

Essay

Good Advice about Education and Training Programs Is Hard to Find

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In many respects, no group of unemployed Americans experienced greater shocks or more difficulties than older unemployed workers during and after the Great Recession. At a time in their lives when most expected to enjoy the benefits of steady employment, millions watched their savings crumble, reconsidered retirement, and struggled with anxiety and depression. When looking for work, far too many experienced discrimination based on their unemployment status and age.

For many, the path to new jobs requires additional education and training. Upended by the Great Recession and rapid technological changes, thousands of older, unemployed workers discovered that what they learned in high school, or college, or on the job is no longer sufficient. Jeff, a 54-year-old unemployed worker interviewed for my book *Working Scared (or Not at All)* lamented: "I think most people are not prepared for life by their education because they don't have enough information on what their choices are, what their opportunities are. It's a big problem with the education system in this country."

According to national surveys conducted by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, most workers are not well informed about the skills they need to advance or the most cost-effective ways to obtain them. They find it difficult to choose from a bewildering array of degree and certificate programs that vary widely in duration, cost, and quality.

Even worse, many older workers enroll in training programs that do not lead to new jobs, leaving them deeper in debt and worse off financially. Although there is a plethora of government grants, loans, tax credits, and deductions for training, older workers are confused or unaware of their options. Most end up paying for training themselves, leaving potential government assistance on the table.

For more information about the Future of Work@50+ project, please visit www.aarp.org/futureofwork.



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Reliable, unbiased advice is hard to find. Public workforce programs were not designed to help older workers make these difficult and important choices. Strapped for funds, many of these programs are unable to provide personal, one-on-one advice and job counseling to jobseekers.

There is an urgent need to improve and expand workforce development services and education and training for older unemployed Americans. First and foremost, prospective adult learners must have convenient, accurate, and timely information to determine whether an education and training program is essential to get a good job. Many unemployed older workers could obtain jobs with nothing more than some tips about navigating the labor market, using social media, and other tactics. Others will benefit from “brushing up” on their skills in short-term training courses, rather than investing in training programs that last for months or even a year or more.

Independent, knowledgeable advisors must be available to assist older workers as they make these consequential choices. What is the potential return on investment for postsecondary education or training, given one’s planned retirement date? What schools or programs are most likely to lead to employment? How can I steer clear of programs that make exaggerated or deceptive claims and prey on people who are desperate for jobs?

To meet the needs of older unemployed workers, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, with funding from the Philip and Tammy Murphy

Family Foundation, is establishing the New Start Career Network. The Network blends high-tech and personal services including web-based advising and information resources, volunteer job coaches, and collaborations with employers, educational institutions, and workforce development and social service agencies.

Government policy makers must also bolster funding for the public workforce system and demand greater transparency from training institutions, including accurate reporting on cost, duration, completion rates, employment, and earnings outcomes. The recently authorized Workforce Investment Opportunity Act of 2014 contains language that could bring about greater accountability, but its provisions must be rigorously applied. If Congress reauthorizes the Higher Education Act this year, they should require that institutions provide independent financial aid counseling to prospective students.

Even as the economy gradually recovers from the Great Recession, the demand for better advice and information about education and training choices will increase. A volatile labor market, characterized by disruptions and uncertainty for employers and workers, means that getting good information and advice will be even more important in the years to come for older and younger workers alike.

The views expressed by the author are meant to encourage debate and discussion; they do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

Essay 10, June 2015

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