

Introduction Themed Section: What do Older Workers Want?

Wendy Loretto*, Sarah Vickerstaff and Phil White***

**Management School and Economics, University of Edinburgh*

***School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent*

Across the industrialised nations, the labour market participation of older workers (i.e. those aged 50 and over) continues to attract considerable attention, as the numbers in employment decline and those who are inactive or retired increase (for a 21-country review see OECD, 2006). Against a background of concern over the economic and social implications of low employment rates among the over-50s, much public policy has come to focus on extending the average working life by encouraging people to work for longer and to delay retirement (see, for example, House of Lords, 2003; and on European policy, von Nordeim, 2004).

In the last five years there has been substantial growth of research in the UK in the broad areas of the employment of older workers and retirement transitions. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation 'Transitions After 50' programme sponsored a body of work which looked at many facets of the experience of older workers including: income in later life (Bardasi and Jenkins, 2002; Meadows, 2002); employment transitions of older workers (Lissenburgh and Smeaton, 2003; Watson *et al.*, 2003); the organisational context of retirement (Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004); the impact of caring on work life (Mooney *et al.*, 2002) and the lessons to be drawn from overseas experience of age policies and discrimination legislation (Hornstein *et al.*, 2001; Taylor, 2002). The conclusions drawn from the programme as a whole were that older workers are a diverse group, facing multiple pressures, and often with limited control over the timing or manner of decisions about continuing or stopping work (Hirsch, 2003, 2005).

Another body of work commissioned by the UK government's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has explored the 'push' and 'pull' factors which influence the work trajectories of older workers (see Humphrey *et al.*, 2003; Barnes *et al.*, 2004; Cappellari *et al.*, 2005; Irving *et al.*, 2005). The DWP also has an ongoing programme of evaluations of New Deal 50+ and Pathways to Work Pilots, which focus on how to get the older unemployed and those on Incapacity Benefits back into paid employment (for example, Atkinson and Dewson, 2003; NCSR, 2004). The broad conclusions of this work are that individual factors such as health, domestic circumstances and caring responsibilities, financial security and pension arrangements interact with organisational pressures, such as job change, restructuring, redundancy and discrimination, leading to the circumstances in which individuals leave, remain or return to work (see also Marmot *et al.*, 2003; Hyde *et al.*, 2004; Phillipson and Smith, 2005; Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005). The Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) has commissioned work to investigate employer policy with regard to older workers (for example McNair and Flynn, 2005; Metcalf and Meadows, 2006), which suggests that many organisations are as yet ill-prepared for incoming age discrimination legislation. Recent research among employers in Scotland (Loretto and White, 2006, forthcoming) indicates that consideration of employers' policies, practices *and* attitudes towards older

workers is paramount in sustaining employment up to and beyond traditional retirement ages.

Despite this burgeoning literature on older workers, relatively little is known about the attitudes and expectations of those in the spotlight: older workers themselves. Existing research evidence paints a complex, and often contradictory, picture. On the one hand, there seems to be support for early retirement, that is retirement before State Pension Age (SPA) or before organisations' normal or contractual retirement age. Some view it as a 'deserved reward' (Meadows, 2003: vii), while there is a body of research evidence which indicates a growing demand amongst older professional and managerial workers for earlier retirement, in order to enjoy a 'third age' after employment (Scales and Scase, 2000; Phillipson and Smith, 2005).

On the other hand, a substantial array of research argues in favour of extending working lives. It has been suggested that some two-thirds of people leaving employment early do so on an involuntary basis (PIU, 2000), many as a result of age discrimination (Barnes *et al.*, 2002). It is argued that, for the most part, choices over when to retire are restricted; employees are more often pushed into retirement by factors such as redundancy and ill-health (Capellari *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, there is evidence that the ability of people to sustain or improve health into older age is better for those continuing in work past SPA (Smeaton and McKay, 2003). These authors have also observed that control over the conditions of retirement, at whatever age, is key to enjoying a satisfactory older age.

A previous themed section on Age, Employment and Policy edited by Kerry Platman and Phil Taylor (*Social Policy and Society*, 3, 2, 2004) looked at developments in public policy towards older workers. This section aims to build upon the theme, to consider the question of what do older workers want? The questions surrounding the aspirations, expectations and needs of older workers have begun to take centre stage in research activity, as the heterogeneity of the 50+ population is increasingly recognised. If government policy is going to have an impact on older workers' participation rates, we need to understand better what this diverse population of older workers wants. In the articles which follow we bring together a range of recent research and practitioner experience, which explicitly address the question of what older workers want and need.

The articles draw upon a variety of methodologies and contexts to explore the attitudes and behaviours of older workers towards a range of issues surrounding continuing work and retirement. The contributions by Stephen McNair, and Wendy Loretto and Phil White, consider the aspirations and motivations of older workers. Through analysis of two national surveys of job changers, McNair finds that attitudes to work in general among the over 50s are more positive than is often supposed, though there is a preference for part-time work as the best means of extending working life. In a qualitative study, Loretto and White explore the barriers to extending working lives. They highlight the ways in which a range of organisational (especially employers' rigidity), and individual (including gender and health), factors serve to create or consolidate barriers to employment opportunities for older workers.

In the contributions by Sarah Vickerstaff and Raija Gould, the focus shifts to look at workers' orientations towards retirement and how retirement decisions are made. Vickerstaff, in a qualitative study of retirement in three case study organisations, explores the notion of choice over retirement decisions, and how individuals' options and choices

may be constrained by employers. The article by Gould, drawing upon longitudinal research in Finland, extends the theme of choice over retirement by investigating how life chances significantly affect the attitudes of older workers.

The contributions by Nigel Pendleton, and by Lavinia Mitton and Cathy Hull, reflect a practitioner's focus. The article by Pendleton is a dispatch from the front line, exploring the experiences of getting older people back into work from the perspective of a former Jobcentre Plus adviser. The review article by Mitton and Hull focuses on a neglected area of older worker employability, namely the nature of their needs for information, advice and guidance on training, the jobs available and how to position themselves as older workers in the labour market.

Finally, the article by Kathleen Riach reminds us that the issues faced in the UK are replicated in many other developed countries in the world. Through a review, drawing upon experiences in Australia, Japan and the USA, Riach considers the international lessons that can be learnt from experience in these three countries, and concludes that the culturally specific impact of work culture and ageism on older workers' labour market participation should not be forgotten.

The contributions share common themes and refrains. The importance of choice and flexibility appear to be paramount, as does the heterogeneity of older workers' expectations and experiences. The significance of choice and control for individuals' sense of wellbeing at work and in retirement are increasingly understood (Arthur, 2003; Phillipson and Smith, 2005). The need to manage health issues in the workplace, both physical and mental, better than is currently widely the case, is now recognised by the joint strategy document produced by the DWP, Department of Health (DH) and the Health and Safety Executive (HM Government, 2005). The importance of increasing opportunities for more flexible work options for older workers, and the need to further develop family-friendly policies at work is likely to be of significant concern in the extending working life agenda (see, for example, Loretto *et al.*, 2005; Yeandle, 2005).

The articles here also highlight the various constraints on choice over work and retirement decisions. These restrictions vary between men and women, and across occupational, sectoral and national contexts. We argue that keeping people in employment is crucial to extending working lives, as it is much more difficult for older workers who become unemployed, for whatever reason, to get back into the labour market. This puts the focus on the need to target training and development and career management activities towards older workers (for example, Ford, 2005; Phillipson and Smith, 2005). The impact of work organisation and design on older workers' capacity and motivation to work also remains relatively unexplored.

In this broad context of the factors which influence the employability of older workers legislation on age discrimination may, on its own, have only minimal impact. We feel that it is crucial to foster a more supportive, encouraging environment for older workers; one that is supported by government, employers, unions and voluntary organisations, and that encourages a holistic, or joined-up, approach to considering the needs and wishes of older persons in extending their working lives. As the UK faces important changes in legislative and public policy towards accommodating its ageing population, employment of older workers both here and in other countries will remain under scrutiny. It is vital that the 'voice' of the older workers themselves remains at the forefront of research and policy agenda.

References

- Arthur, S.** (2003), *Money, Choice and Control the Financial Circumstances of Early Retirement*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Atkinson, J. and Dewson, S.** (2003), *Evaluation of New Deal 50plus: Research with Individuals*, London: DWP.
- Bardasi, E. and Jenkins, S.P.** (2002), *Income in Later Life: Work History Matters*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Barnes, H., Parry, J., and Taylor, R.** (2004), *Working after State Pension Age: Qualitative Research*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 208, Leeds: HMSO.
- Barnes, H., Parry, J., and Lakey, J.** (2002), *Forging a New Future*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- CapPELLari, L., Dorsett, R., and Haile, G.** (2005), *Labour Market Transitions among the Over-50s*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 296, London: DWP.
- Ford, G.** (2005), 'Am I still needed? Guidance and learning for older adults', Summary of report in D. Hirsch (ed.), *Sustaining Working Lives: A Framework for Policy and Practice*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- HM Government** (2005), *Health, Work and Well-Being – Caring for our Future*, London: HMSO.
- Hirsch, D.** (2003), *Crossroads after 50: Improving Choices in Work and Retirement*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Hirsch, D.** (ed.) (2005), *Sustaining Working Lives: A Framework for Policy and Practice*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Hornstein, Z., Encel, S., Gunderson, M., and Neumark, D.** (2001), *Outlawing Age Discrimination Foreign Lessons, UK Choices*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- House of Lords** (2003), *Aspects of the Economics of an Ageing Population*, Volume 1-Report, HL Paper 179-I, London: HMSO.
- Humphrey, A., Costigan, P., Pickering, K., Stratford, N., and Barnes, M.** (2003), *Factors Affecting the Labour Market Participation of Older Workers*, Department of Work and Pensions Research Report No. 200, Leeds: HMSO.
- Hyde, M., Ferrie, J., Higgs, P., Mein, G., and Nazroo, J.** (2004), 'The effects of pre-retirement factors and retirement route on circumstances in retirement: findings from the Whitehall ii study', *Ageing and Society*, 24, 279–296.
- Irving, P., Steels, J., and Hall, N.** (2005), *Factors Affecting the Labour Market Participation of Older Workers: Qualitative Research*, DWP Research Report No. 281, Leeds: HMSO.
- Lissenburgh, S. and Smeaton, D.** (2003), *The Role of Flexible Employment in Maintaining Labour Market Participation and Promoting Job Quality*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Loretto, W., Vickerstaff, S., and White, P.J.** (2005), *Older Workers and Options for Flexible Work*, Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
- Loretto, W. and White, P.** (2006 Forthcoming), 'Employers' attitudes, practices and policies towards older workers', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 16, 3.
- Marmot, M., Banks, J., Blundell, R., Lessof, C., and Nazroo, J.** (2003), *Health, Wealth and Lifestyles of the Older Population in England: The 2002 English Longitudinal Study of Ageing*, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.
- McNair, S. and Flynn, M.** (2005), *The Age Dimension of Employment Practices: Employer Case Studies*, Employment relations research Series No. 42, London: Department of Trade and Industry.
- Meadows, P.** (2002), *Early Retirement and Income in Later Life*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Meadows, P.** (2003), *Retirement Ages in the UK: A Review of the Literature*, London: DTI.
- Metcalfe, H. and Meadows, P.** (2006), *Survey of Employers' Policies, Practices and Preferences Relating to Age*, DWP Research Report No. 325, DTI Employment relations research Series No. 49, Leeds: HMSO.
- Mooney, A., Statham, J., and Simon, A.** (2002), *The Pivot Generation: Informal Care and Work after 50*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

- National Centre for Social Research** (2004), *Incapacity Benefit Reforms – Early Findings from Qualitative Research*, Research Report 202, London: DWP.
- OECD** (2006), *Live Longer, Work Longer*, Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU)** (2000), *Winning the Generation Game*, London: PIU.
- Phillipson, C. and Smith, A.** (2005), *Extending Working Life: A review of the Research Literature*, Department of Work and Pensions Research Report No. 299, London: DWP.
- Scales, J. and Scase, R.** (2000), 'Fit and fifty?', Report prepared for the Economic and Social Research Council.
- Smeaton, D. and McKay, S.** (2003), *Working after State Pension Age: Quantitative Analysis*, DWP Research Report 182, Leeds: CDS.
- Taylor, P.** (2002), *New Policies for Older Workers*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Von Nordeim, F.** (2004), 'Responding well to the challenge of an ageing and shrinking workforce: European Union policies in support of Member State efforts to Retain, reinforce and Reintegrate Older Workers in employment', *Social Policy and Society*, 3, 2, 145–153.
- Vickerstaff, S., Baldock, J., Cox, J., and Keen, L.** (2004), *Happy Retirement? The Impact of Employers' Policies and Practice on the Process of Retirement*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Vickerstaff, S. and Cox, J.** (2005), 'Retirement and risk: the individualisation of retirement experiences?', *The Sociological Review*, 53, 1, 77–95.
- Watson, R., Manthorpe, J., and Andrews, J.** (2003), *Nurses over 50 Options, Decisions and Outcomes*, Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Yeandle, S.** (2005), 'Older Workers and Work-Life Balance', in D. Hirsch (ed.), *Sustaining Working Lives: A Framework for Policy and Practice*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.