Employer experiences of recruiting, retaining and retraining older workers

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Background, objectives and methodology

Background

An ageing population means that making work **more inclusive** for older workers will be increasingly important for employees, for employers and for the economy.

Working for longer can deliver both **financial** and **personal** benefits, in terms of health and social integration.

- This research was conducted in response to concerns about the **barriers** workers aged 50+ face.

- Recent legislative changes have made re-thinking working in later life even more pertinent. These changes include:

  - The abolition of the **default retirement age**.

  - The extension of the right to request **flexible working** from only the parents of young children, to all employees.

Objectives

- To understand what prevents employers from implementing the 3Rs: retain, retrain and recruit.

- To understand employers' awareness of the ageing workforce and their attitudes towards older workers.

- To provide insight into the level of intervention necessary to ensure employers are alert to and supportive of the needs of older workers.

- To understand how employer attitudes vary across sector and within sector towards different groups of older workers, e.g. low paid workers, carers, manual workers and workers with disabilities.

Qualitative Methodology

81 face-to-face interviews were conducted across 50 businesses. All employers interviewed had either:

- Recently recruited someone 50+

- Conducted recruitment recently where they had unsuccessful candidates aged 50+

- Staff aged 50+ or approaching 50

- Someone 50+ but under SPA leave their workforce recently

The main respondent was typically an HR manager, a Director or an owner/manager. Where possible, an additional interview was done with a line manager.

Businesses interviewed were split into two parts:

Broad sectors (A):

- Primary sector

- Retail and hospitality

- Business services

- Public services

- Other services

Low-paid sectors (B):

- Care homes

- Cleaning contractors

- Fashion retail

- Food processing and textile manufacturing

- Transport

Methodology: Sector and size

Sector	Number of businesses	Number of interviews conducted
Low Pay Element		
Care homes	6	8
Cleaning contractors	4	8
Fashion retail	5	8
Food processing and textiles	5	7
Transport	5	8
Cross-economy Element		
Public	5	10
Business	4	7
Retail and hospitality	5	7
Primary	6	12
Other	5	8

Size band	Number of businesses	Number of interviews conducted
Micro (1-9)	5	7
Small (10-49)	15	24
Medium (50-249)	19	31
Large (250+)	11	21

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Attitudes to older workers

Benefits of employing older workers

Employers said there were no universal benefits or drawbacks associated with older or younger workers.

That said, some commonly perceived benefits were mentioned:

Life and work experience

Loyalty and reliability

"It is experience isn't it, life experience and being able to handle people and being able to do the job they are employed to do – that's what it's all about ..."
Managing Director, Food Processing and Textiles, 10-49 employees

"You tend to find the young ones just come and go. When people are older they tend to be more stable, and I tend to recruit older workers. It takes a lot to get everybody used to new people and faces, especially in this job role."
Manager, Care Homes, 10-49 employees

Challenges of employing older workers

Deteriorating health was the primary concern for employers

Health conditions
- Greater risk of long term health conditions
- May have less energy

Adaptiveness
- Less able to adapt to changes
- Particularly the case with technology

Relationships with managers
- May feel uncomfortable being managed by younger line manager
- Younger line managers may not feel confident in a position of authority over an older worker

Caring responsibilities
- Not raised as an issue particularly affecting older workers
- Treated similarly to childcare commitments

Workforce profiles

- Employers largely did not monitor their workforce profile and there was a concern among some that doing so would be seen as discriminatory

- For most employers, less than a third of their employees were aged 50+

- Smaller companies generally had only a few experiences of 50+ workers

- Most employers were not concerned about their workforce age profile, few had attempted to make changes to it

- Some larger companies were aware of the ageing population at the economy-wide level

- Employers had not made plans for how this may affect them or be dealt with in their own organisation

Awareness of an ageing workforce

- Concerns about an ageing workforce were more prevalent in relation to physically demanding roles

- In these cases efforts were made to attract more younger workers

- Care homes had given more thought to the ageing population and workforce

"Teaching is very energetic. Physically, it's the biggest challenge. Doing activities with the children. I don't expect teachers to sit at their desks all day. As the pension age rises, I really worry about that. That they won't be able to have that energy…To make sure the children get the benefit out of their schooling, that might not happen if the age range goes up. That's my biggest worry."

Head Teacher, Public Services, 50-249 employees

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Recruitment

Recruitment

Employers acknowledged that recruitment methods may impact on the profile of applicants. As such, the majority of employers used a mix of methods to advertise roles in order to achieve a good cross-section of applicants.

Skewed towards younger applicants

Online websites

Recruitment agencies

Jobcentre Plus

Local newspapers / magazines / shop windows

Informal approaches (e.g. word-of-mouth, walk-ins)

Skewed towards older applicants

"*We have generally relied heavily on website advertising and we want to move slightly away from that because we feel like we miss a generation who are not looking online for jobs, so managers have started to put adverts in local shop windows to try and capture all different demographics.*"

Senior Human Resources Consultant, Public Services, 250+ employees

Recruitment scenarios regarding older workers

Responses to hypothetical scenarios suggest that situations more likely to apply to older candidates raise potential recruitment barriers for employers.

Caring responsibilities requiring part-time work	• Largely only possible if advertising for a part-time role • Employer would need evidence that they would be a reliable worker (i.e. assess risk of amount of time off increasing, consistency of working schedule)
Moderate arthritis	• Varied by nature of role (i.e. office-based vs. manual) due to the potential impact on ability to carry out the role • Some would consider a medical review to assess current and expected future capabilities
Five year employment gap	• Majority would assess the 'legitimacy' of the gap (university course and childcare were deemed as likely valid reasons), and closely assess character references • Some would need to conduct a full criminal record check • More concern in 'fast-moving' sectors
'Overqualified' applicant	• Employers acknowledged the potential value added by such individuals • Potential desire to reduce workload and stress was an understood driver • Evidence of commitment and ability to work harmoniously in a role potentially 'beneath them' needed

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Barriers to recruiting older applicants

- Limited **numbers** of older applicants often attributed to:

Characteristics of the sector or job role acting as deterrent

- Use of 'modern' practices
- Role is portrayed as tiring, stressful or physically / mentally demanding

Fear of rejection

- Based on assumption that they could not manage the job role due to their age

"I don't think older individuals need the stress generally. They are probably more aware that you need skill and a lot of energy and that it can be stressful – whereas the younger ones apply thinking it will all be fun."
Managing Director / Owner, Fashion Retail, 10-49 employees

- A few expressed reservations around the longevity of older workers' commitment and ability to carry out their role.

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Policies affecting older workers

Flexible working

- Employers made efforts to accommodate needs for flexible working

- Examples were given of offering flexible working to older workers in response to:

  – Changes to health conditions

  – New or increased responsibilities for parents or grandchildren

  – Requests for phased retirement

'"We have a woman over 50 who does not want to commute as much, so she works 3.5 days and she job shares with a woman who has just returned from parental leave. So you have both ends of the spectrum sharing the same job. A new mum recently returning to work, and a grandmother who wants to work less days. And it works."

Human Resources Manager, Business Services, 250+ employees

Approaches to flexible working

Reviewed on a 'case-by-case basis'

Not broadly advertised to employees

Onus on the employee to make a request

Agreement dependent on the 'value' of the employee and their job role

Company size and financial situation

"There is something of an unwritten policy for care homes that you only have 50% of your workers on full-time contracts and the rest on part-time or bank. That way, you have some built in flexibility."
Manager, Care Homes, 50-249 employees

"We could not have a totally flexible situation; because here on a Saturday we are really busy and we need two people in the shop…on the other hand if we knew it was for a certain number of hours per week we could work around it."
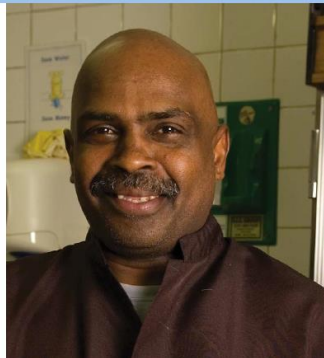Director, Retail and Hospitality, 1-9 employees

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Responses to suggested strategies

A New Vision for Older Workers:
Retain, Retrain, Recruit

Report to Government by Dr Ros Altmann CBE
Business Champion for Older Workers

Mentoring

- Only a few examples of mentoring
- Formalised mentoring thought to be labour intensive

Crisis leave ✔

- Thought to be covered by compassionate leave policies
- Longer periods of leave more difficult to accommodate

Responses to suggested strategies

Career break

- A few examples of systems for sabbaticals
- Some questions about the 'value' of career breaks for older workers

Phased retirement ✓

- Employers generally positive, but difficult to accommodate in smaller companies

Mid-life career reviews ✗

- Could be seen as discriminatory
- Informal conversations allow employers to review on a case-by-case basis

Retraining

Overview of training

Approaches to training varied greatly, largely dependent on size of the organisations and nature of their work.

Identification of training needs

Annual appraisals / reviews

Ad hoc / responsive

Usually initiated by management

"We do some sales training and product training on an informal ad hoc basis. If we get a new product in, we will all need to know about it. Or if we set up a new diary system etc."
Owner, Fashion Retail, 10-49 employees

"Training needs are identified through a performance review process or by the manager identifying a need and then coming to me to discuss it. Then a training proposal form needs to be filled in. A need can also be identified or requested by an individual."
Human Resources Manager, Primary Services, 50-249 employees

Training older workers

Most employers believed they *offered* equal training opportunities to all, regardless of age, although employer interviews indicated that the likelihood of training was lower among older workers.

Reservations to training older workers

- Harder to train
- Less impact
- Potentially less return

Tendency for less training among 50+

- Lower need
- Less likely to request it (as less ambitious)
- Reluctance to undertake IT based training

"I think [approaches to training offered] would probably differ [by age], I think, "Can they take any more training? Do they need any more training at that age? Are they at a maximum where they don't really need it? Once you've trained them,., how long are they going to be there to exercise the training?"
Managing Director / Owner, Fashion Retail, 10-49 employees

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Perceived challenges of offering retraining

While most employers would *like* to be able to offer retraining to their staff, opportunities for doing so were often fairly limited and largely dependent on: the role of the employee in question, the size of the organisation, and the variety of job roles available.

Limited opportunities

Staff lacking prerequisite base of skills needed

Staff resistance

"Roles are limited here because it is a small company and the availability of new roles – you don't often come across that, but if the opportunity was there I would have no hesitation with my members of staff bettering themselves or if they were finding the work too demanding, taking a lighter role."

Human Resources Manager, Public Services, 50- 249 employees

"She was a very good sales person but found the admin very difficult. We offered support but she wouldn't take what we offered –i.e. retraining on processes and procedures. Pride got in her way –she was a very stubborn person, and she resigned."

Managing Director, Food Processing, 50-249 employees

Retirement

Experiences of retirement

- Employers had limited experiences of retirement in their organisation

- Seen as a decision made by each individual, often driven by health and physical capacity to do the job

- Employers were generally not concerned about the retirement age within their organisation

- Physically demanding work associated with lower average retirement age

- Low paid workers more likely postpone retirement for financial reasons

Planning for retirement

Generally no processes for raising retirement planning

Seen as up to the individual to raise the issue

Dealt with on a case by case basis

Appraisals, annual performance reviews, absence due to illness and risk assessments seen as occasions when the subject may naturally arise

"I wouldn't have a formal process for that, but I certainly would encourage managers to have career conversations with all of their staff at appraisal time to understand [their long term career goals] ... That conversation, especially if someone was looking to retire as that would give them the opportunity to talk about if they want to scale back. I don't think it should be linked to just older workers, it should be everybody."
Human Resources Manager, Business Services, 50-249 employees

Planning for retirement

Reducing working hours, working from home and changing job roles are possible options

Most employers feel it is not their place to encourage someone to continue working

Discussions of retirement, health and performance are often sensitive

"We had an incident a few weeks ago where one person was talking to someone else, not about age but their capabilities and the person took it in the wrong way and asked if he was insinuating that he was too old to carry on such a duty when the other person was not…and he took it the wrong way so I am a bit cautious."
Human Resources Officer, Retail and Hospitality, 250+ employees

The role of pay

Differences in retirement outcomes

No clear-cut relationship between pay levels and retirement age, although some employers noted that lower paid workers often worked into later life through necessity, while higher paid workers did so by choice.

"Some people cannot afford to retire – it is obvious that people do work on now well past retirement age because they need to top up their pension. If they could retire, they probably would."

Director, Retail and Hospitality, 250+ employees

"You tend to find the carers work longer because they're not paid as much. If you have a nurse who's been here a long time they're on a higher salary than a care assistant so you tend to find the nurses retire first. Care assistants have always been low paid."

Manager, Care Homes, 10-49 employees

Differences in flexible working

Employers stated that the support they provided to older workers did not differ explicitly by pay grade, although flexibility could differ by the nature of the job role (and job role and pay could be related).

Physically demanding roles	**Office-based / management roles**
Typically lower paid	Typically higher paid
Less flexibility for changing start and finish times	Shown more 'leeway' with taking time off
More challenging to adapt tasks to accommodate health issues	More likely to 'take their work home with them' to make up for lost time
Easier to move from full- to part-time	Better knowledge of historical requests for age-related adjustments

Care homes

Preference for older workers due to perception of their reliability and loyalty (continuity in care important) and ability to relate with older residents.

Limited variety in job roles (less opportunity for retraining).

Able to offer flexibility to accommodate different working patterns (part-time / flexible working practices). This enables them to more easily retain and recruit older workers.

Due to lower wage, employees typically worked past retirement age through necessity.

Cleaning contractors

Majority happy with their workforce profile – happy with their older workers as they are seen to be more reliable with a higher quality of cleaning.

Limited variety in job roles (less opportunity for retraining) – instead, older workers typically reduce hours prior to retiring.

Fairly flexible working - high number of part-time and zero hours contract workers.

Main concern for older workers is physical ability – roles rely heavily on this (and are more likely result in injury and health issues).

Fashion Retail

Tended to have fewer older workers, although do not express an explicit preference for younger workers.

Fewer older applicants attributed to the typical nature of roles (tiring, stressful, and physically demanding) acting as a deterrent.

Approaches to retention and recruitment likely to be informal and ad hoc.

No concerns for older workers outside of ability to do the role – thought the be sufficient movement among the younger workers to address any imbalances.

Transport

Low turnover among staff. Culture of supporting loyal workers - would not want to force individuals out in old age.

Job roles typically physically demanding and require a good health (e.g. good eyesight for driving) – older workers likely to struggle into older age, but have medicals to formally assess their capabilities.

Employers can adjust their role (e.g. gradually moving from large vehicles down to warehouse).

Workers usually keen to work past retirement age due to low income.

Food processing and textiles

Workers tend to leave around retirement age (65), but no concerns about the ageing population and potential of this rising as recognise benefits of older workers (namely, reliability and experience).

Low variety in roles, so opportunities for retraining are limited.

Usually have flexible working practices, but decisions made on a case-by-case basis with productivity taken into account.

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Conclusions

Employers value a mixed-age workforce, but generally say they already have this.

Employers generalised that older workers are more reliable, loyal, committed and conscientious, and contributed valuable experience.

Employers are fearful of contravening equal opportunities legislation and being discriminatory.

This prevents them from collecting information on age, or monitoring the age profile of their workforce or new applicants.

Most employers need persuasion that the ageing workforce is an issue they need to address, as it is not yet a prominent concern.

Where they are concerned, employers react by recruiting more younger workers, rather than retaining older workers.

Existing procedures around flexible working can be used to meet older workers' needs.

These flexible procedures would cover needs arising from caring responsibilities, a desire/need to work less or a phased retirement.

Flexible working arrangements are more likely to be made for long-standing employees than new entrants.

Employers think about the value an individual has brought to a company when considering these arrangements.

Attributes of older workers, like loyalty and experience, are difficult to demonstrate at job interviews.

Employers also need reassurance around the implications of issues likely to affect older workers, such as health conditions and downshifting.

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Existing flexible working procedures are not communicated broadly to staff and more commonly used for/requested by new parents.

Flexible working is approached on a case-by-case basis, based on individual work histories. It is therefore not publicised, so the onus is placed on older workers to suggest flexible working arrangements.

Line managers found to be vital in determining whether employees feel confident raising age-related issues.

Some line managers more open to accommodating requests for flexible working. Others are concerned about the day-to-day impact of this or unsure of what their organisation can be expected to offer.

Some types of flexibility are less likely to be offered to workers in physically demanding roles, which were often lower paid.

Employers said they do not differentiate between higher and lower paid roles. But there were differences in the flexibility they could offer those in physically demanding roles, which were often lower paid.

Employers were receptive to the idea of 'Crisis Leave', but aligned it with Compassionate leave.

Employers said 'gap breaks' would fit within existing sabbatical policies, and would be more likely to offer career breaks to younger workers. Mentoring and retraining were only seen to be achievable in larger companies, despite being seen as valuable throughout.
Employers are unlikely to be willing to play a role in delivering mid-life career reviews.