

Preparedness of industry for the safety of the ageing workforce: A worker perspective

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

It is estimated that by 2045 the number of persons aged over 65 years working in Australia will more than double and the proportion of the population of conventional working age will fall. The increasing number of older people in the Australian workforce presents an exceptional challenge for both employers and workers.

Published research suggests that while older workers have fewer injuries, when they are injured, their injuries are usually more severe. Importantly they have a greater risk of dying than their younger counterparts. These findings are likely associated with diminishing physical resilience with advancing age and a greater level of co-morbidities. There is limited information from the perspective of older workers themselves on their safety in their future working lives.

Aims

1. Describe the opinions and attitudes of workers in defined high risk industries in relation to their future work intentions, and OH&S as they age;
2. Obtain from the workers their views on measures to enhance work safety for older workers in their industry.
3. Compare and contrast these opinions to those provided by industry and evidence from the literature;
4. Identify any interventions, including alternative deployment that could be investigated for implementation.
5. Identify areas of high risk for older workers that would benefit from further research.

Research questions to be addressed:

1. How do workers in identified high risk industries consider their situation in relation to injury as they age? What are their plans in terms of their future work life? What are the barriers and motivations for these plans?
2. What means/methods do they consider would enhance work safety for older workers in their industry? Are there any specific initiatives workers may raise for further consideration?
3. How do these opinions compare with the opinions of industry and of current initiatives and plans of government?

Obtaining the perspective of workers in this area is crucial to determining their perceived needs, and the barriers that may prevent them or their industry from adopting appropriate interventions.

Method

The method was a qualitative focus group study using topic exhaustion, with participants drawn from industries where the greatest proportion of fatalities among older workers occurs; namely, agriculture, transport and construction. The results were compared with the relevant published literature and with those of a complementary study of employer, union, industry association and researcher views of preparedness of the agriculture, transport and construction industries for the safety of older workers. Recommendations were made based on the study findings, review of relevant published and grey literature, and industry and regulator comments. Current workers aged between 45-54 years and 55-65 years were recruited from industries with the greatest proportion of fatalities – agriculture, forestry and fishing; transport, postal and warehousing; and construction. In total, 63 workers attended and participated in the focus groups.

Results

Common themes arose within the majority of focus groups that transcended industry, differences between the age groups studied and their urban or regional geographic location. The themes and subthemes together with supporting quotations from older workers fell into the following major categories:

- determinants of continued workforce participation
- barriers to reducing physical demands of the job
- amenability to re-training
- effects of age-related physical decline
- effects of younger worker issues
- importance of OH&S compliance
- perceptions of regulator activity to prevent injury
- issues specific to the three industries: agriculture, transport or construction
- geographical or age specific (45-54 years versus 55-64 years) issues

Discussion

While a large amount of potentially useful information for OH&S more generally was provided, only those themes considered to be directly or indirectly relevant to the study aims were taken forward into the discussion. Comparisons with the related study of industry representatives' views on the preparedness of industry for the safety of older workers and the relevant literature identified mixed levels of agreement and contrasting evidence.

Two largely distinct groups of recommendations emerged based on the apparent OH&S and related workability needs of the current cohort of older workers and future cohorts of older workers.

Recommendations

Current cohort of older workers (aged around 50 years and older)

1. Reduce injury risk associated with ongoing hard physical labour and declining strength, balance, sensory and cognitive skills by:

- Exploring approaches to more flexible working arrangements for older workers such as part-time employment and less physically demanding and fatiguing roles e.g. roles in the recruitment, training, and mentoring of young workers;
- Considering retraining or re-deployment possibilities for older workers to less physically demanding jobs, with part-time options;

- Actively discouraging older workers from working, and their employers from permitting them to work, at heights or in other risky environments with regard to physical and sensory decline, including by means of social marketing advertisements;
 - Meeting older workers' OH&S information needs, by accessible means including hard copy simple information, local farm safety days, training in the application of fatigue management systems;
 - Considering the provision of advice and incentives to assist older farmers with farm safety improvements e.g. to ageing farm machinery; or subsidizing the employment of a first employee;
 - Actively encouraging and supporting the recruitment of younger workers into the agriculture, transport and construction industries.
2. Engage with both older workers and the young worker sector to moderate between the needs of both groups to facilitate transition to safer and less physically demanding roles for older workers.
 3. Explore the potential to review aspects of the workers' compensation system which may discourage the employment of older workers.

Future cohorts of older workers

1. Provide lifelong learning programs to update trade specific and general technical skills and proficiencies (e.g. in ICT), including providing the capacity for workers to retrain and change occupations during their working life.
2. Review the accessibility for young people of pathways to skilled employment in the construction and transport industries. Are there adequate pathways for early school leavers?
3. Facilitate superannuation savings systems or similar for farmers to provide alternative income streams to the farm as the sole source of income in their old age.
4. Provide meaningful forums and processes for ongoing input of expertise and experience by older workers to relevant policy making and compliance matters.
5. Conduct further older worker focussed research to strengthen, refute, refine and broaden the findings of this study to improve the safety of older workers in these and other high risk industries.

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

As in most developed countries, Australia is experiencing progressive ageing of its population. By 2045, it is estimated that the number of people over 65 years will more than double, accounting for about a quarter of the total population [1]. This phenomenon, and the related ageing of the workforce, is attracting increasing interest both in Australia and internationally [2, 3].

Older people comprise an increasing share of the employed workforce mainly due to the increasing participation of older women [2, 4]. The ageing of the workforce is expected to continue for some time as the “Baby Boomer” cohort moves towards retirement age and a variety of economic, social and policy changes encourage them to postpone their retirement [5]. In particular, eligibility for the Age Pension will rise to 67 years of age in 2023, incrementally affecting workers born after June 1952 and fully applicable to those born after January 1957.

The increasing number of older people in the Australian workforce presents an exceptional challenge for both employers and workers. However, the occupational health and safety implications of this phenomenon and consequent impact on compensation claims appear to have received little attention at the policy level.

Studies investigating the impact of demographic change in the workforce on occupational health and safety tend to dispel some commonly held beliefs about mature age workers. Despite the assumption of declining physical and cognitive capacities in older people, evidence shows that older workers overall have a lower injury risk than younger workers with both the incidence (rate per 1,000 workers) [5] and rate per employee hour decreasing with age [6]. Where there is some evidence of an effect of ageing on injury incidence, it appears to be related to tasks where basic capacities are increasingly exceeded by job demands as workers age, and for which experience cannot compensate [7]. However, the research also suggests that, while older workers have fewer accidents, when they are injured, their injuries are usually more severe [2, 5, 8] and they have a greater risk of dying than their younger counterparts [2, 5].

While individual companies may have internal arrangements for accommodating older workers in place, this information is generally not available. The Prevention Research Unit of the Department of Forensic Medicine at Monash University has conducted a scoping study that confirms increasing rates of serious and fatal work related injury trends with ageing [10] similar to those described elsewhere [5,8] and has explored for Victoria activities undertaken by employer groups or unions, or those planned in relation to this issue [9]. There is, however, no information from the perspective of older workers themselves on their safety in their future working lives. This study will assist in filling this gap, and allow an assessment of older workers’ opinions and ideas.

1.2 Aims

1. Describe the opinions and attitudes of workers in defined high risk industries in relation to their future work intentions, and OH&S as they age;
2. Obtain from the workers their views on measures to enhance work safety for older workers in their industry.
3. Compare and contrast these opinions to those provided by industry and evidence from the literature;
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Research questions to be addressed:

1. How do workers in identified high risk industries consider their situation in relation to injury as they age? What are their plans in terms of their future work life? What are the barriers and motivations for these plans?
2. What means/methods do they consider would enhance work safety for older workers in their industry? Are there any specific initiatives workers may raise for further consideration?
3. How do these opinions compare with the opinions of industry and of current initiatives and plans of government?

Obtaining the perspective of workers in this area is crucial to determining their perceived needs, and the barriers that may prevent them or their industry from adopting interventions.

2. Methods

The following sections describe the methods used to derive the information contained in this report. The study was approved by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine Ethics Committee and the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

2.1 Overview

The method was a qualitative focus group study using topic exhaustion, with participants drawn from industries where the greatest proportion of fatalities among older workers occurs; namely, agriculture, transport and construction [8]. The results were compared with the relevant published literature and with those of a complementary study of employer, union, industry association and researcher views of preparedness of the agriculture, transport and construction industries for the safety of older workers [9]. Recommendations were made based on the study findings, review of relevant published and grey literature, and industry and regulator comments.

2.1 Participant recruitment

Research participants were recruited from each of the target industries of agriculture, transport and construction, using a purposive sample of current workers aged 45-54 and 55-65 years – those approaching or already in the older worker age group and will be affected by the new government policy to raise the Age Pension eligibility age to 67 years by 2023, i.e. for those born after July 1952. The original participant recruitment strategy is described in Appendix A. This strategy was modified following discussions with the Social Research Unit at WorkSafe Victoria where it was recommended to use a recruitment company, in line with that Unit's usual practice.

The recruitment company, Sweeney Research, recruited participants using their network of experienced recruiters. Each recruiter has a database of willing research participants to call on and the database is continually supplemented by freshly recruited participants. Participant group characteristics are described in Table 1. The metropolitan groups were held in Preston and Northcote Library meeting rooms and the regional groups were held in Warragul and Ballarat at a local arts centre and hotel meeting rooms, respectively. The regional group locations were chosen to provide geographical separation and disparate job roles.

Table 1: Recruitment Group Characteristics

	Age group	Construction	Transport	Agriculture	Total
Metro	45 – 54 years	1	1	-	2
	55 – 65 years	1	1	-	2
Regional	45 – 54 years	1	1	1	3
	55 – 65 years	1	1	1	3
Total		4	4	2	10

Exclusion criteria included age range outside 45 – 64 years, females and persons not working in the three key industries identified. Females were excluded since highly physical work roles for them in the industries under consideration are uncommon. Participants were ineligible to participate if they had participated in another research study in the previous six months. Participants were paid \$70 in vouchers, as reimbursement for time and travel expenses.

2.2 Data collection

The focus groups were held between Monday 19th and Thursday 22nd November 2012. Prior to each focus group, participants read an explanatory statement, and provided written consent and demographic information. The ten focus groups moderated by experienced moderators from the research team, explored topics emerging from the results of previous studies [9, 10]. These topics included worker expectations about their future working life, injury risks and improvements to safety for older workers. Table 2 lists the questions used by the facilitator to guide each focus group session. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and discussions were recorded and transcribed, as well as notes being taken by researchers during the focus groups.

Table 2: Themed questions used to guide focus group sessions.

THEMED QUESTIONS
EXPECTATIONS ABOUT FUTURE WORKING LIFE
What will influence how long you continue to work?
Do you think you will be able to continue the same work as you get older?
Have you considered the impact of getting older on your working life?
Have you made any plans for your working future?
Is this issue something you have considered before?
Is it something you've spoken to your friends or colleagues about?

In regards to your personal safety, do you think you will need to change the way you work as you reach retirement age or continue to work beyond retirement age?

INJURY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH AGEING

Are there particular risks to the safety of older workers in the [industry of interest] industry that concern you?

Are there tasks that you were doing previously, that you wouldn't consider doing now [45-54 age groups: or as you get older]?

Are there any tasks that you would either stop doing or adapt?

Have you had or seen any incidents or accidents that you think may have been related to older people taking on unsuitable tasks?

Have you seen anyone change their work practices as a result of getting older?

Do you think people should consider changing their work practices?

IMPROVEMENTS TO SAFETY FOR OLDER WORKERS

What do you think could be done to improve work safety for older workers in general, and particularly in [industry of interest]?

Are there any barriers that may prevent these changes from being adopted?

Are different strategies required to improve older [industry of interest] workers' safety than for workers in the [industry of interest] industry as a whole?

Are there, or could there be, alternative, safer jobs allocated within [industry of interest] that older workers could do?

Would you consider re-training in a different section of the [industry of interest] industry, or another industry altogether, such as administration, in order to extend your working life?

What about if your [workplace/government] paid for the training?

2.3 Data analysis and interpretation

The transcription was reviewed and common patterns and issues related to each set of questions were identified manually. Responses common across groups and selected unique responses were recorded and quotations were used to provide direct examples of typical responses or others of interest. Additional quotations are recorded in Appendix II in accordance with section headings used in the results section of this report.

Results for all of the themes raised and for which there was wide agreement are reported in the results section of this report. Additional results which may be considered to be of greater relevance to older workers than to the general workforce are reported in Appendix II.

The results are distilled for the discussion section to include only those with specific links to older workers and their OH&S. Issues considered to have direct or indirect links to older worker safety or their ability to continue working in their industry as they age are therefore considered in the discussion. Issues of more general concern to industry, with no particular links to this age group are thus not taken forward.

3. Results

3.1 Demographics and profile of participants

The target was to recruit 8-9 participants per group; however of participants recruited, 5-8 attended and participated for each group.

There were sixty-three participants, with approximately even representation across each industry and age group (Table 3). The composition of each focus group according to age range, industry and metropolitan versus regional location is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Focus group composition

	Age group	Construction (n)	Transport (n)	Agriculture (n)	Total (N)
Metro	45 – 54 years	5	7	-	12
	55 – 65 years	7	6	-	13
Regional	45 – 54 years	7	5*	6*	18
	55 – 65 years	5	8	7*	20
Total		24	26	13	63

* Due to the difficulty with recruiting participants in the regional areas, these age groups became mixed rather than strictly between 45 – 54 years and 55 – 65 years.

The participants covered a variety of roles within each industry (Table 4). In the agricultural industry groups, the majority of participants were farmers (n=9, 69%) of cattle, dairy, horses and other produce. In transport, 19 of the 26 participants were drivers (73%), of trucks, cranes, buses and trams. The remaining 7 participants were involved in transport administration. In construction, participants ranged from tradesman (i.e. bricklayers, builders, electricians, and fitter/welders) to administration roles such as project management and building site management. Of participants in administrative and management roles, many had participated previously in more physically demanding roles in their industry. Table 4 lists the roles of the participants by industry and geographical location.

Table 4: Roles of the participants by industry and geographical location

Industry	Region	Role
Agriculture	Regional	Farmer (9) Assembler/plumber Consultant Sales director Tank preparation and installation

Transport	Metro	Driver/owner-driver* (10) Assisting dogman Manager Truck driver operations
	Regional	Crane truck driver (3) Driver/owner-driver (2) Livestock carrier Transport driver Heavy haulage and earthmoving Warehouse manager Transport machinery Office administration Fabricator Planner
Construction	Metro	Truck driver Project manager Construction Cabinet-maker Utilities locating Labourer Scaffolder/handyman Electrical spotter Builder Commercial contracting management Purchasing/credit manager Plasterer/painter
	Regional	Electrician Fitter/welder Building contractor Fence contractor Project co-ordinator Cabinet maker Carpenter/builder Sales/contractor EHS manager Bricklayer Operations manager Building site manager

* A number of the drivers also listed duties such as storeman and maintenance

The mean length of time spent in current employment was 13 years (Range = 9 months to 48 years). Eleven participants, all from the metropolitan focus groups were born outside Australia, and had lived in Australia for an average of 37 years (Range = 15 – 55 years). The majority of participants had completed 12 years or less of formal education (75%).

Table 5: Demographic information

Demographics	N=63	%
<i>Age</i>		
45-49 years	18	29
50-54 years	19	30
55-59 years	14	22
60-64 years	11	17
65-69 years	1	2
<i>Born in Australia</i>		
Yes	52	83
No	11	17
<i>Highest level of education</i>		
Year 11 or below	35	56
Year 12	12	19
Certificate	7	11
Advanced Diploma and Diploma Level	4	6
Bachelor Degree	2	3
Graduate Diploma and Certificate Level	3	5
Post-Graduate Degree	0	0
<i>Length of current employment*</i>		
<12 months	2	3
12 months – 2 years	7	12
2-5 years	16	27
5-10 years	15	25
10-20 years	6	10
20+ years	14	23

* 3 participants did not answer this question

3.2 Generic themes

Common themes arose within the majority of focus groups that transcended industry, differences between the age groups studied and their urban or regional geographic location. Industry or other group specific themes tended to be subsets of the more generic themes.

3.2.1 Determinants of continued workforce participation¹

In response to the questions regarding expectations related to future working life, the majority of participants cited financial responsibilities, particularly issues related to superannuation (reduced value, lack of opportunity to accumulate superannuation funds), and health as key determinants of their continued workforce participation.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you are 60 or 70 or whatever...if you can't afford to go on a pension, what do you do? (Participant 2A, Transport)

I'd basically retired and then the GFC hit me and I had to go back part-time (Participant 3B, Transport).

[Superannuation]... I don't have any. It's the land (Participant 6A, Agriculture)

Look at Super! I started my apprenticeship 34 years ago and I had never heard of it. So you just start slogging away. (Participant 5U, Construction).

This was followed by the contribution of work to their general quality of life as a function of job satisfaction and social support. Few participants voiced any definitive plans for retiring at a specific age.

I don't want to retire at x age, I'd like to get as much out of myself as I possibly can (Participant 1C, Construction)

I couldn't just stop working. Mentally, I honestly can't see myself ever fully retiring. My father and grandfather both kept doing some kind of work. (Participant 5U, Construction)

The majority of participants had considered the challenges of continuing to work in physically demanding industries as they age. While a minority of participants had already planned and initiated role changes in order to reduce day-to-day physical demands, the remaining majority of participants cited multiple barriers to reducing the physical demands of their roles. These barriers included the shortage of less physically demanding roles or tasks, and economic pressures precluding the purchasing of labour saving equipment or additional casual labour when required. Economic pressures, particularly for smaller businesses were also cited as barriers to absorbing the costs of employing older workers or training younger workers.

Can use cranes now. But money plays a role...they'll take a short cut rather than spend the money and save their backs and suffer the consequences for it (Participant 8C, Construction)

I know [where I work], we break rules all the time. I work in the country so we don't have the mechanical equipment in terms of loading and unloading (Participant 10E, Transport)

The shortage of appropriately trained and motivated younger workers entering each industry (agriculture, transport and construction) was also a consistently expressed reason for having to remain in the workforce and continue to engage in physically demanding tasks.

¹ See also Appendix II

In our job, a few years ago... the young ones would move into the industry and it was a cycle. But no new ones are coming on (Participant 7D, Transport)

There was always tradie trainees who could help with the physical work...the apprentices or trainees or whatever would come into the business and provide that manual labour...It meant the older workers could do more of the really involved, technical work and less manual labour (Participant 8A, Construction)

Now we see in our business, once upon a time the young guys coming through would do the labour intensive work but now we have to do it (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

Once when you were young it was your job and now you're old it's still your job. Because those young kids aren't coming through so you don't have the opportunity to do the easier jobs (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

While the majority of workers were amenable to the possibility of retraining, a significant minority was reluctant to consider retraining because of previous negative experiences with formal education, they lacked formal education, or because they considered themselves too old to adapt to change.

I have been doing it [working in construction] for 40 years, so what else do I do? (Participant 8D, Construction)

No, not really interested...they taught me nothing in school the first time! That's why I'm a truck driver (Participant 10C, Transport)

3.2.2 Acknowledgement of age-related physical decline and the importance of OH&S compliance

The majority of participants readily expressed their awareness of age-related physical and sensory decline and the concomitant importance of complying with occupational health and safety initiatives. Nevertheless, a significant minority also felt that they, and their cohort, sometimes overestimate their abilities, and are reluctant to admit health problems due to pride, or not wanting to be perceived as a liability. This was also accompanied by the caveat that awareness and acknowledgement of age-related decline and vigilant application of health and safety precautions tended to be a function of business size and worker seniority and responsibility.

We have a couple of people at work that are in their late 50s that are up on ladders... you are better off sending the young guys up there because they have more balance (Participant 1E, Construction)

If there is something wrong with them [an older worker] they aren't going to tell you half the time. They think they are going to lose their jobs (Participant 1E, Construction)

I know, I used to get up on the roof... You definitely lose your balance as you get older. Definitely (Participant 1E, Construction)

I keep finding that I've got to be very careful at heights, climbing ladders and that sort of stuff, I think once you get past 55 you've sort of gotta be very careful (Participant 3B, Transport)

Tell you what I get... Mechanics, Drivers... especially the elderly tend to...feel reluctant to voice their concerns. So I guess during testing times they don't want to be seen as a stand out in terms of... If they stand out, if the time was to come to cost cut and what have you. So they pretty much want to toe the company line (Participant 2E, Transport)

Self limitation was also acknowledged to be applied. For example, several truck drivers either raised or agreed in response to this theme that they no longer jump off their trucks for fear of injury.

Participants repeatedly noted that witnessing or experiencing an injury was a strong precipitant for increased safety awareness and positive behaviour change, along with observing significant reductions in injury following the introduction of health and safety initiatives. The psychologically damaging effects of pursuing a compensation claim through an adversarial legal system were also cited as a deterrent against health and safety non-compliance.

When there has been an accident, I have seen guys who really re-assess. But it has to happen to someone else before they actually think about it. Otherwise it's just smoko talk. And when they know somebody or are sitting around talking about somebody that it's happened to... it's an active discussion. And you can hear the way they are talking; they are really reaching out, thinking I'm not going to do this anymore. They are talking in such a different way, rather than protecting their egos in front of their mates (Participant 1A, Construction).

They are much more aware of back injuries and that now, than they used to be in the past. You know, in the past, you used to say, 'I've got a bit of a sore back' [Laughter] Now you say you have a bad back and now they say, 'right, you have to go to the doctors' and see the physio and fill out a report. I remember in the old days, there was none of that (Participant 1E, Construction).

Where I work, OHS has made a huge difference in the last say 7 years. Seven years ago we had 130 long term injuries a year. This year it's up to about 9. It's the big brother policy. It's just a dangerous place to work. If someone does the wrong thing, you are out. If you walk through a barrier, you are out the gate. You were explained the rule... and you have to. The barriers are there for a reason. Everybody abides by it...OHS has worked and it continues to work. It's really just the Big Brother policy and everyone looks out for each other (Participant 10D, Transport).

3.2.3 Perceptions of regulator activity to prevent injury^{2,3}

Dissatisfaction with some procedural aspects of OHS Regulatory efforts to prevent Workplace injury was consistently voiced, particularly around published guidance. This included inaccessible language used in publications, and reliance on soft-copy and internet-based distribution. There was also a strong perception that many current guidelines fail to

² In Victoria, where this research is conducted, workplace safety is regulated by WorkSafe

³ See also Appendix II

account for variations in the context of application. Participants expressed the view that the industry specific experience that older workers had accumulated could usefully contribute to formulating and applying logical and effective OH&S guidelines for their industry.

In general, the regulations that they bring in, are done by people who don't really have a clue about what the industry is, it's all done by people that work on computers...who've never physically done the job themselves.....they're changing an industry cause someone who works on a computer thinks they know better... (Participant 7C, Transport)

Everything looks good on computer and works on a computer [but] doesn't work on the floor (Participant 10D, Transport)

3.3 Industry specific themes

3.3.1 Agriculture

A key determinant of continued workforce participation in the agricultural industry, particularly farming as represented by 8/13 focus group participants, was reliance on land as the sole income source during retirement, which, due to a decline in primary production generally, may not be sold, or if sold, generates minimal return. More positively, the majority of agriculture workers also cited job satisfaction as a reason for continuing to work. Some were also reluctant to encourage the succession of their children into the industry due to what they believe to be its social and financial disadvantages.

I think there is pressure to get your sons away from farming too, whether it's for financial reasons or social reasons. Make more money and have their weekends free. More advantages [away from farming] (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

Participants in the agricultural groups believed themselves and their cohort to be generally mindful of the safety risks associated with their industry. Nevertheless, several barriers to ensuring the safety of workers (of any age) within the agricultural industry were identified. Foremost among these was that farming is an individualised pursuit, with many different ways of reaching the same outcome. This diversity of approaches, along with idiosyncrasies in topography and climate were said to make it difficult to provide occupational health and safety guidelines relevant to the applicable context. Participants also noted that with the individualist nature of farming also comes the burden of isolation, reinforced by unreliable mobile telephone reception, and absentee neighbours (who are often part-time hobby farmers).

On prompting with respect to other alerting devices with wider coverage than mobile phones the response was negative with the view expressed that they are easy to lose on a farm.

I think that's another thing to say... farmers are very much individuals, and they basically get to the same end result but they will do it 100 different ways [unlike other industries]...in farming, you can come at it from all different angles and end up with the same result (Participant 6D, Agriculture)

Farmers work on their own and that really means that there's no second person there if you have an accident with a post driver etc. [Nodding around the table] No one to find you if something that happens. Nature of the industry(Participant 6D, Agriculture)

.....if mobile phones work. In the hills they don't work, and you may have to leave it in the tractor (Participant 6C, Agriculture)

You might have a mobile phone but have no coverage (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

The majority of participants considered themselves and their cohort able to adapt to using modern, safer equipment, asserting instead that the biggest barriers to using modern, safer equipment are financial. They stated that much of the larger, more dangerous equipment is used infrequently and requires costly professional maintenance, expenses which they cannot absorb or pass on. Several participants also expressed a preference for completing the more hazardous tasks themselves rather than delegating such tasks fearing the repercussions if an employee is injured.

My old man was [reluctant to use new equipment at first], but he got used to it, takes a while but they soon adapt to it (Participant 6A, Agriculture)

There's a lot of technology out there in most agricultural industries now, but you have to be able to afford it, and secondly, making sure the employees that work with you use them. We have trouble with that sometimes (Participant 6D, Agriculture)

3.3.2 Transport

While many participants in the transport industry noted the lack of part-time roles as a barrier to continued workforce participation, they also stated that the physical demands, particular for delivery drivers, had been significantly reduced by technological advances in equipment (e.g., cranes on trucks and the introduction of cable curtains, eliminating the need for gates in many instances).

In my industry they are [changing things]. They are already going on cranes, putting cranes on the trucks (Participant 2F, Transport)

Actually, it's funny you say that cause... see trucks, I mean all you guys... any of you guys drive [type of truck] here? Now, like a lot of times they have gates, like safety gates that you lift on between your deliveries. And I think now, funny you say that, OHS is really jumping on it cause now they have brought out that cable curtain (Participant 2A)

They are more expensive though (Participant 2F)

[2A] But they save peoples backs. Like my gates, they are 20kg each, and I lift them off and on about 20 times a day, and they are 20kg a pop, you know what I mean? I can do it now, cause I'm younger, but like, when you start getting older... you just think for every delivery you got to take them on and off and put them on the side (Participant 2A, Transport)

Now these vans where they lower down, well they're just brilliant...people they used to have to try and lift and slide and off they go, but now there's some brilliant things saving people (Participant 3B, Transport)

3.3.3 Construction

In addition to the generic determinants of continued workforce participation, several workers from the construction industry noted the vulnerability of the construction industry to the vagaries of the national economic climate. Many participants also noted the lack of less physically demanding roles and the perceived ageism of employers as precluding the continued participation of older workers.

...to get work after 45 is drying out ...They look at you as a risk factor (Participant 4F, Construction)

The nature of this sector is that it is somewhat cyclical... and what is good today may not be what is good for tomorrow...the construction industry is also a barometer for this country... it is one of the drivers. As things tighten up on a national basis...as commercial activity contracts, the effects are seen right throughout. So the question about how long you might be in the industry is very difficult to answer, because it depends on many factors outside the control of the industry itself(Participant 4B, Construction)

Challenges to the safety of older workers specific to the construction industry included site foremen pressuring older workers to maintain the same speed of output as their younger colleagues, and the inability to hire someone to assist with manual labour for less than six hours work, resulting in increased physical risk-taking. Some workers also noted the lack of union representation and influence within smaller companies, and the risks of working with unfamiliar subcontractors.

...a lot of pressure can be put on older workers to try and keep up... work, work, work, work... want to make a profit. The older generation try to keep up with the younger generation (Participant 4D, Construction)

I think you are introducing sub-contractors too. So you are constantly interacting with people you may not have worked with before, or you don't know how they treat safety and if they are actually increasing your risk on site. Quite a transient area to work in (Participant 5U, Construction)

Smaller companies were also perceived as being seen to comply with OH&S operating procedures but failing to apply said procedures.

OHS policies in a lot of smaller companies are documents that just sit on a shelf...I do know of companies where they have the documentation and it has been drawn up by OHS experts but they are just documents sitting on a bookshelf(Participant 1A, Construction)
Stamped 2001.(Participant 1D, Construction)
Yeah. And then when they want to update it for 2002, the binding gets pulled out and liquid papered over and the 2002 is put over it.(Participant 1A, Construction)

3.4 Age specific themes

Themes relating specifically to age were also identified.

3.4.1The younger worker problem

A persistent theme throughout the majority of groups was the inability to attract younger workers to manually intensive roles. This was attributed to younger workers being poorly skilled due to the dissolution of adequate training pathways, the general undervaluing of trades careers, and the perceived unwillingness of younger workers to tolerate physical labour. Specifically, many participants were critical of the closing of technical colleges and what they perceived to be the indiscriminate pushing of younger people into “dead end” university degrees. Several participants stated that they had seen many younger workers attempt to enter trades after failing to obtain employment post-university. The trend toward group training in the few remaining institutions was also viewed as inadequate due to the

disturbing trend for apprentices to be used as labourers rather than receiving skill-focused training.

Participants also noted an increasing preference for hiring overseas labour rather than training local younger workers. Many participants stated they were reluctant to hire younger workers, perceiving them to be poorly skilled and unmotivated, unreliable, non-compliant with OH&S regulations, and too difficult to dismiss if unsuitable, because of unfair dismissal legislation. A specific, frequently cited complaint against younger workers was behaviours that increase the risk of injury on site. For example, use of mobile phones while working in already hazardous contexts (e.g., scaffolding or mixing chemicals).

I know in my industry, the younger ones don't want to do it, and it's too hard, not enough money. As much as we would like to employ younger workers...the older ones have the skills which we would like to transfer to the younger workers but they aren't really interested (Participant 5U, Construction)

The younger ones today don't have the work ethic of 30-40 years ago (Participant 6C, Agriculture)

Agriculture at the moment is being really pinched from all quarters, so the actual return on your asset is minimal, so there's no way you're going to encourage young people to get in the industry...to work their backsides off for 7 days a week for 12-14 hours a day and get minimal reward for it (Participant 6D, Agriculture)

I think it's because they closed all the bloody trades' schools. Now there are no more trades. So kids who weren't going to be doctors or lawyers could go to school and learn electronics and that (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

There's no laws that ban mobile phones on site and I've seen some horrible things. People on their phones and they don't know what's going on above them (Participant 1C, Construction)

Its mixing chemicals too. Like if you're mixing chemicals on site and someone stops to answer a text from a girlfriend... it's the young blokes that are doing it. I don't think it's really the old guys...It's the mixing chemicals that scares the hell out of me, but how do you stop it? (Participant 1A, Construction)

I think they do think that they don't want to get injured, so they don't do things they shouldn't in general, whereas the young people do and one of the major problems we find on site is that they're always on the phone texting, no matter what job they're doing...I actually ban phones... three warnings, you can go home, because I've had a guy fall because he was texting...the younger guys up to about 30, they're the problem ones, they're not concentrating, they're always texting, they don't think about their fellow workers (Participant 8E, Construction).

3.4.2 Age range differences

Themes specific to the two participant age ranges emerged. Participants in the 45-54 year old age range more frequently endorsed the possibility of retraining, and perceived themselves as more adaptable to change and comfortable with information technology.

Retraining is hard too, because as you get older it's hard to learn new things. Depends on what your baseline is. For me, I have been on computers for a while so it's probably easier for me. For others, if they have been in the trade their whole life, they have never had the need to use computers (Participant 5U, Construction)

By the same token, because we are so tech savvy, this generation, we are probably more adaptable to changes. Online training or DVD training. We would be more open minded for that (Participant 1B, Construction)

Participants in the 55-65 year age range more frequently expressed concerns about their superannuation status than the younger group.

3.5 Geographic themes

Of the geographic themes that emerged, all were primarily related to the transport industry.

3.5.1 Metropolitan

Several participants in the metropolitan transport groups expressed concerns about their ability to cope as they age with the stress of, and hazards associated with increasing traffic congestion and did not see GPS systems as a viable solution. A significant minority commented on the reliance of younger transport workers on GPS systems, which they noted is impractical in metropolitan areas because traffic is not usually accounted for in the choice of route, and the signal may be poor and interrupted by high rise buildings.

Just going on that, probably, basically, the only thing I can see with my job, what I do. Like I'm only a driver, I've got forklifts that take it off and on, so there's no physical work at all. But, living in such a congested city as we do, at the age of 45, by the end of a 10 or 12 hour day in that traffic, it doesn't stop... from 6 o'clock to 4 o'clock the whole streets are just clogged. It's shocking. And I do feel it, at my age. When I get home, I'm just exhausted. Cause you are just sitting and focusing. So I reckon if I feel it now at the age of 45. Ten years ago, it wasn't as bad... (Participant 2A, Transport)

But you would be able to teach younger guys how to drive, how to secure loads, how to get to places [in response to how to use older workers appropriately in the future]. Young ones come in now and you say 'do you know Melbourne' and they say, yeah, I've got a GPS. That's the standard answer now. But they wouldn't know how to get to A to B in peak hour traffic (Participant 10C, Transport)

3.5.2 Regional⁴

Regional transport focus groups were vocal about their dissatisfaction with the current log book system and expressed the view that it impacts as a deterrent to young workers entering the industry, and, by extension, lack of young workers means older ones are

⁴ See also Appendix II

continuing to perform more labour intensive work. They cited numerous examples of how the inflexibility of the regulations encouraged increased risk taking, such as speeding and driving while fatigued. There was strong agreement among the transport groups that the current log book stipulations are inappropriate for long haul driving in Australia. Related issues included the perception of current log book infringement fines being overly severe.

Logbook laws are ridiculous. This is why young people don't want to do it, and older people have to keep working...my son the other week...because his logbook overlapped by an hour in a 24 hour period he got an \$840 fine even though he'd had the required 8 hours sleep...(Participant 7C, Transport)

3.6 Suggested improvements

Participants within each group were also forthcoming with suggestions for improving the safety of older workers, lengthening workforce participation, and increasing compliance with OH&S legislation and cooperation with regulatory activity. These improvements related to older workers in general, as well as within specific industries.

3.6.1 Generic

Several participants suggested more regular, subsidised medical checks for older workers in physically demanding industries that monitor sensory decline in addition to other health indicators. The introduction of compulsory physical exercise on each shift, and variation in tasks to decrease repetition was also suggested.

With regards to lengthening workforce participation, participants suggested tackling ageism by educating employers about the benefits of employing older workers, and the provision of subsidised retraining combined with continued part-time work.

what the government need to do is create incentives for companies to take on older workers... older people have benefits – don't take as many sick days, more reliable.... it's a very gradual process whereby people... traditionally find it much harder, regardless of their trade to get a job than those who are 25 or 35 despite the information coming out about the advantages of hiring older workers.... It's all about education, creating incentives... obviously health comes into it... and part of education... certain departments are more risky than others...got to create the environment...to enable older people to have the same level of opportunities as a 25 year old (Participant 4B, Construction)

Suggestions for increasing compliance with OH&S legislation through more effective regulatory activity and broader more proactive approaches to meet older worker safety needs included the distribution of shorter, hard copy publications in “plain English”. Proactive utilisation of the knowledge and experience of older workers during formulation of industry specific regulations, and attempts to provide regulations appropriate to the specific context of application was also suggested. Several participants expressed an interest in more positive advertising and education focusing specifically on risks to older workers as a way of increasing awareness and OH&S compliance among their cohort.

...put the rules and regulations in plain language... [currently] written in university language...everything's about outcomes and warm and fuzzy language... needs to be straightforward...plainer English (Participant 8B, Construction)

You could extend that [the WorkSafe ads] with hearing. Obviously instead of visuals, it could be someone couldn't hear and got clocked on the head with a piece of timber or... you can see all the scare campaigns trying to educate so, if you work that stuff in, it could be very powerful (Participant 1A, Construction)

3.6.2 Industry specific

Agriculture

Participants within the agriculture groups suggested the need for increased training in use of farm vehicles and machinery. They also suggested consultancy as an option for older agriculture workers who would like to move into a less physically demanding role. The introduction of incentives (e.g., \$1000 per property) for farmers to receive and implement safety advice was also suggested; that is, to assist individuals to obtain specialist advice specific to their individual needs and subsidise the cost of implementing this advice. To avoid some of the hard and risky tasks for older farmers, and the added risk of working alone, a subsidy for the first employee was suggested. Farmers also indicated that they are becoming more socially isolated as their communities change, and that a sense of community could be fostered by conducting accessible safety field days in their area, which would be very well received and attended (though preferably not on a particular farm as too much scrutiny could be perceived as threatening).

What about a voucher, \$1000 voucher, to have a mechanic to have a look at your equipment and make recommendations about how to improve the safety? (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

What about a subsidy for your first employee? If you could have someone for a reasonable price? (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

I think awareness is the thing. If you had a function with a guest speaker it might encourage people to come along and listen. And then you could have someone there from WorkSafe saying that maybe you need someone to come along and look at your equipment in case some of it [could lead to] being a disaster (Participant 9U, Agriculture)

Transport

In regard to continued workforce participation, consultancy, teaching roles, sales and customer service, storeman, and public transport positions were suggested as roles suited to older transport workers. Many participants suggested that while reinstatement of the previous logbook system would be preferable, at the very least, the current log book system should be made easier for older workers to use so that drivers are less likely to inadvertently violate the rules. In order to attract younger workers as truck drivers (and to reduce the labour intensive work for older ones) they also suggested that fines should be progressive and reflect the severity of infringement. Increased education of non-professional road users (i.e., car drivers and cyclists) on how to interact with trucks on the road was also suggested.

Even if the log books were electronic in some sort of device and [could] bring up an error and then could correct you and that way you wouldn't unknowingly break the rules and get fined (Participant 7B, Transport)

Construction

Participants within the construction groups were keen to see a significant increase in the support of training in trades for young people within the education system. A variety of suggestions to increase and lengthen older worker participation was also offered, including;

financial incentives to retain older workers in less demanding roles (e.g., wage subsidies or payroll tax exemption), the utilisation of older workers' knowledge and experience in consultancy and teaching roles, and assisting older workers to "get off the tools" and move into management, estimating, purchasing, sales, or "spotting" roles.

In the domestic outer suburbs, they can't afford to have a labourer on site continually cleaning up.... If the government could subsidise the older worker that can't do a normal day's work but can clean up, who might have a slight injury or is just getting a bit old...good for the site and everybody working on the site, and giving the older worker some work (Participant 4E, Construction)

4. Discussion

This study is the third of three related studies in a program of research on older worker safety conducted by the Monash University Department of Forensic Medicine:

- *Older worker fatalities* [10];
- *Preparedness of industry for the safety of the ageing workforce: An industry perspective* [9]; and
- *Preparedness of industry for the safety of the ageing workforce: A worker perspective.*

The primary aims of the current study were to obtain, using focus group methodology, the opinions and attitudes of workers in defined high risk industries in relation to their future work intentions, age related occupational health and safety challenges, and suggested improvements to overcome these challenges.

Prior to this study, there was no Victorian information from the perspective of older workers themselves on their safety in their future working lives and little information from elsewhere. This study is a first step to filling this gap, through allowing an assessment of older workers' opinions and ideas and examining those in the context of the scientific literature and the views of industry representatives [9].

This section of the report firstly addresses the focus group themes of most direct relevance to the study aims, followed by review and discussion of themes considered to be of indirect relevance to these aims. Although themes of a more general nature that also emerged may be of interest, they are not taken forward in the discussion. However, these general concerns have been reported in the results section to maintain the integrity of the research and so that potentially useful information from the study will not be lost. For example general concerns about OH&S guidelines, regulations and enforcement that are not specifically confined to older workers may be useful to OH&S agencies more generally.

Several relevant generic themes emerged within all, or the majority, of focus groups and these are discussed below. In addition, a number of general consistencies emerged with regard to issues raised by the current study and industry representative interviews (employers, unions, industry associations and researchers) reported in the second of these three studies listed above [9]. However, focus group points of view varied from strong similarity to quite different perspectives on these issues.

Solutions to some of the issues raised are somewhat elusive. Based on a systematic review published in 2010, Crawford et al [3] identified no studies that evaluated strategies to reduce injuries in older workers. Given this general lack of proven effective interventions, recommendations from the current study are placed in the context of current thinking as reported in the literature and/or in the context of the principles of injury prevention, such as Haddon's ten countermeasures [11].

4.1 Common directly relevant themes

Generic common themes addressed by both the present worker study and the industry representative study included:

4.1.1 Ageing of the workforce

An awareness of the ageing workforce as an issue was evident within each industry and a general acknowledgement that changes in the demographics of the workforce needed to be addressed.

A review of mean ages of the Australian workforce generally and that of the three industries studied confirmed that the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing industry has the highest share of mature age workers aged 55 years and over (31.0% in 2009). The share of workers aged less than 35 years is also the lowest compared with other industries (22.1 per cent) [12]. The median age of farmers in Victoria was 52 years in 2006 [13].

Compared to the general working population, Transport, Postal and Warehousing Industry workers are older, with a median age of 43.3 years compared with the average for all industries of 39.0 years. The industry has the fourth largest proportion of workers aged 45 years and older, with 46.4% compared with an economy wide average of 38.5% [14].

Although the Construction industry has a relatively young workforce (median age of 36.5 years), lower than that of the overall workforce (39 years), some occupations within the industry such as glaziers, painters, and bricklayers/stonemasons have an older profile, with average ages of 43.5, 42.5 and 40.5 years respectively [15].

The majority of focus group participants were keen to continue to participate in their industry in some capacity as long as they were able to and offered views on the value of older workers, such as experience. The value of older workers is supported by a 2012 Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry publication [16], which indicates several advantages in retaining (or employing) mature workers (aged from 45 or 50 years – not clarified).

Mature aged workers:

- provide return on human capital investment through significant length of service, investment in training and wealth of accumulated experience;
- have networks, external interests and experiences that can add value to a business;
- are often more loyal and stay longer in a business;
- mirror the changing age of customers and the community within the workforce; and
- often hold the corporate memory with lessons of experience, often not recorded, available to be imparted to younger workers.

Indeed the focus group study participants reflect some of these points in that their mean length of time spent in their current employment was 13 years (range 9 months to 48 years) (section 3.1).

4.1.2 Barriers to retirement

Barriers to older worker retirement were addressed by both industry representatives and workers and there was considerable commonality in their respective views.

Industry representatives: This was expressed somewhat negatively by some participants as “resistance by some employees to retire”. Workers were seen to stay on after they probably should have retired for financial reasons, including having accumulated insufficient superannuation funds during their working life (particularly expressed by participants in the 55-64 years focus groups) and because of a psychological need to continue to work. It was also acknowledged by most industry representatives that opportunities for part-time work, flexibility in rosters, or retraining were limited and this contributed to older workers continuing to work full-time when not physically capable or fatigued.

Workers: Most participants cited financial reasons, the fulfilment provided by work and the lack of capable younger workers as the principle barriers to retirement. Of key concern was their level of superannuation (reduced value due to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), lack of opportunity to accumulate superannuation funds) or the absence of superannuation with their land being their sole source of retirement income (farmers).

Workers, particularly in the agriculture and transport industries did not believe that they could encourage their sons to enter their industries for a variety of reasons, including poor financial

returns and security, and regulations and penalties that they consider not to match the context of their application. In the case of older owner operators in the transport industry and farmers, this reduction in succession planning options was reported as a barrier to retirement.

4.1.3 Barriers and facilitators to older worker retention in the workforce

Inflexibility in working hours and a lack of part-time roles in the transport industry were raised by both industry and workers as a barrier to continued workforce participation. This was accompanied by an appreciation by workers of the reduction in physical demands allowed by recent technological advances in equipment, where these were available to them (but was not the case for some participants).

Workers from the construction industry were particularly concerned about the shortage of less physically demanding roles, unrealistic expectations placed upon older workers by foremen, and inconsistent attention to, and compliance with OH&S regulations across smaller companies. It was reported that site foremen pressure older workers to maintain the same speed of output as their younger colleagues, though no similar concerns were raised in industry representative interviews.

Financial incentives to retain older workers in less demanding roles such as wage subsidies were suggested by workers with the advantages of utilizing older workers knowledge and experience, and, according to the participants, less costly than pensions or workers compensation.

While this seems, at face value to be a viable option, in his examination of public policy developments Taylor [2] concludes that, despite their popularity with policy makers, employment subsidies seem to be of limited use, except perhaps where paid to the worker directly. He also queries the value of cost savings in terms of pension and social security benefits and increased tax revenue, as this would be offset by training and placement costs.

However, Taylor's main focus is on extending working life and the need to mainstream and integrate policy on age with activities of all areas of government [2]. He does not specifically address safety considerations for older workers nor the specific purposes of the recommendations put forward by older workers in this study.

4.1.4 Re-deployment or re-training

Industry representatives: Concerns were expressed about low educational achievements of older workers limiting future retraining for less physically demanding jobs.

Workers: This view was shared by some workers despite there being general concern among the older workers about their physical capacity to continue in their present job. However, some others had retrained within their industry to undertake administrative or management jobs.

There were differences between the age ranges of workers (i.e., 45-54 and 55-65 years) with greater acceptability of the possibility of retraining among the younger group.

The low level of educational achievement of workers identified in these studies is supported by the demographic information collected for the current focus group study participants where for 56%, their highest level of education was year 11 or below (section 3.1). Data from Australian government sources also supports these concerns:

- Nationally, levels of educational attainment are relatively low within the agriculture industry, and although formal qualifications are becoming increasingly important, 51.6 per cent of workers had no post school qualifications in May 2009, compared with 38.7 per cent for all industries [12].
- The proportion of workers in the construction industry who have completed a post-school qualification (a certificate, diploma, bachelor degree or post-graduate

qualification) is almost identical to the all industries average (62.6 per cent compared with 62.3 per cent). However, most had obtained a Certificate III and IV (42.2 per cent compared to the 19.9 per cent all-industry average) reflecting the pivotal importance of trade-level skills in this industry [17].

- Educationally, the transport industry is relatively low skilled, with just over half of employees not having more than high school qualifications [15], which has implications for redeployment options should a worker be unable to continue in their current job.

4.1.5 Workers Compensation issues

There was agreement that the current workers' compensation system works against the employment of older workers.

Industry representatives: There was a general awareness of the impact of a lifetime of heavy physical labour on the current health of many older workers and potential for chronic musculo-skeletal conditions. Particular concern was expressed about the workers compensation liabilities for degenerative musculo-skeletal conditions which fall on the last employer, and act as a disincentive to employing older workers.

Workers: There was also a common perception among workers of a marked reluctance to employ older workers in the transport and construction industries, reporting a lack of less physically demanding roles and the perceived ageism of employers as precluding the continued participation of older workers.

Participants reported that their physical abilities (e.g. strength and balance) and senses such as hearing decline with age, but they are reluctant to report their safety concerns or injuries for fear of losing their job. These declines were supported by a UK systematic review of relevant literature [3].

Pursuing a compensation claim through the legal system was cited as psychologically damaging, but also a deterrent against health and safety non-compliance. Further, in keeping with Pollock's research findings (see safety management systems below) [22], but somewhat contrary to a study of the barriers to the adoption of safety in the agriculture industry [24], participating farmers indicated that they prefer to do the more hazardous tasks themselves for fear of the consequences of a worker taking risks and being killed.

4.1.6 OH&S issues

General

Industry representatives: There was a general assumption that the safety needs of older workers will be covered by any safety initiatives undertaken within an industry.

Workers: While there was agreement that OH&S measures had contributed greatly to the improved safety of their industries and, in some cases, placed less restrictions on their ability to continue to work for longer, many older workers considered that they had specific safety and workability needs that require attention because of the vulnerabilities that accompany ageing.

A 2010 systematic review identified a number of older age related physical and psychological changes, though it found these could be moderated by physical and intellectual activities, experience, and lifestyle factors [3]. Similarly, that review concluded that some declining sensory abilities can be accommodated via equipment or workplace adjustments. While this may be achievable in the future, it is clearly not yet reflected sufficiently in fatal and severe injury figures for older workers in Australia [10].

Computer literacy

According to focus group participants, much OH&S information provided by WorkSafe requires Internet access and the material available is lengthy and complex. There was an

expressed need across all three industries for accessible information in simple hard copy form. This suggests that the platform for communication with older workers should be tailored to meet their needs.

Broader examination of the issue of internet access among older persons indicates, from Australian Bureau of Statistics data, that in 2006 persons aged 55 years and above had less internet access than younger age groups [18]. Of Australians aged 55 years and over, 51% did not have access to an internet connection compared to younger persons (5 years of age and above), where only 29% did not have access [18].

Few studies were found that focus specifically on information and communications technology (ICT) and older workers. One such study found that older workers make less use of ICT in their job, use less complicated applications and have more difficulties in using it compared with younger workers [19]. It was concluded that this is to their disadvantage as the level of use appears to affect performance positively. However, this study was conducted in industries unrelated to agriculture, transport and construction and may not apply to the industries addressed in the current study. Another study conducted in the UK, found that older workers embody less computer skills than younger workers, but that this does not negatively offset wages of older workers [20]. However, the study does not address other aspects of the older worker labour market position – which may be more pertinent than wages. Importantly, low computer skills are likely to limit retraining options for older workers.

On a positive note, there was widespread agreement among the focus group participants that the current TV advertisements about returning home safely are compelling and that similar advertisements should be made, specifically targeting older workers and their common age specific safety issues (such as hearing and balance).

Management of safety issues

Issues regarding management of safety issues differed between industries and between urban and regional workers. While regional transport focus group participants expressed concerns about meeting log book requirements, no participants mentioned the accreditation programs for Basic Fatigue Management or Advanced Fatigue Management which would allow more flexible hours (and therefore more flexible logbook arrangements) [21]. It is therefore assumed that they were working to the Standard Hours⁵ (12 working hours per day) and it is unknown whether or not these workers were aware of the accreditation programs or whether they believed these applied to them or would meet their needs⁶.

Urban transport groups expressed concern about fatigue associated with increasing traffic congestion, although they were unable to suggest any solutions to managing what appears to be a relatively intransigent problem.

Consistent with industry representative interviews, older agriculturalists reported not commonly using newer equipment – not due to poor adaptation to new technology, but rather for economic reasons. The majority of farmers in the focus groups either did not have a problem with adjusting to new, more technically complex equipment or did not consider that this would be a problem.

This was also consistent with Pollock [22], who found increased cost efficiency was a key motivator for safety change, most commonly through improved machinery. She suggested if

⁵The conditions and calculations are complex as set out in the Victorian Bus and Truck Driver's Handbook Roads Corporation, Victoria, Australia (Nov 2009)[11].

⁶The Standard Hours option for solo drivers sets out minimum rest and maximum work hours and includes basic record keeping requirements. Basic Fatigue Management accreditation allows up to 14 working hours and gives operators a greater say in when they can work and rest providing the risks of working long hours and nights are properly managed.

it can be shown that new machinery will increase profitability, with increased safety as a by-product, then, this can be used to promote the need for new machinery on farms.

Also in reference to older farmers (aged 55 years and older), Pollock's research found they scored higher than younger counterparts on their perceptions of farm health and safety in contrast to literature suggesting they are "set in their ways" and suggested this needs to be taken on board in considering the promotion and extension of farm safety information material [22]. However, they scored lower on their control of major safety hazards and safety management systems which indicates that while older farmers acknowledge the risks, they are failing to act accordingly.

Concerns were expressed by focus group participants about their limited access to safety information (see section 3.2.3), a potentially important barrier to implementing safety management systems.

In the case of the agriculture focus groups, farmers made specific recommendations:

- Local farm safety days are needed and would be well attended if they were available and well publicised [If farm safety days were available locally, study participants were not aware of them]. With the increasing isolation of farmers, particularly older farmers, community gatherings are welcomed and farmers are keen to learn first-hand about OH&S.
- Older farmers seek a system of advice and incentives to assist with implementation with regard to the safety of their farm equipment, which has often grown old with them.

Incentives to assist farmers with their safety needs were suggested by workers, for example, to have a mechanic check farmers' equipment and to fund improving its safety, or to fund the first employee on a farming property to avoid the situation of older workers, with their recognized high vulnerability to severe injury and death, having to work alone – often out of mobile phone contact – and to assist with physically demanding tasks. There is evidence of incentives being effective in encouraging the uptake of ROPS by farmers [23], though no interventions have been evaluated for the specific measures raised by the focus group participants.

A small 2006 study commissioned by the Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC), addressed barriers to the adoption of safety in the agriculture industry. While the ASCC study did not focus specifically on older workers, it did find that farmers' attitudes towards safety on the farm represent a significant barrier to improvements in OH&S [24]. This is somewhat contrary to the findings of the current study where participants sought OH&S improvements. This ASCC finding is also questioned by Pollock [22].

The manner in which legislation and regulations are written was of strong concern to focus group participants and is of relevance to safety management. Participant older workers strongly expressed the view that the knowledge and experience of older workers should be used proactively during the formulation of industry specific regulations to assist in providing regulations appropriate to the specific context of their application. As a result of her extensive research on farm safety Pollock raised a number of related questions including: "Are there modifications that can be made to legislation that can make compliance more straightforward for the farmer?" "Are the regulations sensible, practical and realistic?"

4.2 Significant theme of indirect relevance

4.2.1 Younger workers

Younger workers are relevant to this discussion because the workforce is generally ageing, more markedly than average in the agriculture and transport industries, and intergenerational differences between workers may be a factor contributing to safety concerns for older workers. While there is a generally agreed need for more young workers

to enter all three of the high risk industries studied, particularly to reduce the amount of hard physical labour currently required of older workers, to gain knowledge and skills from older workers, and to eventually replace older workers, many barriers were also identified both in the studies and in the literature.

Research undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence supports anecdotal evidence that many young workers and employers have little or no knowledge about the impact of generational differences at work. Generational differences were an area of particular interest with over 50% of employers believing that workshops providing further information would be useful, and just over 40% of young workers also wanted to learn about these differences [26].

Industry representatives: Expressed their view that there is a need to attract younger people into their industries, but also recognised some of the barriers to older workers leaving the workforce.

Workers: A consistently expressed age-related theme was the perception of younger workers as poorly skilled and unmotivated, primarily attributed to the lack of clear trade training pathways. The tendency for younger workers to use mobile phones in hazardous contexts was also consistently raised, as was their general low level of responsibility and performance on the job.

The lack of young workers was a consistent reason given for older workers needing to continue to do hard physical work, whereas their expectations had been that younger workers would take over the more demanding physical tasks – a working life cycle that had existed during their earlier working lives.

The perceived unsuitability of younger workers was not mentioned by industry representatives [9] but is consistent with issues acknowledged by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA) with regard to the likelihood of current underemployment or unemployment persisting without additional skills training [25].

The need to increase the support for training in trades for young people within the education system as identified by participants is supported by the AWPA report [25]. Participants were concerned about pathways in secondary education and for early school leavers, which do not seem to be a focus in the report's recommendations. Potential training and mentoring roles for older workers are suggested both by the current study and the literature [27], to bridge the various gaps between older and younger workers, including skills training, passing-on of general experience and contributing to moderating generational differences [26].

4.3 Strengths and limitations

- To our knowledge, this was the first exploration of older workers perceptions of their future work intentions, age related occupational health and safety challenges, and suggested improvements to overcome these challenges.
- In providing an assessment of a sample of older workers' opinions and ideas on these issues, this study assists in filling a gap in knowledge.
- The study findings were variably: (1) supported by literature; (2) raised doubts over previous findings; (3) or were new findings not previously identified by studies.
- The study sample was small (63 participants) compared with the thousands of older workers in the three industries studied, though other studies of this type also tend to have small samples, including, for example, the AWPA focus group study of only 37 participants [25].

- The study was further limited by the sample sizes being lower than expected⁷
- It is possible that the recruitment process introduced volunteer bias, though other possible recruitment processes may have been less efficient, or been considered coercive by ethics committees and therefore not approved.
- Although many common themes emerged from the focus group discussions, topic exhaustion was not necessarily achieved due to the limited number of focus groups that could be conducted with the resources available and the wide range of diversity in specific occupations and geographical differences within the three industries investigated.
- Focus group methodology precludes confident generalisation, therefore further research is required to strengthen or refute the findings of this study for these and other high risk industries.

4.4 Implications of findings

The current cohort of male older workers in the high risk industries studied here appears, from the available evidence, to be disadvantaged on several fronts and to have special OH&S needs. Increased injury incidence in older workers appears to be related to tasks where basic capacities are increasingly exceeded by job demands as workers age, and for which experience cannot compensate [7]. The cohort of most concern appears, from this study and from the literature, to particularly include workers currently aged approximately 50 years and above (with no upper limit).

Features common to this cohort include an increased risk of work-related fatal and severe injury, a lifetime of hard physical labour, low educational achievements, lower than average information technology skills, limited options for retraining, limited exposure to superannuation savings, and limited recognition in the workplace of their age-related physical and sensory limitations. Given that the majority of this cohort seems destined to remain in the workforce at least until they reach pension eligibility (65-67 years), targeted OH&S measures are needed to meet their unique circumstances.

These findings are contrary to the prevailing view that general OH&S measures sufficiently meet the needs of older workers. Some of these findings require immediate attention and, although the current study is small and not necessarily representative of all older workers in the agriculture, transport and construction industries it should be used as a springboard for further consultation and action and additional research where necessary.

Some interventions to meet the OH&S needs of the current cohort of older workers fall directly within the Regulator's jurisdiction and others may require collaboration with other sectors, particularly industry.

Future cohorts of older workers

Longer term solutions, some of which are already in place, may largely prevent such a disadvantaged cohort from emerging in the future. These longer term strategies will require the provision of life-long learning policies and opportunities [2], adequate skills training and

⁷Following advice from the Social Research Unit at WorkSafe Victoria, the recruitment methods were modified following project commencement to employ a recruitment company as a means of achieving adequate participant recruitment. Despite this strategy, the final number of participants was below expectation. An example of where the recruitment strategy was unsuccessful was advising to hold an earlier meeting for the rural agriculture groups as they are early risers; however participants advised the researchers that dairy farmers would have still been working when the meeting was scheduled in a dairy farming region.

recruitment pathways for young workers to ensure their employment and their flexibility to adapt to changing roles throughout their working life [25], and adequate superannuation savings to support retirement or to supplement government pensions.

Recommendations for future strategies to avoid the linked issues of workability and older worker safety associated with the current older worker cohort occurring in future cohorts of older workers are broad-reaching and many transcend the workplace. While WorkSafe may be the lead player in developing and promoting innovation in OH&S, it will remain an important player amongst several in integrated inter-sectoral policy developments and their implementation.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The issues raised in this study are wide-ranging and provide, for the first time in Victoria, a considerable depth of information on the concerns of older workers regarding the preparedness of their industries (agriculture, transport and construction) for the safety of the ageing workforce and the retention of older workers in the workforce. The key determinants of continued workforce participation identified were financial and health related, followed by the shortage of skilled and motivated younger workers entering physically demanding industries, and the satisfaction provided by working. Recognition of age-related physical decline and the perceived value and success of OH&S initiatives in relieving aspects of hard physical labour, and potentially extending their working life were also consistently acknowledged.

Older workers in these industries face barriers to both retirement and to continuing in the workforce. This appears to be exacerbated for the current cohort of older workers, from about age 50 years and extending past the current 'retirement age' of 65 years. Issues related to younger workers appear to compound some of the threats to older worker well-being.

Some of the issues associated with older workers appear able to be mitigated for the next age group by factors such as greater computer literacy and a longer period of contributing to superannuation and so approaches to older worker safety will differ for the different age cohorts.

There are many potential recommendations from this study, but the following have been selected for their importance and potential for implementation, while acknowledging that there are no proven effective interventions for the issues identified in this study [3]. Recommendations are in two parts, for: the current cohort of older workers (aged around 50 years and older); and future cohorts of older workers.

Recommendations

Current cohort of older workers (aged around 50 years and older)

1. Reduce injury risk associated with ongoing hard physical labour and declining strength, balance, sensory and cognitive skills by:
 - Exploring approaches to more flexible working arrangements for older workers such as part-time employment and less physically demanding and fatiguing roles e.g. roles in the recruitment, training, and mentoring of young workers;
 - Considering retraining or re-deployment possibilities for older workers to less physically demanding jobs, with part-time options;
 - Actively discouraging older workers from working, and their employers from permitting them to work, at heights or in other risky environments with regard to physical and sensory decline, including by means of social marketing advertisements;
 - Meeting older workers OH&S information needs, by accessible means including hard copy simple information, local farm safety days, training in the application of fatigue management systems;
 - Considering the provision of advice and incentives to assist older farmers with farm safety improvements e.g. to ageing farm machinery; or subsidizing the employment of a first employee;
 - Actively encouraging and supporting the recruitment of younger workers into the agriculture, transport and construction industries.
2. Engage with both older workers and the young worker sector to moderate between the needs of both groups to facilitate transition to safer and less physically demanding roles for older workers.
3. Explore the potential to review aspects of the workers' compensation system which may discourage the employment of older workers.

Future cohorts of older workers

1. Provide lifelong learning programs to update trade specific and general technical skills and proficiencies (e.g. in ICT), including providing the capacity for workers to retrain and change occupations during their working life.
2. Review the accessibility for young people of pathways to skilled employment in the construction and transport industries. Are there adequate pathways for early school leavers?
3. Facilitate superannuation savings systems or similar for farmers to provide alternative income streams to the farm as the sole source of income in their old age.
4. Provide meaningful forums and processes for ongoing input of expertise and experience by older workers to relevant policy making and compliance matters.
5. Conduct further older worker focussed research to strengthen, refute, refine and broaden the findings of this study to improve the safety of older workers in these and other high risk industries.

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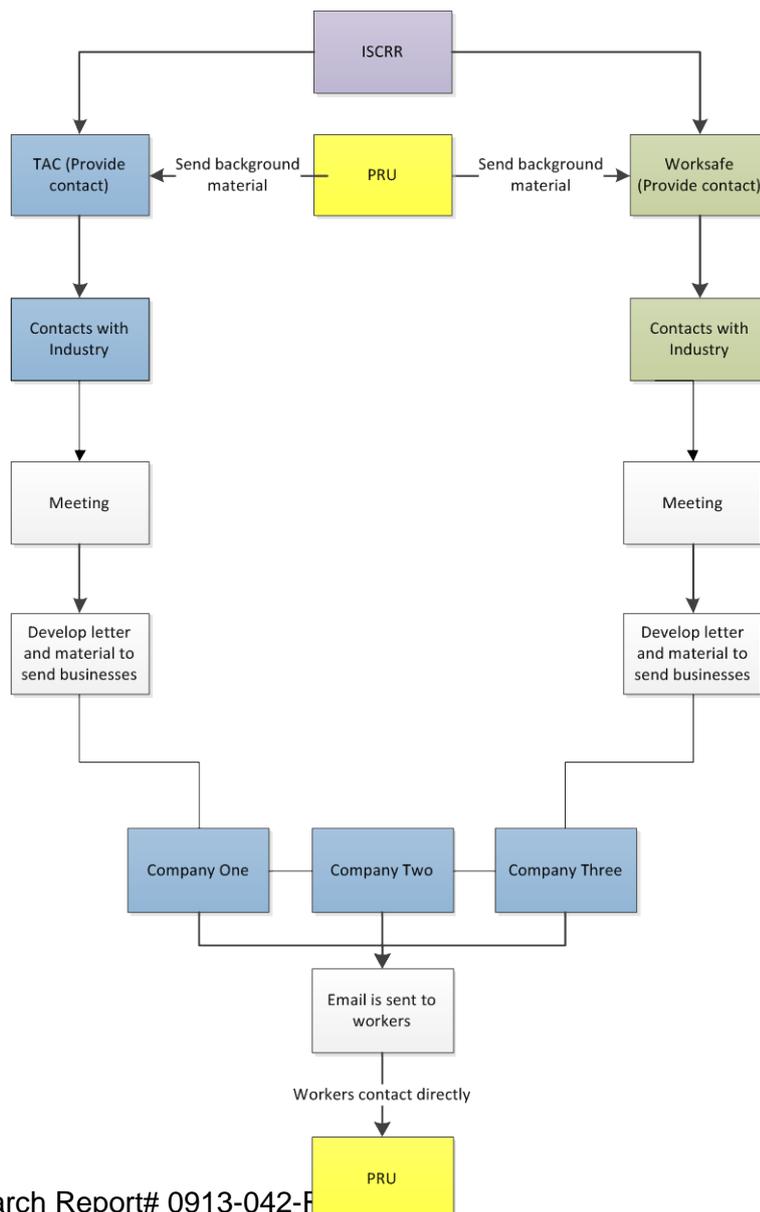
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Appendix I

Original Participant Recruitment Method

Research participants were recruited from each of the target industries of agriculture, construction and transport, using a purposive sample of current workers aged 45-54 and 55-64 years. ISCRR were to provide contacts from the TAC and Worksafe who would facilitate participant recruitment through links already established with relevant high risk industries (Figure 1). Industry contacts would contact relevant businesses to distribute information among their workforce or members inviting interested persons to make direct contact with the researchers. Participants would be additionally recruited through posting flyers in key locations and media advertisements. Interested persons contacted project staff by email or telephone to confirm interest and participant eligibility.

Figure 1: Process for participant recruitment



Appendix II

Results

This section contains supplementary results and quotations relevant to chapter 3 of this report. The additional results presented here may be considered of more general relevance to the OH&S of the general workforce in the agriculture, transport and construction industries than specifically to the older workers who raised them in their respective focus groups.

3.2.1 Determinants of continued workforce participation

If you have a farm, there is a lot of money tied up in it... superannuation etc. (Participant 9U, Agriculture).

If people earned the money years ago they wouldn't have to work until they were 70 years of age. (Participant 10A, Transport).

There is still a few that do it as a personal choice. We have a guy who is 73 and he was too bored at home, so he does a few days a week just to keep his hand in it. (Participant 10C, Transport)

3.2.3 Perceptions of Regulator activity to prevent Injury

Many participants expressed the opinion that current policy makers and enforcers lacked the industry-specific experience necessary to formulate policy and guidelines for their industry.

....they come out of uni, they study all the powers of the cable chains, dogs...and they tell blokes who've done it for 50 years how to do something. (Participant 7C, Transport)

...and I just feel that WorkSafe inspectors need to be able to work with the individual farmer rather than work out of a book...need to work with the farmer and ask him ...he'll know best, what's best for his property and be able to work with that individual (Participant 6A, Agriculture)

A view was expressed that unwanted effects can accompany safety measures.

Rollbars on tractors. I don't need a roll bar. It's more dangerous to me than anything I've got in the place. [They] don't take into account individuals...don't take into account your land...must have a rollbar... (Participant 6A) [During a conversation where the participant relayed striking his rollbar on a low lying branch and rolling the tractor]

We have had that experience too... think you are doing the right thing, paying 1500 to get roll frame ... bought it for safety but it turned out to be a hazard...(Participant 6D, Agriculture)

A significant number of older worker participants noted changes in OH&S practices over time and saw the benefits of targeted media advertising that focused on the emotional aspects of workplace injury / death in getting people to think about workplace safety.

...when they brought in the OH & S rules and WorkSafe stuff, it seemed that the emphasis was on the big stick...it was quite an impost to introduce an OH & S system and many a side company made money out of the small business trying to do the right thing...and then the guy that actually tried to do the right thing who accidentally mucked up at one juncture got hammered to buggery and yet some who just snubbed their nose at it got away with things willy nilly...and it just seemed to be pushing at the wrong end ...Now the recent ads focusing on the outcome of doing the right thing –like getting home to your family- are on the right track...concentrating on the outcome of not doing the right thing at work rather than saying I'll beat you with a big stick for not putting your electricity wires above ground on stakes...(Participant 8B, Construction)

I think we are in an optimal industry for information campaigns... that show the repercussion. Those OHS ads that were shown recently, where the lady and the kid, the kid was looking for his father when he got home... I think it's very powerful. That gets to a lot of blokes too without talking about it. They actually think about their loved ones and what the ramifications could be if there was an accident. They might not need to talk about it, but most blokes watch that and they can relate to it (Participant 1A, Construction)

You see the WorkSafe ads and they are spot on... how often would that happen? (Participant 8D, Construction)

3.5.2 Regional

Compliance with the transport log book system was reported as being particularly difficult when transporting livestock, due to the noise of the livestock precluded sleep and negative effects of extended breaks on the animals' welfare. In addition, the noise of livestock often precluded parking in designated rest areas since this annoyed the other truckies. Transport focus group participants also stated that it is too difficult for small businesses to comply with logbook stipulations and compete against the larger companies.

I was going over to Port Augusta and I was getting a bit tired and I figured that if I didn't make it there tonight, I wouldn't have enough hours to get back tomorrow... and this is why all these crashes are happening...because the fines are so severe...all these blokes are trying to make that extra half an hour or hour when previously they used to always stop and have 15-20 minutes or an hour [sleep] and then continue...this is why I reckon all these blokes are running off the road (Participant 7C, Transport)

Timeslots. In the grain industry, it's all time slotted now, when you load and unload. The timeslot to get from a to b are too short. That's the only thing that I find is a problem these days. Either have 12 hours to get there or 3 hours to get there (Participant 10A, Transport)

The difficulty in stopping when required due to closure of parking bays, a perception of being negatively stereotyped by police officers, and inconsistent interstate legislation (e.g., load limits, permits, and use of reflective tape) were additional issues raised. More specific safety concerns expressed by regional transport workers included roadside (as opposed to

kerbside) placement of landing legs, and the increased risk among older workers of sudden onset cardiovascular events.

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