



# The health and safety of older workers

A guide for workplace representatives

## **The workplace is changing**

There is a higher proportion of older people in Britain now than at any time in recent history and it is likely to increase. At present one in every six people is over the age of 65, but by 2033 that is expected to rise to almost one in four<sup>1</sup>. This is partly because we are living longer but also because birth-rates are falling.

We are also seeing changes in the number of older people in the workplace. The number of people aged 65 and over reached the 1 million mark for the first time in 2013<sup>2</sup>, against 205,000 in 1998. That is likely to rise with both the planned increase in the State Pension Age for men and women and the removal of the mandatory retirement age which gives people the ability to work longer should they want to. More people will also be forced to work beyond the State Pension Age because the growing financial uncertainty means that more and more people are continuing to work longer. Additionally there has been a big fall in the number of people who retire early as employers reduce benefits from occupational pension schemes.

At the same time the recent rise in unemployment and continuing discrimination by employers means that many older people are unable to get jobs. In August 2010 the TUC reported that long-term unemployment for 50-64 year olds is increasing at a much sharper rate than for 25-49 year olds<sup>3</sup>.

## **What is an older worker?**

Aging is a gradual process and there is no single point when someone becomes an “older worker”. Some organisations define an older worker as one who is over 50, while others only cover those either over 65 or over the State Pension Age.

The definition is not important. What does matter is that the different issues that are associated with aging are taken on board – at whatever age they develop.

## **The Law**

It is unlawful for employers to discriminate against workers on the grounds of age in employment and training. Since October 2011 they have not been able to automatically force someone to retire once they reach the state pension age, but have to justify their actions.

There are no specific health and safety laws that apply only to older workers, but the employer has a general duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of the workforce. There is also a requirement on them to do a suitable risk assessment and provide any necessary training.

It is how the employer does this that is important and they have to ensure they meet the needs of any specific worker or groups of worker, so, although a separate risk assessment is not necessarily required specifically for older workers, if there are any issues that arise because there are older workers employed these

have to be identified by the risk assessment and any risk removed or reduced “as far as reasonably practical”.

Employers cannot simply use “health and safety” as an excuse for not continuing to employ an older work, or for not providing training.

## **Aging is not about decline, but change.**

It should not be assumed that age will directly relate to a person’s ability to do a job. Many older workers have a greater physical and mental ability than similar people half their age.

Despite this many employers believe that older workers will be less productive or more prone to injury or sickness absence. They are not. Research indicates that job performance is broadly similar across all age groups, as are sickness absence rates. A report by the HSE’s Health and Safety Laboratories exploded many of the myths around older workers including ones around their mental abilities and adaptability<sup>4</sup>.

However some abilities, including strength and mental agility decline in most people over a certain age, but much less and much later than many people think. Muscle strength decline is unlikely to be noticeable until after the age of 65 and cognitive performance does not usually show any marked decrease until after 70.

In some industries, musculoskeletal disorders are more common amongst people over 45<sup>5</sup>. This is the case in construction and agriculture, and is simply because of the very preventable damage that this type of work is causing to the workforce. They also have a slightly higher fatality rate, but that may be because they are also much more likely to be self-employed, and self-employed workers have a fatality rate that is over twice that of employed people. This could get worse as 84% of the increase in the number of self-employed since 2008 was for those aged 50 and above<sup>6</sup>.

Although health and physical capacity can deteriorate as we get older, several other functions improve with age. A report for the European Agency for safety and health at work<sup>7</sup> stated “Mental growth is the success story of ageing. For example, strategic thinking, sharp-wittedness, considerateness, wisdom, ability to deliberate, ability to rationalise, control of life, holistic perception and language skills improve with age”.

Studies have shown that when measuring the work performance in the workplace, work experience compensates for the decline of some basic cognitive processes such as memory functions and psychomotor skills.

Also, contrary to common myth, older workers can learn new things. Learning is not dependent on age, but the learning process changes with age and speed of learning may change.

In summary, the aging process means that workers develop different skills and abilities as they get older and active participation in working life is an important positive driver for active ageing. Each generation has its own strengths and

weaknesses and the strengths of older workers should be better identified and utilised with the aim of making them a valuable asset in the workplace.

For that reason, we need to ensure that work, and how it is organised, is flexible enough to ensure that any older workers who choose to do so can continue to work for as long as they wish and are able. Older workers should not be forced to work indefinitely however, and we need to ensure that they have the ability to make their own choices of when and how they wish to retire.

## **How to accommodate an aging workforce**

Older people may experience personal and health issues that can come with age, including evolving family responsibilities as they care for their families, spouses and elderly parents.

There is a lot that employers can do to ensure that the workplace, and the way work is done, meets the needs of the individual employee and benefits all workers, not just those who are older.

Key to ensuring that the workplace is adapted to be a safe, suitable and welcoming environment for older workers is risk assessment.

There are specific risks faced by older workers in the workplace which employers should take account of in their risk assessment, there is no 'one size fits all' solution when thinking about how to support older workers. However, the HSE have given useful advice on risk assessment and older workers<sup>8</sup>, and some of the points in it can be helpful when considering individual circumstances.

It states that employers should:

- Carry out risk assessments routinely, not just when an employee reaches a certain age
- Assess the activities involved in jobs and modify workplace design if necessary
- Make adjustments on the basis of individual and business needs, not age
- Consider modifying tasks to help people stay in work longer, but make sure you provide appropriate retraining
- Allow staff to change work hours and job content
- Don't assume that certain jobs are too demanding for older workers - base decisions on capability and objective risk - not age
- Encourage or provide regular health checks for all staff, regardless of age
- Persuade staff to take an interest in their health and fitness
- Consider legislative duties, such as those under the Equality Act or flexible working legislation. These could require businesses to make adjustments to help an employee with a health issue or consider a request to work flexibly.

What that means in practice will vary depending on the worker, but the key is focusing not just on the job but the individual. Risk assessments should be carried out and reviewed routinely, not just when an employee reaches a certain age and when considering older workers in risk assessments decisions should be based on capability and objective risk, not age.

However the risk assessment simply assesses the risk, the important thing is to remove any hazards or manage any risk.

Among the actions that employers can take are:

- Ensure that all work-stations and work activities are reviewed to meet the needs of individual workers taking into account the physical capabilities and limitations of each worker. This includes making alterations to avoid repetitive twisting, stretching or bending. Where “hot-desking” has been established, or equipment is shared, employers have to ensure that desks chairs and screens are fully adjustable and that all staff are trained in how to make the adjustments that best suit them.
- Keep good injury and ill-health records to identify any potential health concerns caused by work. They should consider “body-mapping” exercises<sup>9</sup>, preferably jointly with the union, to flag ill-health and identify trends, analyse work processes and remove hazards. This is a simple process involving asking workers indicate on an outline of the body where they feel any soreness or pain.
- Adapt the workplace to better meet the needs of older workers by considering lighting, heat, ergonomics and toilet and welfare facilities.
- Look at more flexible work arrangements to staff. This could include part-time working, flexible hours, home working options and other types of varied work schedules.
- Design and provide appropriate training programs to help older workers learn, keeping in mind that some older workers learn differently and may respond better to practical training or self-paced training.
- Draw on employees' years of experience by encouraging them to mentor younger workers or facilitate training of other older workers. This can help stimulate older workers as well as giving them new skills and experiences.
- Provide proper occupational health support to older workers or give them time off to get regular health screenings from their GP. Many conditions can be treated if identified early. Occupational health interventions may reduce numbers taking early retirement<sup>10</sup>. The same applies to eye testing. Although the employer has to provide eye testing for screen users, good employers will ensure that all staff are offered regular testing. Eyesight does change with age and poor eyesight can lead to workers having bad posture.

- Ensure that union health and safety representatives are involved in the risk assessment process. Union representatives should ensure that they involve older workers.

However, the best way to retain staff is to ensure that they are valued and stimulated and that their work is rewarding.

By taking steps now to help all workers stay safe and healthy at work as they age, and addressing the immediate needs of older workers, employers will benefit from an experienced, dedicated pool of employees. Most importantly, the workers can work in an environment that meets their changing needs and enables them to work comfortably and safely.

In Germany unions and employers have agreed collective agreements on measures to extend the ability of older workers to extend their working lives<sup>11</sup>.

## Older women in the workplace

While health issues affect all workers, there are some specific issues which particularly affect older women and are often neglected or overlooked by employers<sup>12</sup>. Women are more likely to suffer from stress in the workplace. An HSE survey into self-reported workplace illness found incidences of work related stress, anxiety and depression to be higher amongst women than men in most age groups. Women aged 45-54 reported higher levels of work related stress, depression and anxiety than all other age groups<sup>13</sup>. While this may in part be explained by women feeling it is more socially acceptable to talk about how they feel than men, some of it may also result from the pressures of juggling work and caring responsibilities.

Another cause of stress and physiological symptoms for many older women is the menopause. The TUC has long argued that the menopause is a workplace health issue which is all too often overlooked by employers. The average age for the onset of the menopause is 51-52 and the period of hormonal change before, during and after the menopause can last for six years. While many women may go through the menopause with relatively little discomfort, many others report a range of symptoms from the well known (hot flushes and irritability) to the less well known (sleep disturbances, fatigue, depression, anxiety, impaired memory).

Seventy per cent of those surveyed had not disclosed the fact that they were experiencing symptoms relating to the menopause to their manager. When asked what adjustments could be made at work, seventy five per cent said it would help if their manager was more aware of the issue and 63% said that flexible working would help them to cope with symptoms. The fact that women do not tend to disclose the fact that they are menopausal to their managers yet they would like their managers to be more aware of the issue presents a conundrum and points to the fact that the menopause is still a taboo issue for many people.

The TUC has produced specific advice on women and the menopause<sup>14</sup>.

## **Towards a longer working life**

We must not forget that some workers do not live to make it to retirement, while many more have to leave their job early because of ill-health brought on by their work.

People in low paid jobs are more likely to die young. Nearly 20% of male manual workers will die before they reach the state pension age, compared to 7% of those from a higher social class. They are also less likely to be able to enjoy their retirement. This proportion will grow as the pension age increases.

Both men and women who were manual workers live for four years less, but even in the years before death manual workers are far more likely to be in bad health. They are also far less likely to have an occupational pension that gives them the option of retiring early and are more likely to be dependent on the state pension, and so be forced to stay in work even when they are in poor health.

That is why the best thing that union safety representatives can do is to continue to try to ensure that all workers have a safe and healthy workplace to make it more likely that older people will be able to enjoy a long and illness-free old age. That means removing exposure to hazards and reducing risk for everyone from the day they enter the workplace to the day they retire.

## **Checklist for H&S reps**

- Does your employer have a policy on how they are going to retain and support older workers?
- Are line managers trained in how to support and develop older workers?
- Are risk assessments done that take into account individual needs and abilities?
- Have these identified possible risks that may be more likely to affect older workers and have these risks been managed properly?
- Are union health and safety representatives consulted on these risk assessments and do they involve older workers?
- Is training offered to all workers, regardless of age and is it flexible enough to ensure it is appropriate for all age groups?
- Do workers have access to an occupational health service?
- Are all older workers given time-off for regular health and eye checks?
- Do workers have access to services such as Employee Assistance, fitness, and nutrition programs, that are appropriate to all ages and genders?

## Resources

Facts and misconceptions about Age – HSL 2005

[http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/hsl\\_pdf/2005/hsl0520.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/hsl_pdf/2005/hsl0520.pdf)

Age and Employment – research by HSL 2010

<http://www.50plusworks.com/downloads/HSL%20Update%20on%20Age%20%20Literature.pdf>

Ageing and MSDs – HSL Research 2010

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr799.pdf>

Age statistics from HSE

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/demographic.htm>

TUC guide on working through the menopause

[http://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC\\_menopause\\_0.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC_menopause_0.pdf)

Not dead yet from Hazards Magazine

<http://www.hazards.org/olderworkers/>

Ready Willing and Able – TUC

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/over-fifties-unemployment.pdf>

The health safety and health promotion needs of older workers

[https://www.iosh.co.uk/~media/Documents/Books%20and%20resources/Published%20research/IOM\\_Ageing\\_RR.ashx](https://www.iosh.co.uk/~media/Documents/Books%20and%20resources/Published%20research/IOM_Ageing_RR.ashx)

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Commons library briefing “The aging population”, 2010

<sup>2</sup> TUC Economic Quarterly: #1, June 2013

<sup>3</sup> Warning signs for older workers, TUC 2010

<sup>4</sup> Facts and Misconceptions about age health status and employability. HSL, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Ageing and work-related musculoskeletal disorders, HSL 2010

<sup>6</sup> Office of National Statistics. February 2013

<sup>7</sup> Promoting active aging in the workplace, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2012

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hse.gov.uk/vulnerable-workers/older-workers.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Barefoot Research: A Workers' Manual for Organising On Work Security, ILO 2002

<sup>10</sup> The health, safety and health promotion needs of older workers, IOM, 2009

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/docs/eiro/tn1210012s/EF13235EN.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Payne & Doyal, *Older Women, Work and Health*, TAEN/Age UK 2006

<sup>13</sup> HSE *Self Reported Work- Related Illness and Workplace Injuries* 2009

<sup>14</sup> Supporting working women through the menopause, TUC, 2014