

FACULTY OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE
of the Royal College of Physicians



Faculty of Occupational Medicine

Position Paper
on
Age and Employment

Age and Employment

Key themes

- People aged over 50 now form a substantial part of the population.
- In the future, economic reality will require older workers to remain longer in employment, both for the benefit of themselves and the country.
- Employers need to recognise the sound reasons and the positive benefits of employing older workers and should not discriminate on the basis of age.
- False perceptions exist about older workers. An evidence-based approach is needed to dispel these myths.
- Employers should focus on workability (what employees can do), rather than disability (what they can't) – objective assessment is needed.
- The Faculty supports evidence-based placement approaches and action by external agencies that encourage inclusion and retention of older workers within the working population.

The Demographic Reality

Older workers are commonly defined as being those over the age of 50 years. There are approximately 19 million people aged over 50 in the UK (40% of the adult population). By 2020 this figure is expected to increase to 22 million. One in three people (2.8 million) between 50 and state pension age in the UK do not work. Incomes vary considerably in this age group with nearly three quarters receiving some benefit income and nearly half relying on benefits for more than half of their household incomes.

The majority of non-working men aged between 50 and 65 are economically inactive (ie retired, sick or caring for others and unavailable for work) rather than unemployed (one in ten of this non-working age group). Of those not seeking work, approximately half are on sickness or disability benefit (over 1 million people) and nearly half a million, mainly women, are full time carers. Individuals in this age group are more likely to experience low self-esteem, ill health and poverty. 37 per cent of 55-64 year-olds say they have a limiting long-standing illness. Depression, social exclusion, and marital problems are also more common in this age group.

Most of those not working have been out of employment for long periods, many having previously been in long standing jobs. Involvement in other activities (such as charitable work) is also declining in this age group.

A Business Case for Employment

There are increasing concerns that the economy will face skill shortages and that the social security system will become increasingly expensive as the old age dependency ratio grows. Older workers commonly have skills and experience that are valuable in the workplace. These skills are often underestimated by employers and, with the decreasing availability of trained younger workers, there will be a major economic impact if older workers continue to be lost to the economy. Employers prefer to loose older workers when downsizing or replacing them with younger workers. This age discrimination will not be socially or economically acceptable in the future. If such discrimination continues the increased cost in social benefits for this group will deny funds to other areas of social spending.

Age Discrimination

Age discrimination has an important impact on society. The reduced employment of workers over the age of 50 years is becoming untenable as dependency ratios increase. The number of people over 50 and on Incapacity Benefit has trebled in the last 20 years. Early retirement is associated with significant financial challenges and those in receipt of benefit are less able to save thus perpetuating poverty in old age. The UK is committed to implementing the EU Directive on Equal Treatment in Employment (Article 13) by December 2006. This will outlaw age discrimination in the workplace. In the meantime, a non-statutory Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment is being promoted. The impact on companies that fail to comply with age legislation could be significant. In the USA, where similar laws have existed for several years, a fifth of all discrimination claims are based on age.

Myths and stereotypes

Age discrimination happens because assumptions are made about older employees or prospective employees that are based on inaccurate, outdated, and inappropriate stereotypes. Such attitudes work against the interests of the individual and employers. Employers have a key role to play in avoiding discrimination on the basis of erroneous stereotypes.

Although natural ageing does result in physiological change, which can affect work capacity especially in motor and visual bodily systems, cognition is not significantly impaired in the age ranges that span working life. Variation in performance within a specific age group far exceeds the change in performance associated with ageing. In addition, older workers often have accumulated experience or learned strategies that may be valuable in contributing to business success. The published literature does not support the popular misconception that work performance declines with age. Older workers are noted to perform generally more consistently and to deliver higher quality, matching the performance of younger colleagues. In practice, despite an age related decline in physical strength, stamina, memory and information processing, this rarely impairs work performance. Older workers may use knowledge, skills, experience, anticipation, motivation and other strategies to maintain their performance. Older workers also bring the benefits of often being more conscientious, loyal, reliable and hard working and having well developed inter-personal skills.

Although older workers may be less adaptable or able to accept change, training design and methods of introduction can easily overcome this. Older workers may have longer absences from work due to illness (as common medical problems increase with age), but this may be offset by a tendency to fewer short-term spells of absence (which are often more disruptive). On balance older workers do not have more absence from the workplace than workers of other ages. Older workers are also less prone to accidents. Lower staff turnover in the older age groups has financial benefits in reduced recruitment costs, and also in terms of better returns from training initiatives.

Reversing the Trend

Two main processes affect the employment rate of ageing workers: the promotion of workability and the development of employability. Opportunities for older workers to remain in or gain work will be maximised by addressing these processes.

Workability is defined as the ability of workers to perform their jobs taking into account specific work demands, individual health conditions and mental health resources. This concept should be distinguished from workers' ability, which is related to competence to do the job. The ability to work is a function of:

- health and functional capacities (physical, mental, social)
- education and competence
- values and attitudes
- motivation
- work demands
- work community and management
- work environment.

Employability is used to describe the actions needed to improve rates of employment.

At an individual level these processes include promotion of good health and associated functional capacity, as these are pre-requisites for prolonging the ability to work effectively. Adequate training to ensure competence to do the job and work scheduling to avoid overwork and exhaustion are also important. Improved ergonomics and reduction in the manual handling components of jobs may promote workability.

Smarter working, using health promoting workplaces that provide flexible working, sensible work schedules, appropriately trained managers and workers, good practices in human resources management and pro-active occupational health services also enable effective working for older workers.

It must be remembered that work has a positive impact on health and older workers have a right to work safely. Badly designed working conditions and a lack of training are the main factors that turn ageing into a handicap, rather than the natural ageing process itself.

Good Occupational Health Practice

Occupational health practice exists to promote the physical, mental and social wellbeing of workers and to reduce the loss of workers due to ill health arising from workplace risks. Occupational health practice also ensures the placement and retention of workers in a work environment adapted to their physiological and psychological needs.

For the older worker this workplace adaptation requires an objective evidence-based assessment of functional capacity, hence avoiding unsubstantiated prejudice. Objective functional, physiological and mental assessment is key to informing good occupational health advice. Functional capacity evaluation tools may help.

As in any other age group, appropriate pre-placement assessment (for safety critical tasks or tasks with particular demand) and effective systems for monitoring and ensuring workers can access advice if health concerns arise are important. Effective systems of rehabilitation after illness (including effective consideration of placement) and appropriate health surveillance should also be in place. Job analysis, vocational skill assessment, job coaching (and retraining) and job matching are also components of an effective management system. Consideration of retention and retirement needs to avoid premature diagnosis of incapability by being based on objective information.

Good practice will ensure that core anti-discriminatory and health and safety legislation is used such that workers needs are considered and work is matched to capability. Even those with chronic or degenerative disease may have a healthier life expectation with appropriate work placement.

Key External Actions

Government policy and the development of benefit, tax and rehabilitation systems have a key role to play in encouraging older workers to remain in employment. Businesses, Trades Unions and workers will benefit from recognising the value of older workers being employed, ensuring that workplaces and work practices are adapted to enable diversity and moving away from the "aged worker" stereotypes.

Key Actions for the Faculty

The Faculty of Occupational Medicine will:

- lobby external agencies to encourage them to tackle the issues concerning the employment of older workers.
- ensure our specialists and trainees:
 - recognise the issues that promote the effective employment of older workers and attempt to dispel the myths surrounding these issues as well as promoting the business case for employing older workers.
 - understand the requirement for evidence-based functional assessment and the adaptation of the workplace for older workers.
 - work with employers to show the benefits of employment for prolonged healthy life expectancy and recognise the benefits of disability management.
 - participate in the development and research of tools to ensure effective functional, mental and social evaluation to support effective work placement.
 - promote the development of good practice guidelines to inform employers and other practitioners.



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