursue a job lead in June and hear back on it around the end of September. In many industries, July and August are forced holidays for job seekers. Sometimes clients will respond to job openings toward the end of the year but hear nothing until mid-January.

The work search seasons may change according to the sector and the community, so it is imperative that clients determine

- when the breaks usually occur
- what events cause hiring to be paused
- how to maximize their time when recruitment has been temporarily halted
- how to use their energy well when job opportunities are more abundant

Preparing for the quiet times

“Job search is a lonely business. I often warn clients about the roller-coaster ride of searching and help them prepare for the down times when there appears to be no activity in the job market (for example, no ads, no leads from friends). Then people must become more creative in the search process, and get themselves into research mode.”

Bonnie Young

Career Transition Counsellor

Helping older workers manage work-related concerns about age

Education is one strategy for dealing with age biases based on fallacies and misinformation.

Help older clients be ready to use every opportunity to educate employers and organizations about the benefits of hiring older workers. Older workers also need to become comfortable working through alternate ways of handling discriminatory employment practices or comments.

Finally, older workers should become familiar with Alberta’s human rights and equity legislation and with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom.

Demonstrating employability

“People who are employable speak with confidence, demonstrate social skills, are energetic, look current and talk about the present and the future. They talk about their willingness to learn and actually demonstrate that by trying new things. They’ve also learned to build and use their network of associates.”

Nell Smith

Nell Smith Career Services

Experienced counsellors help older clients prepare for difficult interview questions and encourage them to have the courage to bring up topics themselves if they sense that some issues are simmering.³⁹ This preparation takes courage on the part of the counsellor as well, since counsellors need to be able to help people cope with difficult questions that potential employers will likely ask.

Helping older workers explore alternatives to full-time work

Counsellors report that clients often only see themselves as they’ve been; they don’t see themselves in other work roles. Furthermore, many older clients worry that they will never get another full-time job. These older adults, having assumed they would be employed until *they* chose to retire, may be unaware of the educational opportunities and the range of support available to them. Similarly, they could be out of touch with the rapidly changing realities of today’s work dynamic and alternative opportunities for jobs.

In counselling older workers to reconcile their goals with the realities of the workplace, encourage them to consider the growing alternatives to the traditional full-time job, including

- one permanent, part-time job combined with other small part-time jobs or contracts
- phased-in retirement through reduced hours or responsibilities
- long-term contract with one employer
- several short-term contracts with different employers
- job or work sharing
- part-time work
- consulting
- home-based business
- self-employment
- training or mentoring position⁴⁰

Work alternatives may offer the best opportunities for older workers wishing to use different sets of skills or to pursue a long-time dream or passion. Employers may be very open to creating flexible work arrangements because they value the contribution made by older workers.

Self-employment and home-based businesses are also becoming popular ways of working. Some people are ready to work differently, often more independently. There are government programs and community-based agencies that can assist individuals who are interested in starting their own businesses.

Helping older workers continue to learn

One of the key ways in which older workers can overcome barriers to employment is to ensure they have the skills appropriate to their chosen direction. If clients determine that their skills and knowledge need to be upgraded or enhanced, help them explore educational alternatives.

If older workers prefer not to return to the classroom full time, they may be able to gather the skills or credentials needed through

- a mentor
- a volunteer position
- online or distance learning
- apprenticeship
- on-the-job training
- evening courses
- work/study programs

Programs that offer on-the-job training may be especially well suited to some older workers. On-the-job training would allow older workers to acquire new skills in the workplace. For some clients, being employed, even at a lower wage, may be preferable to the stress and uncertainty of trying to obtain future employment after an extensive period of retraining.

In Conclusion

The constantly changing workplace and increasing longevity of workers are providing more choices for the older worker. We are in the process of redefining the older worker, aging and retirement. Opportunities to work with older workers in your counselling practice will challenge you to keep up with the trends, services and issues facing this diverse group of people.

Support, structure and information—those are the keys

“With the proper coaching, people will go after what they really want. They go do things, they have energy and they are right on top of things. They need support and this is all about being sensitive, respectful and helpful. They also need structure and information. Support, structure and information—those are the keys.”

Faye Haney

Career Management Specialist

Endnotes

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