



# Employer experiences of recruiting, retaining and retraining older workers

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## Background

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

Life expectancy in the UK is higher than ever and is set to increase further. The increase in life expectancy means many people will have to increase the savings they put in place for retirement or work for longer. For many, working longer will be a matter of economic necessity. In response to the increase in life expectancy the State Pension age is also increasing to 66 by 2020 and 67 by 2028. This means the percentage of older workers in the workforce will increase. The proportion of workers aged 50 to State Pension age is estimated to reach 32 per cent by 2020, and to continue to increase.

This research was commissioned to investigate the attitudes and behaviours of employers around the recruitment, retention and retraining of older workers. It aims to go beyond traditional employer survey responses to gain a deeper understanding of employer attitudes and experiences of managing older workers.

## Key findings

- Employers value the benefits of a mixed-age workforce, and generally state that they already have one.

- Older workers are described as loyal, reliable, committed and conscientious, with valuable business and life experience to offer the organisation.
- Fear of contravening equal opportunities legislation can prevent employers from collecting and analysing information on age within their workforce.
- Existing flexible working policies and procedures are seen as effective to meet the needs of older workers. However, these policies are not always clearly articulated and are predominantly used by new parents.
- Flexible working arrangements are more likely to be made for long-standing employees than for new entrants.

## Methodology

The findings in this report are based on research case studies conducted with 50 employers in England, Scotland and Wales. Half of the case studies were carried out with employers in sectors that have large volumes of low paid workers including care homes, cleaning contractors, and employers in fashion retail and transport. The remainder were distributed between five broad sectors covering the economy as a whole.

Wherever possible, the contractors have interviewed both a Human Resources representative and a line manager for each case-study, to explore whether their views or experiences differed.

## Findings

### Employer attitudes

**Employers valued a mixed-age workforce and generally stated that they already had one.** Older workers were described by employers as loyal, reliable, committed and conscientious. They were seen to contribute valuable business experience and knowledge of their sector. Employers noted that greater life experience made older workers better placed to manage themselves and others in the workplace compared with younger colleagues.

**Most employer concerns about older employees focused on accommodating health conditions.** However, when asked for specific examples, employers had limited experience of this in their own workforce. This concern was greater for occupations that were seen to be physically challenging, such as cleaning, teaching, manufacturing and retail. Caring responsibilities for relatives other than children were not spontaneously mentioned as a challenge associated with older workers. Caring in this sense was seen as similar to, but less disruptive than, childcare responsibilities.

**Generally, employers did not express concern about what an ageing workforce would mean for their business.** As a result, employers were not planning to make changes to their policies and practices relating to the recruitment, retention or retraining of older workers. Some employers had responded to an ageing profile in certain occupations within the company by taking steps to attract more young applicants.

**It was rare for employers to conduct analysis of the age profile of their workforce.** The research shows that employers can be wary of either collecting or using information on age relating to their workforce or new applicants for fear of contravening equal opportunities legislation and being considered discriminatory.

### Employer policies

**Employers took the view that existing policies for flexible working could be used to meet the needs of older workers.** The research found few examples of policies or practices targeted specifically at older workers. Employers stressed that existing procedures could accommodate needs arising from health concerns, caring responsibilities, phased retirement or a wish to work less. However, employers reported limited experiences of offering flexible working arrangements to older workers. Requests were more common for employees with childcare responsibilities.

**The availability of individual types of flexible working was determined on a case-by-case basis.** For this reason, flexible working policies were often promoted in a non-specific way. Requests for flexible working were considered by taking account of individual work history, the role of the employee and the potential impact that flexible working would have on colleagues and the business.

**The people management skills of line managers were seen as determining whether older workers were confident in raising age-related issues, including requests for flexible working.** The research included in-depth interviews with both Human Resource managers and line managers within organisations, which sometimes revealed different attitudes to flexible working scenarios. Line managers were sometimes more reluctant to accommodate flexible working within their teams. They were also sometimes less confident about the flexible

arrangements that could and could not be accommodated and were more concerned about the day-to-day impact of flexible working on the business.

**Usually, flexible working for those in customer-facing and physically demanding roles involved a reduction in working hours and therefore pay.** Employers stated that all employees could access policies such as flexible working, but typically not all flexible working options were available to workers in more physically demanding and, usually, lower paid roles. Manual workers were less likely to have access to flexible working hours, working from home and retraining for a different role. Flexibility for these workers predominantly took the form of a reduction in shifts or working hours.

**Employers did not consider that there was any age-related bias in their recruitment approaches. However, it was clear that some of the circumstances that are more likely to affect older workers are potentially putting candidates from this group at a disadvantage.** Employers interviewed in this study stated that recruitment was always based on skills and experience, and not on age. However, using hypothetical recruitment scenarios with employers illustrated that they would have some concerns about recruiting workers who presented with situations such as health conditions, caring responsibilities and downshifting. Attributes listed by employers as part of the benefits of employing older workers, such as loyalty and experience, are difficult to effectively demonstrate at a job interview.

**The strategies for retaining older workers included in the Business Champion for Older Workers' report A New Vision for Older Workers<sup>1</sup> drew a mixed response from employers.** Employers were receptive to the idea of 'crisis leave' equating it to existing compassionate leave policies. The idea of 'Gap Breaks' was also viewed as similar to sabbatical procedures for those who had them; nevertheless, sabbaticals were considered more suitable for younger workers. Larger organisations were more receptive to the notion of mentoring. Employers questioned the value of holding a specific 'Mid-Life Career Review' with workers at age 50 outside regular appraisals and performance reviews. Workplace conversations regarding age, health, later life working and retirement were considered to be of a sensitive nature and difficult to approach.

## Policy recommendations

To gain maximum benefit from an ageing population and workforce, employers could usefully:

- monitor the age of their workforce and recruitment base;
- share best practice and information on the benefits of a mixed age workforce;
- promote flexible working arrangements for staff at all stages of life;
- provide appropriate training for line managers on age-related issues;
- empower managers and employees to hold discussions about work and retirement plans.

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<sup>1</sup> *A New Vision for Older Workers; Retain, Retrain, Recruit – A Report to Government by Dr Ros Altmann CBE Business Champion for Older Workers* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015)

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