

Advice Leaflet - Employing older workers

Introduction

Focusing on older workers

Age discrimination is not confined to any one age group. It can affect people of all ages and at every stage of their working life. However, there are three very good reasons why employers need to focus on the issue of older people at work:

1. **the working population is getting older** - employers will have more older workers to recruit and manage and fewer younger workers. There are currently 20 million people aged 50 and over in the UK. By 2030 this figure is expected to reach 27 million – an increase of 37 per cent
2. **people are working longer** – increased life expectancy combined with shortfalls in pension provision mean employees are retiring later
3. **the law is changing** - by October 2006 employees will have protection against discrimination on the grounds of age. The government is also consulting on the introduction of a default retirement age of 65, with employees having the right to request to work beyond that age.

This does not mean you should discriminate in favour of older workers. However, being fair to all your workers, regardless of age, may help you to tackle the issue of skills shortages. When an older worker retires you will no longer have the same conveyor belt of younger workers to replace them.

So how do you make the most of your older workers? Older people are no different from young people at work. They want to:

- start work on a sound footing
- be developed and trained throughout their career
- have flexibility in the hours they work and the kind of work they do

Human Resource Planning and career planning can help you to manage an ageing workforce effectively. This means reviewing the way you treat people at key stages such as recruitment, promotion, training, redundancy and retirement.

Challenging stereotypes

Challenge the stereotypes about older people at work. For example, many people assume that older people are more likely to be off sick. In fact, research has shown that the opposite is the case.

Another common assumption is that older people start 'winding down' as they approach normal retirement age. However, older people are often ambitious but need to use their skills in different ways. For example, older workers can make good mentors for junior colleagues or use their experience working on special projects.

Stereotypes are damaging to the way we perceive age. Be positive about age and value the contribution every individual can make.

The employment relationship

The employment relationship begins with recruitment and goes right through to retirement and beyond. It is vital that you do not take this relationship for granted – whatever the age of the employee.

This booklet splits the employment relationship into three phases:

beginning the relationship – focuses on recruitment, induction and human resource planning

maintaining the relationship – looks at performance management systems and career planning as well as issues like flexible working and health and safety

changing the relationship – concentrates on retirement and redundancy and the challenges faced by employees when they approach the end of their working life.

The next few months give employers an excellent opportunity to start thinking seriously about the issue of age at work. This booklet aims to provide practical solutions to common problems and a wide range of sources of further advice and information.

Beginning the relationship

Who are older workers and why do those not working find it so hard to get a job?

Generally, older workers are people over fifty. They find it hard to get work because age discrimination is most common during recruitment and selection.

Some of the barriers employers put in-front of older workers include:

- **advertisements** asking for school-leavers or people with little experience
- **application forms** requesting date of birth and an employment history
- **selection procedures** that re-enforce stereotypes about older workers not fitting in or being able to learn new skills.

When an older person does apply for a job an employer can be suspicious. Shouldn't they be in a job already or retired? Employers often consider that older workers are:

- over-qualified
- too experienced
- not what they had in mind when they advertised the post.

How can you give older workers a fair chance? Start by asking yourself the following questions:

Why should I take age seriously?

You need to take age seriously because older workers will form an increasing percentage of the working population. The people you recruit will be older and the people you train and develop will be older. It's in your interests to make the most of the skills and experience of your workers, regardless of age.

You may already have equal opportunities policies, promoting equality in terms of sex, race and disability. Age is potentially the form of discrimination that affects most people and should be added to your 'equality policy'. For information on developing equality policies see the Acas Advisory booklet [Tackling discrimination and promoting equality](#).

Try putting yourself in the shoes of older people to think about why they apply for jobs. Older people may have the necessary skills and ability but possibly lack confidence. They may feel out of touch with developments and in need of re-establishing themselves. There are 2.7 million people age between 50 and the state pension age who are not in work but able to work. Of these, between 700,000 and 1 million would like to work.

Flexible working is often a very important issue for older workers. They may have caring responsibilities outside work or just want to work fewer hours. A flexible approach to working patterns can help employers to attract older workers when recruiting and to hold onto their expertise when they are established employees see [Maintaining the relationship](#).

How do I recruit older workers?

Start by choosing your words carefully. Without realising it, employers often write job advertisements with coded language that warns off older workers. For example, the term 'experience' can be used as a means of imposing an age limit on job applicants. For example, 'post graduate experience' is often shorthand for someone in their 20s.

Adverts should focus on the nature of the job and the skills required. There is no need to describe the working environment as 'dynamic' or 'lively' which may give the impression you are looking for younger people.

Care should also be taken in how and where to advertise. For example, is the website you use likely to attract the full range of age groups?

Traditional application forms usually ask applicants to give their date of birth and a detailed record of previous employment and academic achievements.

This kind of information can cloud judgement. There may be gaps in a person's career record that they are unable to discuss on an application form. Equally, demanding 'GCSE' qualifications will often deter older workers who may have alternative, but equally valid, qualifications.

How do I avoid stereotyping?

Recent research shows that age is often a factor when choosing candidates for interview or selecting for a post.

To avoid stereotyping older workers employers need to train their managers and personnel staff about age diversity. This will involve, for example, thinking carefully about the kind of language used in adverts and interviews and challenging some of the preconceptions managers may have about employing older workers. A common preconception is that older workers do not stay with the business as long as younger workers. However, many companies target older workers in order to reduce labour turnover.

To support the awareness of age issues consider using age profiling. This involves keeping an ongoing record of the age of all job applicants, short-listed candidates, and interviewees – as well as those appointed. Profiling can tell you if recruitment and selection processes are successfully recruiting older workers.

How do I plan for future changes?

It is a good idea for any organisation to plan its labour force requirements, matching available supply against forecast demand.

In the future the 'available supply' will consist of more and more older workers, so you may need to adapt your recruitment and training procedures to reflect the concerns of this ageing workforce.

Skills shortages may occur unexpectedly and recruitment and training processes need to be kept flexible. Older workers often have the necessary skills but sometimes are not familiar with some types of new technology or work environments. These problems can be overcome during the induction and training process.

If recruitment is difficult for certain jobs or skills, consider re-designing the job to make it more attractive to older workers. Part of this redesign may involve offering flexible forms of working; a mentoring role or the opportunity to work on special projects.

Maintaining the relationship

Maintaining an effective working relationship with older workers means focusing on training, career planning and performance appraisal.

There is a danger that older employees may be overlooked within an organisation. They are not always associated with words like 'ambition' and 'development' and can be left to tread water when it comes to career progression.

Employers sometimes make the following assumptions about older workers:

- they can't or don't need to **learn new skills**
- they should not be set challenging targets during **performance appraisal** reviews
- they don't need **to be developed** because they are just heading towards retirement.

Recent research challenges these assumptions. For example, a report by Age Concern shows that older workers are able to master new skills as well as younger workers.

How do I manage older workers?

Start by taking a long-term view of management. Career planning can help you to think about an employee's whole working life from recruitment right through to retirement.

But it is not always easy. Older workers can present you with specific problems. For example, how do you make the most of their expertise without blocking potential career progression for junior colleagues?

One of the answers is to be more creative about how you see career progression. Promotion will always be important but 'getting on' is not just about moving up. Employers may find it worthwhile thinking about other options for older workers, such as:

- a more **open job description**, with a wider variety of tasks
- **sideways moves** to other jobs, giving more responsibility on special projects
- a **mentoring role** to help develop and coach junior colleagues.

Older workers often respond positively to greater choice and flexibility at work. Employers need to be flexible, too, about how they hold on to the valuable skills and knowledge of experienced staff.

Organisational strategies for achieving targets should be written with career paths in mind. Developing the skills and experience of older

workers may offer employers the chance to set new and challenging goals for individuals and the organisation as a whole.

Career plans should be a positive reflection of what older workers can achieve rather than an acceptance of negative stereotypes. However, it is also up to employees to identify their own strengths and to discuss career ideas with their managers.

Do performance reviews change as employees get older?

No. Levels of performance need to be monitored just as closely with older workers. Adopting a 'let it be' attitude will indicate to an older employee that you do not value their work. From October 2006 treating older workers less favourably will be against the law.

Career planning is very closely linked to reporting systems. Employers cannot develop their employees unless they understand them. This means:

- a **reporting system** with clear, realistic objectives
- regular meetings with **ongoing appraisal** throughout the reporting year
- **personal development plans** that reflect an employee's individual strengths and weaknesses.

You can't make exceptions for older workers and allow performance to slip because you think they are going to retire. This may be regarded as positive discrimination. Deal with unsatisfactory performance in the same way you would for any employee.

Talk through the problem first and try to resolve it informally. If things persist issue an improvement note, setting out the standard of work required and the timescale for reaching that standard. Give employees chance to improve and offer training where necessary.

For further information on handling poor performance see the Acas Advisory Handbook Discipline and grievances at work.

Is it worth investing in older workers?

Yes. All your employees are valuable and should have access to training, regardless of whether they are full-time or part-time, young or old. Of course, employers need to take account of the different ways people learn.

Initially, some older workers may be less familiar with new technology or software – particularly if they are returning to work after a gap in employment. Also, it may take time for them to adapt to college-based training courses as they may not have undertaken formal study for some time.

Older workers will have advantages over younger workers in some respects. For example they will have more experience and will often be able to apply the theory of the text book more easily to work situations.

To plan future training needs consider carrying out a skills audit of all your employees. With employees working longer, specialist training in coaching and mentoring could prove invaluable.

Changing the relationship

One of the biggest changes people face at work is retirement. When people retire is a question the government is currently seeking views on. They plan to introduce a mandatory retirement age of 65, with employees having the right to request to work beyond that age.

Retiring is not just about reaching a certain age or working until an agreed date. You need to plan the retirement process in order to:

- manage the **spread of skills** throughout the organisation
- develop **mentoring or coaching** roles for older workers so expertise is not lost
- ensure older workers have a **soft landing** into their life after work.

Flexibility is the key to managing change. Be flexible about working patterns and job descriptions and ask yourself:

How do I deal with retirement?

Good management is about good communication – no matter what the age of the employee. For older workers the subject of discussion – during informal chats or more formal appraisal interviews – will often centre on retirement plans.

Planning retirement is vital. So ask yourself how will:

- **retirement** affect the business – in terms of the mix of skills and opportunities for junior workers?
- **expertise be kept** within the business beyond retirement?
- the **retirement process** be built into career planning in the future?
- employees be prepared for **life after retirement**?

By talking things through you are less likely to be surprised by sudden shortages in staff or skills. Ideally, you will have time to prepare for retirement. It can be useful to arrange a hand-over period so that younger colleagues get the chance to learn from those retiring.

You may be worried that by working beyond 65 employees will struggle to maintain the same standards of performance or output. In most cases this worry will be unfounded but where there is cause for concern discuss the options with the employee. Possibilities will vary between organisations

but may include alternative work – such as mentoring (see below), more flexible hours or retirement. Where options have been exhausted and unsatisfactory performance persists follow procedures outlined in the previous section.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is about an older worker becoming a role model to a younger worker. The older worker is able to pass on their skills and offer support and encouragement.

Mentoring is an ideal way of hanging onto the huge investment you make in the skills and expertise of your employees.

Mentoring is a one-to-one, non-judgemental relationship in which an individual voluntarily gives time to support and encourage another. This is typically developed at a time of transition in the mentee's life, and lasts for a significant and sustained period of time. (Active Community Unit, Home Office);

Mentoring can benefit older and younger workers. Older workers may be moved away from physically demanding work into a more supervisory role. They get a fresh challenge towards the end of their career and greater flexibility in the hours they work and the kind of work they do.

Younger workers have the reassurance of being 'taken under the wing' of someone with years of experience.

Training in mentoring will help you manage the new relationship between the older and younger worker in a structured and thoughtful way.

Mentoring can help employees at all levels – from those in junior roles all the way up to leaders of companies. Indeed, most effective 'succession management' involves a degree of mentoring.

Have I updated our policies for retirement and redundancy?

With an increasing focus on the end of an employee's working life, employers need to check:

- **retirement policies** – bearing in mind current consultation on a new mandatory retirement age of 65 and the right to request to work beyond that age
- **redundancy policies** – with the introduction of protection against discrimination on the grounds of age due in October 2006.

In the future retirement policies will have to be more open and flexible. The age a person retires may be more linked to their individual career and development plans than a set retirement age.

Redundancy policies need to state clearly that employees will not be selected because of age. Also employers need to be careful that they do not indirectly discriminate against older workers by using other redundancy criteria – such as part-time working – when selecting employees for redundancy.

Do I keep in touch?

Leaving work can be a very stressful experience. Some employees may want to leave work and never look back. Others may prefer to keep in touch. You can help by offering to send employees:

- newsletters or company documents – such as annual reports or business plans
- invitations to social events.

Older workers may appreciate being kept informed on any special projects they were involved in before retirement or any big changes affecting the organisation. Some older workers also remain in their trade union membership after retirement and receive union journals and other support.

Further information

Useful Websites

Age Concern

Age Concern provides essential services and information to people in the UK over 50. It campaigns on issues like age discrimination and pensions.
www.ageconcern.org.uk

Age Positive

Age positive are a team working in the Department for Work and Pensions, responsible for strategy and policies to support people making decisions about working and retirement.
www.agepositive.gov.uk

Are you over 50?

Are you over 50? is a practical guide to advice, support and services available through government and voluntary organisations for people aged 50 and over.
www.over50.gov.uk

Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA)

The CPA is an independent centre of research and reference and aims to inform and influence service providers on the issues affecting older workers.
www.cpa.org.uk

The Employers Forum on Age (EPA)

The EFA is a campaigning organisation made up of an independent network of leading employers. Core members include B&Q, Barclays, BBC, BT, Cabinet Office, Centrica, and the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development.

www.efa.org.uk

Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)

The EOC is the leading agency working to eliminate sex discrimination in the UK. www.eoc.org.uk

Help The Aged

Help the Aged is a charity campaigning for the rights of older people.

www.helptheaged.org.uk

Third Age Employment Network (TAEN)

TAEN is a campaigning organisation, working with the media, employers and government to change attitudes and public policies on older workers.

www.taen.org.uk

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