

Age Stereotypes and Evidence of Discrimination

The employment rate of those aged 50 and over has increased in recent years. But it is still significantly lower than that for the 25-49 year old age group (71% against 82%).

Legislation is now in place outlawing age discrimination in employment. However changing attitudes and stereotypes takes decades, not months. Often discrimination is unconscious rather than deliberate – a reflection of ingrained stereotypes and workplace culture.

Differences between individuals are so large in relation to health, cognitive capacity and physical strength that generalised assumptions about everyone in a certain age group are wrong. Nevertheless they are common. The diversity within any one age group is greater than the average differences between age groups.

Common misperceptions about older workers:

- **“Older workers cost more than their younger counterparts”**

Earnings of workers aged over 50 are lower than those of people in their 30s and 40s. This is true for hourly, weekly and annual earnings.

Median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in their 50s are 7% lower than for their counterparts in their 40s; and for those aged 60 and over, the difference widens to 21%. (*Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2006*)

The median gross annual earnings for full-time employees aged 50+ was £22,599 compared with £25,709 for 40-49 year olds and £24,908 for 30-39 year olds. (*Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2006*)

A survey amongst different groups of professionals found substantial differences between average salaries for those aged 41-50 and those aged over 50. In accountancy, the salaries of those aged over 50 were on average 29% lower; in banking, they were 25% lower; and in the internet sector, they were 30% lower. (*Paymaster.com, 2004*)

- **“Older workers suffer from a decline in cognitive capacity”**

Cognition (intellect) is not significantly impaired in the age ranges spanning working life. (*Position paper on age and employment, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, August 2004*)

Some skills and abilities, such as vocabulary and writing speed, do not peak until age 40 or 50. (*Ageing, Physical, Activity and Health, RJ Shephard, 1997*)

Verbal skills peak at 60, and reasoning skills in the late 40s. Numeracy skills decline gradually from 35 and perceptual speed from 25. (*British Psychological Society, 2006*)

- **“Older adults find it harder to learn and to acquire new skills”**

A quarterly survey of public and private sector employers shows this view is widespread. Older workers are seen as being less likely to grasp new technology and less able to accept new ideas. (*Recruitment Confidence Index, Cranfield School of Management, November 2006*)

In practice, the success rate of older workers on training courses is as good as that of younger adults in gaining skills, reaching performance standards or attaining qualifications. (*The Economic Contribution of Older People, P Meadows, Age Concern, 2004*)

People in mid-career taking part in pilot apprenticeship schemes for adults completed them in 17 months compared to three years for young apprentices. (*York Consulting for LSC, 2006*)

Teleworking, defined as electronically based working offsite, is more common and growing faster among older than among younger age groups. (*Labour Market Review: 2006*)

- **“Physiological change in older workers impairs their ability to work”**

Physical strength, stamina and eyesight show some decline with age, but the average decline is a few percentage points over the last 15 years of working life. (*Simon Pickvance, University of Sheffield, Hazards Magazine, 2006*)

- **“Older workers are ill more often”**

Half the HR directors and managers believe that a major drawback to employing older people is increased sickness. (*BUPA/Ipsos MORI Survey of 200 British HR directors and managers, August 2006*)

Yet sickness absence does not increase with age; the pattern of absence changes.

Sickness absence is highest in the 16-24 year old age group (3.2%) and stays constant between age 35 to state pension age (2.8%). It is lowest amongst workers over state pension age. (*Labour Market Trends, April 2005*)

Younger workers are more prone to short-term absences while older workers have fewer but longer periods off. (*Office for National Statistics, 2002*)

The uptake of health management options (health checks, health and dietary advice, healthy catering, back strain reduction, sports facilities and relaxation programmes) is greater by older workers than by their younger colleagues. (*Demographic Fitness Survey of 2,500 companies in the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, Adecco Institute, 2006*)

- **“Older people have more accidents at work than younger people”**

Younger workers have a slightly higher overall accident rate than older counterparts. Factors influencing this may include a more responsible attitude towards health and safety risks as well as a tendency for more accident prone older workers to stop working or working in less dangerous environments. (*Health and Safety Laboratory, 2005*)

A ten-year American study of commercial pilots (initially aged 45-54) revealed the crash risk remained stable as the pilots aged and flight experience lessened the risk of crash involvement. (*American Journal of Epidemiology, G Li, 2003*)

Age discrimination: research evidence

43% of workers say they have not applied for a job because they consider themselves too young or too old. (*NOP/Manpower research, July 2006*)

The older a person is, the longer they are likely to remain out of work. 34% of those aged 50 and over remain unemployed for more than 12 months against 25% of those aged 25-49. (*Labour Market Statistics, 2006*)

Age is the most commonly experienced form of discrimination and yet is perceived as less serious than racism, discrimination on religious grounds or on grounds of disability. 28% of respondents have experienced it in the past year. Nearly half believe that employers don't like having older people on their workforce as it spoils their image. (*University of Kent survey of 1,864 adults, 2005*)

Two thirds believe the workplace is ageist. In the 45-54 age group, 70% agree with this view and 72% of those aged 55-64. (*NOP / Help the Aged survey of 1,000 people aged 16 and over, September 2006*)

More than a million 50-65 year olds who want to work can't get a job because of barriers to retaining or recruiting older staff. Only a third of those who retire early do so entirely voluntarily. (*Report: Ready, Willing and Able, TUC, 2006*)

Despite the introduction of age discrimination legislation in October 2006, 24% of public and private sector organisations do not have an age discrimination policy and only 54% provide training on age discrimination to managers. (*Recruitment Confidence Index, Cranfield School of Management, November 2006*)

Around a third of HR managers have experienced some form of age discrimination themselves; a quarter say they have been discriminated against for being too young. (*Recruitment Confidence Index, Cranfield School of Management, November 2006*)

Six in ten managers say they have been personally disadvantaged at work because of their age and nearly a quarter say age has an impact on their own recruitment decisions. 48% have experienced age discrimination in job applications while 39% believe their chances of promotion have been hindered by their age. (*Survey of 2,682 managers and personnel professionals, Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development / Chartered Management Institute, October 2005*)

A survey of 6,000 UK workers identified age as the major barrier, cited by 17%. More than 50% of those aged 45 and over and 16% of those under 25 felt they had been discriminated against because of their age. (*Kelly Global Workforce Index, October 2006*)

Employment in the *Sunday Times* 2005 list of the top 100 best companies to work for is skewed to young people: 54% of their employees are under 35 and 7% over 55, compared to 33% under 35 and 21% over 55 in the workforce as a whole. (*Lancaster University Management School, 2006*)

A Department for Work and Pensions review (*Research Report No 325, 2006*) of 2,100 employers' policies, practices and preferences relating to age found that:

- 49% of establishments recruiting in the past five years said they had a maximum recruitment age;
- 8% said certain ages counted against applicants, especially the under-22s and over-60s;
- 12% included age as a selection criterion for compulsory redundancy and 40% included length of service;
- 21% believed some jobs in their establishment more suitable for certain ages than others.

One in seven workers under 25 feel that their progression at work has been hindered by their age, compared with one in ten people over age 45. More young males than females felt discriminated against because of their age. (*YouGov / Royal and Sun Alliance survey of 1,300 workers, August 2006*)

Almost half of older women police officers think ageist attitudes and jokes are part of police culture. Only 41% agree that the Police Service values the contribution of older officers. (*University of Nottingham survey of 941 women police officers aged 40+ on the experience of ageing at work, 2006*)

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