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Ageism on the Rise as One in Four Employers Labels Over-50s as Older in Australia

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A new report reveals that nearly a quarter of Australian employers now classify workers over 50 as “older,” signaling a troubling rise in workplace ageism. This growing bias, particularly affecting those aged 51 to 55, is locking experienced workers out of jobs, despite their skills and resilience. This article examines the data, real-world impacts, and the urgent need for change in hiring practices.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) jointly found that 24% of human resources (HR) professionals now view workers aged 51 to 55 as “older,” a sharp increase from previous years. Cairns resident Bob Epps, 63, shared his struggle with ABC News, noting he applied for over 100 senior management roles without securing a single interview after being made redundant in his mid-50s. “It’s demoralizing,” Epps said, reflecting the frustration of many who face rejection despite decades of expertise. The report highlights that only 56% of HR professionals are open to hiring those aged 50 to 64, and just 25% consider those over 65, even as Australia faces skill shortages.

Ageist stereotypes, like assumptions about technological incompetence or resistance to change, persist despite evidence to the contrary. Sarah McCann-Bartlett, AHRI’s chief executive, told ABC News, “Employers are missing out on a wealth of skills and experience by focusing on age rather than ability.” The data contradicts these biases, showing older workers match younger colleagues in performance, creativity, and adaptability, while excelling in reliability and stress management. Yet, 49% of HR professionals admit their recruitment practices disadvantage older candidates, with many failing to use age-neutral job ads or skills-based assessments.

The economic cost of this prejudice is staggering. The World Health Organization estimates that employing just 5% more workers over 55 could boost Australia’s economy by \$48 billion annually. With the pension age rising to 67 and potentially 70 by 2035, prolonged unemployment for over-50s risks financial insecurity and mental health challenges. As career coach Leah Lambart noted, even those in their late 40s now fear job searches due to age bias. Employers must

overhaul outdated practices to tap into this resilient, skilled workforce, or Australia's productivity will continue to suffer.