CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH AWAKENING ENTHUSIASM FOR FURTHER LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

This is an account of a 2008 scoping study of what would influence men of forty five years and over to train for a new career in the community services and health industry. The study considered the need of this industry to recruit staff from non-traditional sources in relation to the efficacy of the LCM Model (see Figure 1). The LCM Model (Hughes 2007a) is a recently devised approach to applying the outcomes of lifelong learning to organisational achievement.

This scoping study, informed by earlier research, probed the view that men who are at, or beyond, the mid-point in their working life are disinclined to engage with further career-related learning. In this study, the focus was on the community services and health industry.

The outcomes from the scoping study indicate that a meaningful number of men 45+, who might not otherwise consider a career in the industry, can be recruited to and will enthusiastically undertake the required training. However, there are conditions to be met which are the foundation of an awakening to the value of engaging in further learning and developing a commitment to a new career.

Whilst the scoping study gives cause for optimism – with respect to its undertaking training linked to recruitment objective – there is more work to be done. This scoping study is a pointer toward recruitment and embracing further learning strategies for the target group of 45+ men. The development of the detail, from expanded enquiry, is yet to be done.

THE NEED – Some would say “a looming crisis”

The Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC) has identified a looming difficulty in recruiting people to a career in the community services and health industry (CSHISC 2005). Consequent upon declining birth rate, the rate of increase in available labour force is declining leading to an aging workforce. From the 1.9% annual increase in labour force, in the late 90s, there is a projected slowing to 0.4% annually by 2016 (ABS 1999\(^1\)). The inference is that, around 2016, the community services and health industry will be competing to attract its share of new entrants to the workforce from a total pool – targeted by all employers - in the order

\(^1\) The Australian Bureau of Statistics have ceased making projections of this sort as there are many imponderables – such as immigration – which might vary outcomes. However, this 1999 projection is drawn upon as indicative of the demographic circumstance to be acknowledged and acted upon as is highlighted in CSHISC (2005, p. 6).
of 43,000 per year. Clearly, success (if adequately achievable) in this competition for new entrants presents as only a partial solution to meeting the staffing requirements of the already large and fast growing community services and health industry.

Cognisant of the foregoing, CSHISC has raised the prospect of drawing upon largely untapped workforces such as middle aged men (45+) who have dropped out of the workforce for reasons such as forced retirement or taking the opportunity of early retirement because it seemed, at the time, to be attractive. The “untapped workforce”, as CSHISC sees it, is a segment within the “not in the labour force” category of 5.4 million people (ABS 2008); and invites consideration as a pool from which to innovatively draw in an increasingly competitive staffing market.

‘The questions facing all Australian business are therefore how we address these challenges to retain our existing workforce and lift the participation rate of not only the over 45s but also the other untapped workforce of people with disabilities and those from a CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] background.’ (CSHISC 2005, p. 5)

By raising the prospect of recruiting from the “untapped workforce”, CSHISC is inviting innovation. And the learning arising from innovative recruiting action will be powerfully informing with respect to the totality of the “not in the labour force” category.

CSHISC has compared the potential for atrophy versus the potential for growth with respect to skill evolution in health and community services (CSHISC 2008a, p, 19). In a scenario format, CSHISC makes comparison against seven preconditions – funding model; employer ownership profile; employment structures; level of labour intensity associated with core work of sector (e.g. Care); structural perceptions of customer need (e.g. client and patient); employee receptiveness to train; and professional apparatus [sense of identity and valuing of status]. In this paper, I am especially addressing the “employee receptiveness to train” precondition and note that it is significantly bracketed by “funding” and “professional apparatus”.

Given that the community services and health industry is already fast growing, there is urgency in taking action to recruit from non-traditional sources. From a current base of 1.1 million staff, it is projected that 24% of all new workforce growth will occur in the community services and health industry in the period to 2012 – i.e. an annual growth of 3%, equating to 170,000 new jobs up to 2012 (CSHISC 2008b). Action, now, strengthens current capacity and diminishes the future problem as the industry progressively, and strategically, accommodates to the need and the opportunity to staff the future in new ways.

Consequent upon the industry need, and to inform action, exploration of the utility of the LCM Model has been expanded to recruiting men, 45+, to the community services and health industry. The model (Figure 1) is an outcome of five years of PhD research into applying lifelong learning to organisational achievement. In this paper, it is an industry achievement goal which is being pursued; however, this is an amalgam of organisational goals and the reader is invited to draw from the discussion as suits their industry and/or organisational horizon interests.
RECRUITING MEN 45+ TO THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SECTOR

Exploration methodology

For the purpose of focussing upon one “untapped workforce” opportunity, the exploration was specific to the recruitment of men aged forty five and over. At an early stage, it became apparent that the time, and other resources, available required limiting the study to the community services sector. However, there is the potential for extrapolation to the health sector - including the “Attractive Employer” initiative of the Victorian Department of Human Services.

Note: There is the appearance of an environmental (organisation of work) difference between the two sectors of the community services and health industry. The health sector seems to be particularly “territorially protective” with respect to demarcation of roles and therefore, possibly, resistant to innovative change as could relate to recruitment, training, and sharing of the load.

With the foregoing in mind, health sector employers drawing upon this scoping study (in an extrapolating manner), for the purpose of adopting the outcomes from the DHS “Attractive Employer” project presently underway, may be faced with moderating industrial issues more so than the community services sector. Note: The Facilitator’s Report (Burke 2007) arising from an Attractive Employer Model focus group is a helpful insight into health sector issues relating to recruitment and retention.

Figure 1 – LCM Model for organisational achievement (Hughes 2007)
The approach to this study has been to explore the resonance between insights gained in the development of the LCM Model, insights gained from a major study into Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for Volunteers (Hughes 2007b), and insights gained from new contact with men 45+ regarding their predisposition to career engagement with the community services sector with an eye to extrapolation to the health sector.

- In a generic sense, there is clearly a strong connection between organisational achievement and the coalescence of valuing learning and its outcomes, having a nurturing of learning culture, and respect for motivations. The question then is “To what degree does the model have utility by making recruitment to the community services sector (with its inherent training obligation) the sweet spot?” Although, there is logic in positing that by supporting men in valuing (awakening to) what they know and can do and fuelling their motivation to add to this asset - as is relevant to community services - they will come to valuing a career in the sector, it does not necessarily follow that they will join the sector.

- The overwhelming predisposition toward valuing the knowledge and skill which a volunteer brings to volunteering, and what is acquired through volunteering, by respondents to the RPL study suggests that “learning” is a strong motivator when applied to committing to a volunteer role. This is also indicated in other “volunteering” studies (Clary, Snyder & Stukas 1996; Aitkin 2000; Fahey, Walker & Sleigh 2002).

- In the 2007 RPL study there were twenty three male respondents (24% of respondents); and, due to the large concentration of volunteers within the community services sector, there is a particular relevance to the sector recruitment and training objective which has been probed in the interviews (below). Indeed, three of the scoping study interviewees are community services volunteers seeking careers in the sector –one already at near completion of a Diploma, and the other two exploring RPL as a consequence of participation in this study.

- The scoping study interviews (April to August 2008) were with twelve 45+ men; five are presently mid-age entry career community services workers; three are volunteers in the community services sector and seeking career employment; and four are seeking employment appropriate to their perception of self wherever they can find it. And, there is on-going contact, of a case study nature, with interviewees who are potential recruits to the community services sector – in particular relating to taking career shaping advantage from RPL.

The rationale for interviewing, in a scoping manner, from three categories is as follows –

1. Men who are presently, mid-age entry, career community workers provide insight as to motivations and satisfactions.
2. Men who are presently volunteer contributors to social services, and who seek career involvement, provide aspirational insights.
3. Men who hold negative (with respect to the industry and/or learning) predispositions provide insights into attitudinal change approaches.

There are also continuing opportunistic conversations within the target group as a triangulating – confirming or revealing new nuances - device.

- The format of interviews was to, first, invite respondents to tell their story in terms of life/work experience - what brought them to where they are now and where they might progress. This was unstructured. The responses were reflections which ranged across matters felt by the respondents to be relevant as to why they chose community services as a career or why they might, or might not, make such a choice. The interview then moved on to seeking responses to the LCM Model related questions as listed in Table 1.

**Outcomes from the unstructured component of the interview**

The unstructured beginning of interviews yielded the following themes which have also been evident in the casual conversations which serve as a triangulating device:

- A career in community services is not necessarily a first career step. Indeed, for 45+ men it can be a “new beginning” – as was the case for each of the interviewees already engaged with the sector.
- A sense of wanting to make a difference – consequent upon life experience – is a motivator for some 45+ men changing their career direction to community services. This is particularly prompted where there is a personal recognition that their life experience is a foundation and leads them to this action. What then is the latent propensity of some men 45+ to find fulfilment via a community services career, but they haven’t yet recognised it?
- For some 45+ men, changes in personal health – such as permanent physical injury – cause search for a new career.
- For some 45+ men, changes in employment circumstances – such as forced early retirement – cause a seeking of new career.
- For some men 45+, they seek a new career in a quest for personal fulfilment. Their earlier choice may have been compelled by economic or social factors (including perceptions of expectations) or at that stage in their life still finding themselves.
- For some 45+ men, a career in community services (or health) would be a last choice due to a perception of low pay and high stress.
- For some 45+ men, taking a direction toward a career in community services is a consequence of the influence of others. Of their own accord, and even with a neutral predisposition, they would not choose community services – it is just not in mind. However, once guided towards the sector and having experience of it, they become highly committed to a career in community services such that it becomes a passion.
- Perception of high cost deters some men 45+ from undertaking the training required for a new career.
- A welcoming and stimulating learning environment is very important for the continuance of engagement with training and motivation to commit to the industry. For some men 45+
their return to study is a much more positive experience than what they encountered in their earlier years – they become “awakened” as learners.

- The female dominance of the community services sector is not an issue which will deter men from seeking a career in this area.

Note: In the foregoing, the reference to “some” men should not be taken as indicating marginal opportunity for recruitment. Men in this “some” category are a large population within the “not in the labour force” ABS category.

These themes have strong resonance with the “need”, “opportunity” and “support” pillars which were revealed in the 2002-2003 scoping study - embracing the water industry, contract cleaning and waste management, and volunteer fire service - which led to the development of the LCM Model.

- The pivotal influence of “NEED”: It is apparent that a man 45+ who is seeking a new direction in life is responding to a need. This need may be a consequence of work caused injury, or other injury, which obliges the man to seek a new career. In other instances, the need may be driven by the thought that “there must be better things to do with my life”.

- The recognition of “OPPORTUNITY”: In the case of men 45+ they may not, without prompting, recognise the opportunity for them to enter the community services and health industry. For many, it is not so much a front-of-mind opportunity as a new direction; and there may be perceptions that they don’t have much to offer. On this last point, the opportunity to draw upon what they already know and can do for RPL purposes is unlikely to be in mind. When acted upon, RPL is a motivator to getting started and a device to reduce costs. The variety of new careers, to which 45+ men can gain entry, may be invisible to many or they may have a negative attitude grounded in a perception of poor pay and much stress in the community services and health industry.

- The occurrence of “ENCOURAGEMENT”: Having a mentor or colleague supporting and encouraging continuance with training and/or engagement with the industry is an important factor. It is also important to have systemic support and, in this respect, the CSHISC has a leading part to play. In some instances, men 45+ report that they had to overcome resistance from agencies such as WorkCare with regard to wanting to undertake further studies. Some of these stories are so extreme, and beyond logical expectation, that it has to be questioned that the circumstances were as understood to be reported by interviewees.

From the perspective of indicating congruency with the LCM Model, the unstructured component of the interviews (and reinforced by casual conversations) revealed that the outcomes from this scoping are aligned with Figure 2 which was the foundation for the LCM Model.
In this community services and health industry case, the organisational achievement/objective is to recruit men of 45+ to the industry – with its inherent requirement to train. The scoping study indicated that the pathway to this is prompting new career interest through overtly valuing what men 45+ bring from their life experience and awakening an interest in further learning.

**Figure 2 – Three pillars, temple analogy, supporting recruitment of men 45+**

Following the unstructured phase of the interview – in which a respondent’s story was explored without shaping the content or manner of telling – a response was sought from each interviewee to the questions listed in Table 1. The purpose of this was to obtain focussed views on issues which have previously been found to contribute to organisational achievement and have relationship to the objectives of this scoping study.

### Table 1

**Interview questions – men 45+**

*Note: these questions were put in the context of what might influence men 45+ to consider embarking upon a career in the community services and health industry; and, as a consequence, to undertake the required learning – achieving qualification.*

1. Drawing upon your life experience – with respect to yourself and with respect to what you have observed in others:
   
   *Is it appropriate for men of 45 years and over to add to what they know and can do and to expand their qualifications?*

2. Drawing upon your life experience – with respect to yourself and with respect to what you have observed in others:
   
   *Would it help if men of 45 years and over recognise and value what they, and others, know and can do?*

3. Drawing upon your life experience – with respect to yourself and with respect to what you have observed in others:
   
   *Would it help if the workplace culture valued what men of 45 years and over know and can do?*

4. Drawing upon your life experience – with respect to yourself and with respect to what you have observed in others:
   
   *What have these above questions got to do with motivation?*
The structured component of the interviews (see above listing of questions) yielded the following:

- Lifelong learning is valued by 45+ men who are seeking a new career, but the “drive” to do this (stronger than just moderate motivation) is not possessed by all men of this age. Ideally, a man who is faced with a change in employment circumstances will have the capacity – motivation, knowledge, and means – to be self-directed in this regard and acquire the appropriate qualification. However, in some instances, action to seek a new career requires prompting regarding the opportunity. On the evidence of the interviews and casual conversations, without guidance it is unlikely that men 45+ will identify a community services and health industry career as an option.

In addition to the unlikely prospect of a new career being in community services and health - which may be a radical change in direction - the requirement to gain qualifications will further add to the improbability. Under these circumstances there is a need for some agent to support an “awakening” to the opportunity and an “awakening” to their capacity to learn. Figure 3 is a representation of the indicated relationship between “awakening” to the new learning possibilities and new career achievement.

- Unless prompted, men 45+ are inclined to not recognise the breadth and depth of what they know and can do. Interviewees who have transited to a new career in community services displayed a capacity to identify a large spectrum of their knowledge, skill and attitudinal capacity, but expressed a view that they did not necessarily consciously know all that they know and can do – in the past or even now. Interviewees who were still searching for a new future (and men engaged in casual conversation) were less certain; and, where there was an appearance of having given up, some had very shallow self-valuing. Comparing this with the outcomes from my earlier research – both CFA and RPL for Volunteers – there is much to be gained (especially by the individual who under-values themself) through supporting “awakening” via RPL – as illustrated in Figure 4. The revelations arising from RPL can be life-changing for some individuals. RPL makes
explicit the human resource asset which an individual brings to an organisation. Also, RPL has a place in formally acknowledging (valuing) what an individual acquires consequent upon contributing to organisational achievement.

In the instance of an on-going case study – arising from this scoping study – the subject reports that volunteering colleagues have become interested in the manner in which he is now seeking RPL and looking to achieving a qualification which was not, previously, in mind as achievable. This has “stone in the pond” connotations – the ripples are far spreading. The subject is potentially a model motivating others to follow in undertaking learning and finding a career in community services. There is a “seeding” potential in supporting some as showing the path and “awakening” others to the possibilities.

RPL benefits both the individual and the organisation. However, examples of less formal approaches to making explicit what people know and can do emerged in the course of the interviews – these were of a nature of sharing between colleagues. These examples, arising during the interviews, confirmed the view which arose in the development of the LCM Model that an “action informing” positive and negative matrix exists. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 4 – Mutual individual and organisational benefit accruing from RPL – a learning partnership

Figure 5 – Interaction between self-valuing and valuing by others
The scoping study reveals that Figure 5 is pertinent to the recruitment of men 45+ to the community services and health industry. For some, possibly many, a change in mid-life career – as an alternative to just giving-up – requires the support of another for the potential recruit in moving to the top right hand cell of the matrix. This invites consideration of ways and means by which the industry can draw upon collegiate resources to achieve this outcome. The sought for outcome having three elements –

1. the “awakening” to the value of the current competency base;
2. the “awakening” to the career value of adding to the current competency base;
3. the “awakening” to the achievability of adding to the current competency base.

- The “recruiting to”, “training for”, and “acting within” environments/cultures have a strong influence upon the propensity of a man 45+ to join, and remain within, the community services and health industry. Arguably, this is a self-evident statement, but in practice there can be slippage between intent and action. For some men in the 45+ category, previous work and learning cultures have been very damaging leading to the requirement for a new, supportive, culture to guide a new direction. To be effective the new culture must be overtly apparent and valued.

- In terms of recruiting men 45+ to the industry, the operative culture is largely external to the industry. Interviewees (including those who are now career community services people), and men contributing through less formal conversation, comment upon having to overcome entrenched views within government agencies which are not really supportive of their quest for a new career. Even if these experiences are the exception rather than the rule, there is need for a confirmed supportive culture which assists men to aspire to the status of men 45+ in the realm of the supported learner shown in Figure 6. And then, having embarked upon a course of study, the culture of the training environment is highly influential with respect to nurturing enthusiasm for the new career.
In Figure 6, the “systemic” influences are largely external to the industry. It is the manner in which a man 45+ is supported or discouraged by agents such as Centrelink, WorkCare and the vocational education and training system which are the dominant cultural influence. However, the industry culture – component parts and totality – can assert influence upon these external agents.

- In terms of the LCM Model, the interviews and conversations indicated recruitment and “sustaining” connection between the component parts. This is illustrated in Figure 7. “Sustaining” is a very deliberate choice of term and relates to sustaining the intention to invest effort in entry training and throughout subsequent training. It is evident that the culture of the learning environment – the quality/nature of the learning experience – is a key element in sustaining the interest and grounding commitment to a career in community services and presumably in health. When men 45+ find that the learning experience is now more positive than they had previously experienced, this discovery is highly motivating and reassuring that the new career is right for them – for some, this is the bedrock of retention.

With reference to the LCM Model, it is apparent that –

1. There is a close connection between an “awakening” to the value of what a man 45+ already knows and can do and their motivation to consider a career in the community services and health industry. This awakening is greatly aided by the support of “valued” others when choosing this path.
2. The realisation by a man 45+ that there is a substantial contribution which they can make to the welfare of others, by building upon what they already know and can do, is highly motivational. This is in respect of both their motivation to learn and having commitment to the industry.
3. The quality of the introduction to the industry culture and the encouragement to embark upon further learning culture are intertwined. These co-joined cultures are the key to 1 and 2 above; and it is probable that the CSHISC has a pivotal role in this regard.
WHERE TO NOW – Nurturing “the awakening”

It is apparent that men of forty five years and over are a group which invites further attention as prospective career personnel in the community services and health industry. Although this scoping study focussed upon the community services sector, the outcomes are indicative of extrapolation potential to the health sector. Accordingly, an extension of the research beyond a scoping study and inclusive of the health sector beckons.

The scoping study, and the continuing engagement with arising case studies, suggests that the continuum – as illustrated in Figure 8 – invites action. In this regard, the LCM Model is a framework for action; and the application of RPL is a strategic device to be drawn upon in association with the model.

![Diagram of the awakening to new career and engagement with learning continuum](image)

In taking action to move men 45+ along this continuum – from varying starting points – attention to the LCM Model is a guiding mantra and drawing upon RPL is a powerful strategy. On the matter of RPL, it should be borne in mind that this is, of itself, a significant learning experience. It is a tangible way, and giving immediate value, in which a person is “awakened” to knowledge and skill assets which they would not otherwise overtly recognise.

On the matter of further research, this can be undertaken in a manner which is conjoined with reaching out to potential new staff on a learn-as-you-go basis. That is, set about recruiting men 45+ now, drawing upon the outcomes from the scoping study. Use this activity as a research project, somewhat akin to action research, to inform continuous improvement with respect to adding to industry capacity through awakening enthusiasm for further learning.

I conclude with a question – **What might be the role of the CSHISC in nurturing an environmental culture which “awakens” men 45+ to better valuing learning - leading to a career in the community services and health industry?**
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