



***Older Workers, The Myths and
Realities***

**Notes of Dinner debate hosted by BT.
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ILC-UK

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Older Workers, The Myths and Realities

On Tuesday 17th November 2009, ILC-UK invited a number of key people to a dinner debate to discuss the 'Myths and Realities' of the older worker.

The event came soon after the High Court had ruled it is legal for employers to force workers to retire at the age of 65. Newspaper reports of the case argued that the decision was "good news for employers" and that "for employers, there will be a huge sigh of relief".

But in making the announcement the judge expressed a view that the Default Retirement Age (DRA) may not be appropriate and necessary. And the Government has committed to review in 2010 whether the DRA should continue.

Baroness Greengross chaired the event and Caroline Waters of BT welcomed attendees and introduced the debate. Charlie Massey (DWP) opened the discussion and presented the Government's current thinking on older workers.

The notes below represent some of the issues which emerged during the discussion.

The Myths of the Older Worker

- "Older workers take jobs from younger workers"

There is no evidence that this is true. If it was, the western world would have seen increasing unemployment as we have seen a growing population. On the contrary, more older workers could benefit the economy considerably. If you increase the average retirement age by one year, GDP would increase by 2%.

- "Older workers are not very reliable and often ill"

Evidence suggests that older people are amongst the most loyal, punctual and reliable workers. One participant noted that people in their early 50s take less sickness leave than those in their late 20s. Participants also argued that there is no drop-off in productivity with age as long as training continues.

- "Older people are past their sell by date"

This is clearly not true and it is important to tackle this attitude which some employers have.

- "You can't teach old dogs new tricks"

There is no evidence of this. However you may need to teach older people in different ways to younger people.

- "Getting rid of the Default Retirement Age (DRA) would lead to lots of octogenarian employees"

The vast majority of older people retire before the DRA kicks in. The bigger issue is how to motivate and support people to work longer (rather than the difficulties of managing an older workforce). Older people still able to work into their 80s and beyond and should be supported to do so.

The DRA remains the last legal impediment to a workplace culture based on performance.

Around the table, participants noted that these myths did not represent their experience of working with older people.

The Ageing Population

The ageing of the population poses a number of challenges for employers of all sizes.

The pace of change is fast and today's 65 year olds are likely to live another 20 years on average. From the perspective of pensions alone, it is increasingly unlikely that many people will be able to make adequate provision to ensure that they can support themselves over this length of retirement. And we shouldn't forget that most people underestimate how long they will live for.

Within this context we are beginning to see a change in the concept of retirement. A second or third career is increasingly normal and should be encouraged.

The older worker in a recession

There was a strong feeling that older workers were absent from certain professions. The marketing profession was used as an example. Participants felt this was counter productive from an economic as well as a social perspective.

One participant noted that in fact, some jobs are more appropriate/better suited for older people given their life skills. (e.g. roles related to bereavement support).

In the context of a recession it was pointed out that many people who lose their jobs in their 50's are likely to find it difficult to get a new role. This can lock people into poverty. The recession could be devastating in terms of poverty for parts of the older population.

One participant pointed out that the experience of older workers would play a key part in helping the UK move out of recession.

How can we support older workers

It is vital that the workplace does adapt to a growing older population. Through the debate, participants highlighted a number of ways in which older workers could be better supported including:

- Flexible working and other new new ways of working are key to supporting older workers.

Participants discussed the idea of a 'fund for life' which would support people to drop in and out of work when they needed to. Delinking pensions and retirement would help with this idea. Flexible working shouldn't just be for older people.

- Good 'age neutral' assessment and appraisal.
- Intergenerational solutions.

There was a feeling that there were intergenerational tensions in the workplace and that tackling these was key to improving the current problems facing both younger and older workers. It was felt that the promotion of good examples of older and younger workers working together could help reduce potential tensions.

- Ensure older people are given opportunities to engage with new technologies.

Technology is a major divide in the workplace and is contributing to increasing challenges for some older people. Equality of access to training is extremely important.

- Provide better support to older people who are in transition back to a working environment.

This could include opportunities to gain new skills through volunteering. Volunteering opportunities need to be promoted to (and incentivised for) all ages, not just the young. It was noted that secondees of older workers from businesses can benefit a charity by millions and benefit the older worker in terms of skill development.

- Employers need to think how to better engage older workers and be aware of what support is needed.

Age Champions within business (at a senior level) would help organisations to develop knowledge and expertise and promote good practice. It is important to engage the CBI and other industry bodies in discussions about the older worker. Best practice shouldn't just come within the remit of corporate responsibility.

- We need to tackle age discrimination in the workplace.

We need to create a space for employers to work at this and educate and communicate better, to overcome negative stereotypes.

The review of the default retirement age is very welcome. Legislation does lead to a change in attitudes as well as practice (as can be seen as a result of previous legislation on race and gender). Legislation changes behaviour immediately and culture afterwards.

The media could do more to tackle age discrimination. The media coverage of older people is not always positive and this helps perpetuate some of the myths highlighted above.

- Employers need to redesign the workplace to meet the needs of a changing workforce.

We are an older, fatter and taller workforce yet the design of the workplace has been slow to keep up with these trends. The Helen Hamlyn Centre at the Royal College of Art has undertaken some very interesting research on the design of the workplace in an ageing society. More should be done to promote the findings of their research.

- We need continued investment in prevention (and health promotion) to ensure that people can work for longer.

We need early intervention in order to support people to work longer. And good work is good for your health!

- Older people need equal access to opportunities to learn inside and outside the workplace.
- There should be better recognition of the links between the “grey” economy and the older worker.

Older people have assets of over £1000bn and a spend of over £250bn a year. Companies which recognise this potential could find that older workers could help them reach this market.

- There is a leadership gap within the HR industry

The HR industry could play a part in tackling some of the myths. It needs to become a more vocal proponent of age equality and assess individuals on ability not age. HR leaders have a key role to lead the discourse around a new approach using the concepts and ideas of "age management," a term we can conveniently borrow from its widespread use in Europe. Parts of the HR profession does not seem to have this on its radar at the present time.



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