Recruiting and retaining older workers

To do list for employers

There are a range of different approaches and options that employers can adopt to reap the benefits of recruiting and retaining older workers and to ensure they do not breach age equality legislation. Some of these are described below.

Recruitment

Considering a wide range of recruitment methods and media to ensure a broad range of people are aware of the opportunities available. Looking beyond formal qualifications and considering previous experience, such as that obtained by older people who have had personal caring responsibilities, may result in the recruitment of a more diverse range of employees with rich life experiences and with high levels of motivation and commitment.

To do:

- Check your adverts, job specifications and interview questions to ensure they avoid any age bias

- Consider recruiting from new talent pools, e.g. those made redundant. Many are well trained and professional with desirable personal and work related skills suited to roles within the care sector

- Promote the positive aspects of working in the sector to counter the negative reputation in some areas

- Share examples of good practice in relation to the employment of older workers, for example through case studies, to demonstrate to those employers who remain sceptical of the value that older workers can bring to an establishment or service

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Flexible working

Many older workers nearing retirement are keen to gradually withdraw from employment by working part-time or on a flexible basis. By facilitating these options, employers can retain their older workers for longer. In addition, the hours that older workers may be willing to work may complement the different needs of younger workers with, for example, child care responsibilities.

In addition to flexible working, employers can consider opportunities for older workers to transfer from an existing role to one that is less demanding or stressful. This approach can further help support retention and reduce recruitment costs.

To do:
- Develop a set of flexible options for employees including part time and home working as well as phased retirement

- Consider developing a range of alternate step-down roles for older workers who may wish to reduce their responsibilities by choice or as they feel they are no longer mentally or physically able to cope with current work demands

- Establish coaching and mentoring of less experienced workers to enable older workers to pass on their skill and knowledge accumulated over many years

Training

Some employers believe that training older workers is a waste of investment as they believe older workers are incapable of learning new skills or that there will be insufficient time to recoup the cost because the worker will retire shortly afterwards.

In both of the above cases the evidence shows otherwise. Research has shown that our cognitive abilities do not decline until after the age of 70[1], which means older workers are fully able to learn and apply new skills. Recognising and meeting training needs of all employees not only increases motivation, but also ensures everyone in the workforce is up-to-date with the latest knowledge and are able to adapt to changing needs and demands. In turn your organisation will improve its retention rate and benefit from an effective workforce who delivers a high quality service to your customers.

To do:
- Ensure opportunities are offered to all, regardless of age

- Consider investing in older apprentices

[1] An update of the literature on age and employment Health & Safety Laboratory 2010

Performance management

Some employers have been reluctant to deal with under-performance of older workers. Leaving someone to perform poorly in the years running up towards retirement and then letting them finally retire can be costly to the business. This approach can also be considered discriminatory and unfair, as workers of any age should be given the opportunity to discuss their performance and improve.

A good performance management system will help managers regularly review performance and identify problems early on. In most cases action can then be agreed between the manager and worker to remedy any problems which should minimise under-performance.

To do:
- Establish performance management processes which include regular discussions with all employees in regard to their current performance, future aspirations and plans

- Make sure managers have the skills required to performance manage effectively and fairly

HR policies and practice

Given changing legislation, it is important to regularly review HR policies to make sure they are compliant, up-to-date and meet the workforce needs of the business.

To do:
- Review your policies to make sure they are up to date, e.g. following removal of the Default Retirement Age

- Ensure none of the policies contain clauses which might discriminate against older workers

- Ensure policies on redundancy do not target older workers

- Consider flexible retirement options

- Analyse your current workforce's age profile and identify actions to ensure future skill needs are met

- Conduct exit interviews before staff leave to gain an understanding of their reasons so that you can take any steps indicated to avoid a drain on skills and expertise

Health and safety

Employers have a duty to ensure the safety and well-being of all their staff. They therefore need to make sure the workplace is a safe and pleasant environment to work in.

To do:
- Conduct regular risk assessment to make sure all employees are working in a safe and comfortable environment

- Consider design and reasonable adjustments which may reduce stress and ease physical activities

- Invest in equipment to reduce the risk to workers such as from lifting and handling frail and disabled people

Workforce planning

In order to ensure current and future workforce needs are met, it is important to develop a workforce strategy.

To do:
- Age profile your workforce

- Analyse the data on older leavers, e.g. when are they leaving; how many are leaving; are they opting for flexible retirement

- Identify your likely future workforce needs

- Identify likely staff shortages and skill gaps

- Develop a plan which will address your identified needs