

AGE POSITIVE LIVING AND WORKING LONGER

The attitudes of employers toward older workers are changing

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Age discrimination is the most prevalent form of discrimination in the workplace today, and can affect anyone of any age.

Many older workers believe employers consider them to be 'past it', whilst younger workers often feel that they miss out on certain employment opportunities because of a perceived lack of necessary skills and experience.

With Increased life expectancy, lower birth rates, and more than a third of the labour force now aged over 45, (this figure set to increase to almost 40% in 2010), organisations will need to look at employees of *all* ages to help fill any potential skills shortage gaps.

However, the attitudes of employers toward older workers seem, at last, changing, according to a new Government survey of 2,000 employers.

As the first anniversary since their introduction last October is reached, increased awareness of new age discrimination laws has prompted employers to review their recruitment, retirement and selection practices, and to reconsider fixed retirement age policies. Nine out of ten companies interviewed now claim they

will not discriminate on the basis of age. But there is still a long way to go to ensure the message reaches all employers.

This new awareness by employers is partly due in no uncertain terms to the Government's 'Be Ready' initiative, which distributed information to over 1.4 million employers before and after the new law's implementation. It provided, and continues to provide, help and guidance on the required changes to company policy necessary to comply with the new regulations. This is good news for older workers.

But age legislation is not just about employers complying with a law, because by failing to do so means will be hit financially. Encouragingly, what also appears to be happening, is that more and more employers now recognise the benefits of employing a diversely aged workforce. Research indicates that older workers can be more strongly committed and deliver value for money for employers.

As the age of retirement changes it is important that people – employers and employees alike - adjust their attitudes to age, and the success of the 'Be Ready' campaign is only part of a wider campaign by the Government to encourage people to be 'Age Positive'.

But the Department for Work and Pensions cannot afford to be complacent about these successes with employer attitudes.

While the results from the research have, without doubt, been positive, there is still strong evidence that smaller businesses are less aware of age legislation. There is more work still to be done if we are to challenge and change prejudices, stereotypes and discriminatory practices in the workplace. Some of these ought to have been confined to history long ago, but changing ingrained attitudes does take time.

Laws can provide a lead, as they did in combating workplace prejudices against women, ethnic minorities and the gay community, but we know that even today, prejudicial barriers remain which must be broken down. Reducing prejudice against older people will be a major effort by the Government for years to come, an effort that must be sustained.

Today, many workers are no longer willing to accept that they must retire at a certain age. More often they want to be able to choose when to retire. Increasingly, when given the choice, many opt to stay in work. Indeed, people above the State Pension Age have the fastest growing employment rate, with more than 1.2 million currently in full or part time jobs in the UK.

It is important that this positive trend continues.

Around 42 per cent of the UK population is over fifty years old, and this figure is expected to increase by a further ten per cent by 2041. In economic terms, allowing employees to continue to develop their careers into later life will clearly

be necessary, as well as hugely beneficial to both individual employers and the nation and economy as a whole.

Enabling those who want to stay at work to do so is important because we are also facing the challenge of people living longer and therefore spending longer in retirement. A longer life should be welcome, and we must ensure we do not pass the cost of increased longevity on to our children or grandchildren.

The Pensions Act 2007 gradually increases State Pension Age to 68 by 2046. There's now broad consensus that people will need to work longer in the future – and it is important that employers embrace the skills and potential of older workers to help meet these challenges.

Other countries face similar problems as the baby boomer generation retires and the cost of that retirement needs to be met by reduced numbers of people in work.

In the UK, there currently are four people working for each retiree; in just a few decades, it will be two people working for each person in retirement. That is a big social change. Politicians often get knocked, but it is a tribute to the political consensus that developed around the Turner Report on Pensions that Parliament was able to raise the state pension age without a major row. In countries such as Australia, it is difficult to even discuss the issue domestically. Other countries like Canada are attracting increasing numbers of younger workers through

immigration to help compensate for the Baby Boomer retirement. This would be unworkable in the UK. But a difference can be made through changing attitudes and working practices.

The Age Positive campaign continues to work directly with employers and trade organisations to remove the outdated and inaccurate perceptions that still exist in the workplace. Employers are increasingly recognising that prejudice against older workers is not just unacceptable but bad for business – after all many older people are their customers – and they are making changes to their recruitment and retention practices to ensure that the focus is on getting and keeping the best people for the job.

The age discrimination legislation and the changes outlined in the new Pensions Act are important steps. Everyone must continue to challenge attitudes and expose prejudice. And in doing, they must continue to demonstrate that there is a clear business case for employing and retaining older workers, building on the progress of increased awareness and deepening consensus against discrimination.

Age Positive has very recently launched a series of 11 free booklets looking at various aspects of employment from recruitment to redundancy, to help answer some of the most common questions asked since the implementation of the new age regulations.

The guides cover all areas of the employment process; Recruitment, Selection, Training, Promotion, Pay and Benefits, Health & Safety and Ergonomics, HR, Workforce Management, Flexible Working, Flexible Retirement and Redundancy.

If you require one, a selection or the full set of the new booklets, e-mail agepositive@agepositive.gov.uk, or to read and/or directly download the copies you require or any other information, please visit the Age Positive website at www.agepositive.gov.uk

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