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Employers and older workers: attitudes and employment practices

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ABSTRACT

The research on which this article is based examined the relationship between attitudes towards older workers held by personnel managers and directors in large organisations (500 or more employees) across virtually the whole range of industrial sectors (excluding agriculture), and their employment practices. The aims of the research were to explore the operation of workplace social closure and the social construction of age in organisations, and to provide practical information to better inform policy making towards older workers. Analysis indicated that attitudes associated with recruitment, training and promotion practices were: perceived trainability, creativity, cautiousness, physical capabilities, the likelihood of having an accident, and ability to work with younger workers. Attitudes which showed no relationship with employment practices were: perceived productivity, reliability, ability to adapt to new technology, interest in technological change and flexibility. It is argued that these findings stress the need to target stereotypical attitudes towards older workers if age barriers in employment are to be removed. However, it is also argued that educational campaigns alone are likely to exert only limited influence against a background of a long-term decline in economic activity rates among older workers. The research also indicates that future research studies need to take greater account of potential differences between different groups of older workers.

KEY WORDS – older workers, employers, attitudes, institutional ageism, social construction, exclusion, employment practices.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between attitudes held by personnel managers and employment practices affecting older workers. It is a frequently stated view that employers hold stereotypical attitudes which are associated with employment practices disadvantageous to older workers (for example, Casey *et al.* 1993). However, while several recent surveys of employers' attitudes and practices towards older workers have been carried out, there have

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TABLE 1. *Labour force participation of older men and women in Britain (1951–1996)*

	1951	1961	1971	1975	1981	1985	1990	1994	1996
Age:									
Men									
55–59	95.0	97.1	95.3	93.0	89.4	82.6	81.5	76.1	75.0
60–64	87.7	91.0	86.6	82.3	69.3	55.4	54.4	51.2	50.0
65+	31.1	25.0	23.5	19.2	10.3	8.5	8.7	7.5	7.8
Women									
55–59	29.1	39.2	50.9	52.4	53.4	52.2	55.0	55.7	52.8
60–64	14.1	19.7	28.8	28.6	23.3	18.9	22.7	25.6	25.3
65+	4.1	4.6	6.3	4.9	3.7	3.0	3.4	3.2	3.4

Source: 1951–71 Census of Population for England and Wales and for Scotland; 1975–81 Department of Employment, Gazette (various); UK Labour Force Surveys.

been few attempts to examine the relationship between attitudes towards older workers and workplace practices. Two issues – one theoretical and one practical – underpin this analysis. It begins, first, with the process of examining the extent to which 'institutional ageism' (Walker 1993) exists in organisations and the form it takes. Second, there is a need to examine this issue to better inform policy makers about the types of barriers faced by older workers.

Older people in the UK labour market

Table 1 shows that, since the 1950s, there has been a dramatic fall in the proportion of economically active men aged 55 and over in the UK, a process which has accelerated since the 1970s, particularly among those aged 60 and over.

The situation of older men appears to contrast with that of older women whose participation in the labour force has increased since the 1950s. However, it is important to bear in mind that the cohort effect of increased labour force participation of women in the post-war period is likely to coincide with many of the same factors influencing male participation rates in later life. Once the cohort effect of the post-war rise in female economic activity is disentangled from the cross-sectional picture shown in Table 1, a similar trend may be observed among older women, though it is less steep than the male trend (Guillemard 1993).

Demand-side factors have been the primary determinants of this decline in economic activity among older people (Walker 1985; Trinder 1989). This is for three reasons. First, older workers were overrepresented in the older declining industries. Second, older workers were more likely to be dismissed than younger ones and they were less

likely to find employment if they were made redundant. Third, for organisations needing to shed staff quickly, it was relatively easy to negotiate early retirement for those close to retirement age. Research by Casey and Wood (1994) has indicated that voluntary redundancies and, in particular, early retirement, have been used as means of achieving workforce reductions in large employers, in organisations with a trade union presence, in manufacturing and in the public sector.

Looking over the post-war history of older workers in the UK labour market reveals a pattern that is akin to their use as a reserve army of labour: older people were encouraged to remain in employment in times of boom but were among the first to be jettisoned in times of recession. Thus, in the boom of the late 1950s, older people were encouraged to work on to achieve a 'happier old age', while in the recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s, when the UK experienced the simultaneous contraction of full-time employment and historic high points in the numbers of young people entering the labour market, older people were encouraged to take early retirement (Walker 1985). In addition, youth unemployment was given a high priority in employment policies under successive governments. This led to the introduction in 1977 of the Job Release Scheme which had the aim of substituting younger for older people in the labour market. During this period there was a remarkable consensus in which a wide range of official and independent bodies, including the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress, favoured early retirement as a solution to the problem of youth unemployment (Walker 1982).

However, with the rapid expansion of the UK economy in the late 1980s, coupled with the so-called demographic 'timebomb' of falling numbers of young labour force entrants (NEDO 1989), the status of older people in the labour market as a priority for public policy began to change again, with various government ministers encouraging them either to work longer or to re-enter employment. The government also introduced measures aimed at encouraging older people to remain in or to re-enter the labour market. In 1989 the Job Release Scheme was replaced by the 50 plus Job Start Allowance, whereby an older person received an extra amount on top of the wage or salary paid by the employer if they remained in or re-entered the labour force, although this was later abandoned because of low take-up. Also in 1989 the government abolished the 'earnings rule' which restricted the amount of money those beyond pension age could earn before their NI pension was reduced. In 1993 the government established a Ministerial Advisory Group on Older Workers and, in response to the preliminary findings of the second stage of the research reported here – especially

the fact that some two-fifths of large employers were using age as a criterion in recruitment (Taylor and Walker 1993) – a special campaign was launched. The Getting On plan, promoted vigorously by former Employment Minister Ann Widdecombe, urged employers to abolish age bars from job advertisements; to encourage applications from older workers; to base selection on tests of ability to do a job rather than educational qualifications; to offer flexible working arrangements; and to continue to train staff regardless of their age (Employment Department 1994). Meanwhile a few employers had begun to actively encourage older people to re-enter or remain in employment (Trinder 1989).

Thus the context in which we conducted this research was a changing one, with both government and some employers focusing on the disadvantaged position of older people in the labour market. Unfortunately the experience of the majority of third-age workers, particularly those in the low-skilled labour market periphery, remained one characterised by economic insecurity and discrimination (Walker 1985; Laczko and Phillipson 1991).

Surveys conducted among older workers have found evidence of widespread discrimination in all areas of employment. For example, a survey carried out among managers found that 36 per cent reported that there was an age barrier for internal promotions in their organisation, while 45 per cent had received no development in the last five years (Lewis and McLaverty 1991). Similarly, Ginn and Arber (1996) found that 64 per cent of women and 66 per cent of men aged 40 or over cited their age as the major barrier to obtaining a better job. In addition, a survey we conducted of older men's and women's experiences in the labour market (Taylor and Walker 1991, 1996) found that some non-working older workers felt that they had already effectively retired despite being in their 50s or early 60s, and had become resigned to the fact that they would not work again after discouragement from employers and representatives of official agencies. Age restrictions in job advertisements were frequently cited as barriers to employment. The age of the person doing the interview was also cited as a factor in being turned down for jobs. A greater number of potential working years, 'paper' qualifications and greater adaptability were cited as some reasons why employers would be more likely to employ younger people although the older workers felt they were more reliable. Another strong feeling was that employers would not wish to train older workers. Several respondents felt that the only jobs open to them were part time and/or extremely low paid. In the words of three informants:

I've never been idle and they'd probably get more work out of me than someone younger but I don't think employers think that. You can't even get as far as the interview stage. When they see your date of birth that's it. The money they are offering to pay you is terrible – I've been told £78 per week (Man, age 60).

Not at all interested. They'll get a longer working life out of younger ones. They'd not dream of training anyone 50 to 60. They've no great regard for setting on anyone older but if they've been with the firm some time they know they are loyal. But not to start them working for them (Man, age 64).

I was an accounts clerk up to being made redundant and I'd rather do that to cleaning but I couldn't get another office job. I was told, at 49, for an office job they were looking for 18 to 30 year olds to blend in with existing staff. You weren't with it to fit in with younger staff. In my present job, cleaning, you are thought of as a good workhorse, reliable, honest etc, and it's appreciated. But in an office, men seem to think older women wouldn't get on with young ones which is not true (Woman, age 59).

Given the existence of age discrimination in the UK labour market, it is not surprising that older non-employed workers have a negative perception of their own labour market position in terms of the probability of them regaining employment (Laczko 1987*a*) and, as a result, may prefer to define themselves as disabled or early retired (Rosenblum 1975; Walker 1985; Piachaud 1986; Bytheway 1987; Laczko 1987*b*). Research indicates that older workers have a realistic perception of their prospects for re-employment. For example, Westergaard and colleagues (1989: 64) found that, even within the same socio-economic group, older workers were more likely than younger ones to be unemployed at six months and three years after redundancy. Similarly, Love and Torrence (1989) found that, as well as taking longer to find employment following plant closures, older workers earned less on re-employment than younger workers. What are the reasons for age discriminatory employment practices? In the next section we review research on employers' policies and attitudes towards older workers.

Research on employers' policies towards older workers

There have been only a few previous studies of UK employers' policies, practices and attitudes with regard to older people. Thompson (1991) carried out a large-scale postal survey of private sector employers in 1990 and asked a range of questions regarding the extent to which they were re-orientating their recruitment and retention policies towards

older workers. The study showed that, at that time, only a minority of employers were doing so and only a few were considering such a course in the future, despite the evidence from the study that employers were experiencing both skill and labour shortages. Those organisations which were focusing on older people were doing so because they considered this group to be more reliable and because it was believed they were able to carry out the jobs the employer was offering. These organisations were likely to be in the construction, transport and mineral extraction sectors. Thompson reported that employers perceived the existence of important supply-side factors limiting the extent to which they could use more older workers, including a shortage of older applicants and a lack of skills and qualifications among older workers. Another key finding of this study was that a fifth of employers reported age restrictions on jobs. In a small-scale qualitative investigation of 20 employers, Metcalf and Thompson (1990) showed that, in response to demographic change, organisations were taking more active steps to recruit older people. However, it was felt that older people were suitable only for employment in low skill, low responsibility and repetitive jobs, while physically demanding, time pressured or IT-based jobs were deemed unsuitable. Older workers were also considered to be less trainable than younger ones.

Similarly, other studies have found that older workers are considered to be more likely to be in poorer health, less likely to be with an organisation for a long period, more resistant to change, less creative, more cautious, as having a lower physical capacity, less interested in technological change, less trainable and more accident prone (Rosen and Jerdee 1976*a*, 1967*b*; Craft *et al.* 1979). Despite considerable evidence showing these to be inaccurate stereotypes (Barth and McNaught 1991; Casey *et al.* 1993; Davies and Sparrow 1985; Hogarth and Barth 1991), it would appear that these attitudes are persistent.

To obtain up-to-date information on employers' policies and attitudes towards the employment of older people we carried out a survey of 500 large organisations (defined as having more than 500 employees) covering virtually the whole range of 'industrial' sectors (apart from agriculture), public and private, between September 1991 and January 1992 (Taylor and Walker 1993, 1994). This survey indicated that most employers were not developing any strategies towards older workers although many of them held favourable attitudes towards this group. Less than a fifth of the employers stated that they were seeking to recruit more older people and less than a tenth had introduced a partial retirement scheme or were encouraging later retirement. In fact a

significant proportion of organisations was still operating early retirement schemes. We also identified sectoral differences in orientation towards older workers with organisations in the service sector being more likely to focus on older workers, unlike the findings of Thompson (1991).

In addition, a significant proportion of organisations told us that they used age as a factor in employment decisions. Our postal survey found that 15 per cent of employers specified upper age bars in recruitment advertisements. Moreover, 43 per cent stated that age was an important consideration in the recruitment of staff. Surveys of upper age bars in job advertisements have consistently shown that a significant number carry such limits (Naylor 1987; Tillsley 1990; Jones and Longstone 1990; McGoldrick and Arrowsmith 1992).

A subsequent study of the employment of older workers in local government conducted by Itzin and Phillipson (1993) found that local authorities were only just beginning to introduce policies based on the inclusion of older workers. While some authorities were beginning to make efforts to remove age bars in recruitment advertisements, and one-third included age in their equal opportunities policies, early retirement was being actively used by the majority as an alternative to compulsory redundancy in the reduction of staffing numbers. Policies such as phased retirement and job-redesign to better accommodate older employees had seldom been implemented. In addition, line-manager attitudes towards and beliefs about older workers were identified by senior management respondents as being significant obstacles to the recruitment, training and promotion of older workers. In addition, Warr and Pennington (1993) have conducted a large-scale postal survey of personnel managers and found ambivalence in their attitudes concerning older staff. Although this age group was seen as being more 'effective' than average in terms of experience, loyalty, reliability, conscientiousness and team working, they were also viewed as being less adaptable.

Most recently a postal survey among Institute of Management members (Arrowsmith and McGoldrick 1996) asked managers to respond to a series of attitude statements concerning the merits of older workers, and to indicate whether they thought age could be a justifiable consideration in making employment decisions. They found that attitudes towards older workers and the justification of the use of age in employment decisions were unrelated, and concluded that: 'the stereotypical views which managers hold of older workers are therefore not directly associated with organisational practice' (Arrowsmith and McGoldrick 1996: 30). The analysis reported here aimed to build on

the study by Arrowsmith and McGoldrick by conducting a detailed examination of the relationship between attitudes towards older workers among employers and various employment practices.

As stated above, this research had two aims – one theoretical and one practical. The first aim was to examine the extent to which 'institutional ageism' (Walker 1993) can be said to exist. The social construction of old age thesis (Walker 1980; Townsend 1981; Phillipson 1982) argues that old age is, to a considerable extent, defined by social and economic policies. This thesis has been supported by macro level testing (Johnson 1988) but still requires micro level examination at the point of production itself. Thus, while the exclusion of older workers from the labour market has been documented, there is no specific information on the operation of workplace social closure in relation to this group nor on how old age is constructed within organisations. Second, to date, policy development has proceeded without the benefit of detailed information about the relationship between employers' attitudes towards older workers and workplace practices. Despite attempts to educate employers about the benefits of employing older workers it appears that, so far, these have failed to change discriminatory practices. Thus there is a need to better understand employers' attitudes towards older workers in order that campaigns can be better targeted.

Methodology

This article is based on statistical analyses of the data collected from our national postal survey of employers (Taylor and Walker 1994). A questionnaire was sent to a clustered random sample of 500 large employers. The sample was chosen from among employers with addresses in London, Leeds, Edinburgh, Bristol, Sheffield and Birmingham to facilitate the third stage of the research which involved face-to-face interviews with a selected group of employers. The vast majority of respondents were either personnel managers or personnel directors. The postal survey achieved a high response rate (61 per cent) and the reasons for this are described elsewhere (Taylor and Walker 1994). The questionnaire contained a range of questions about employers' policies and practices towards older workers. Older workers were defined as people aged 50 or over. The questionnaire included the following items:

- whether the age of a person was an important consideration in the

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recruitment of any staff they were involved in (response: 'yes' or 'no');

- whether the organisation was currently seeking to recruit more older workers, whether they might consider such a policy in the future or whether they would not consider such a policy in the future; and
- separate questions about whether managers or staff received training past the age of 50 (response: 'yes' or 'no').

Employers were asked to respond to the following attitude statement (on a five-point scale: agree strongly, agree slightly, not sure, disagree slightly, disagree strongly): 'Older workers are less likely to be promoted in this company'.

In addition employers were presented with 14 items which assessed their attitudes towards older workers. Responses to each item were measured on the same five-point scale. The items are listed in Table 2.

Results

Characteristics of the sample of employers

The mean number of employees in the organiations which responded to the survey was 3,838 and the median was 736. Together these organisations employed approximately 1.17 million employees. In most cases, almost 80 per cent, workforces comprised less than 25 per cent of people aged over 50, while almost 15 per cent of organisations had workforces in which between one-quarter and one-half of staff were aged 50 or over. According to respondents there had been a net decrease in the last ten years in the numbers of people aged over 50 in their organisations. Approximately 27 per cent reported a fall in the last ten years while 19 per cent said there had been an increase. Many managers appeared to be unaware of the effect that demographic change was predicted to have on the structure of their workforces and, especially, the sharp reduction in the early to mid-1990s in the number of younger people entering the labour force. Fifteen per cent expected a decrease in the number of older people employed by their organisation over the next 15 years, 37 per cent expected things to remain the same, 39 per cent thought the numbers would increase and almost seven per cent did not know what would happen. Turning to the proportion of younger people employed, 24 per cent of employers expected a decrease, 37 per cent expected the number employed to stay the same, 29 per cent expected an increase and seven per cent did not know.

Asked whether the average age of their workforces was increasing, 45 per cent of managers said yes and 47 per cent said no. Of those

responding affirmatively 29 per cent thought this was of no importance to their organisation, 24 per cent thought it was of little importance, 40 per cent thought it of some importance and only eight per cent thought it to be of great importance.

Significant numbers of organisations were experiencing recruitment and retention difficulties (26 and 18 per cent respectively). Managers were finding it hardest to recruit technical and managerial staff, and hardest to retain technical/scientific staff and clerical/secretarial staff.

Turning to normal retirement age, approximately one-quarter of respondents stated that the normal age for retirement in their organisation was 60 years while over half reported that the normal retirement age was 65 years. Only a few respondents reported male retirement ages under 60 years and only two reported retirement ages over 65 years. On the other hand, the normal retirement age for women was 60 years of age in 60 per cent of the organisations, and was 65 in almost one-quarter of them.

At the same time as experiencing recruitment and retention problems, some organisations had voluntary early retirement schemes in place. Almost two-fifths of the sample operated some kind of early retirement scheme. For both men and women a common age at which they were eligible for early retirement was 50 years, with 57 per cent of employers operating a scheme starting at this age for men, and 63 per cent for women.

Attitudes and practices

Simple frequencies, means and standard deviations for each attitude measure are shown in Table 2. This table shows not only that employers differ in their views – there was a broad spread of views on all of the items – but also that some stereotypes about older workers are weaker than might have been foreseen. Six items were in the negative direction. Older workers were, on balance, likely to be thought incapable of heavy physical work, difficult to train (and, anyway, not keen on training), resentful of taking orders from younger people, lacking in enthusiasm for technological change and liable to be just 'marking time' until retirement. But another six items were on balance positive, with older workers being seen as likely to retain plenty of 'mileage', as being reliable, productive, flexible, less accident prone and not lacking in creativity. On the remaining items, opinions were fairly evenly divided.

Frequency counts for each dependent variable were also calculated. In all, 43 per cent of managers stated that age was an important

TABLE 2. *Percentage of employers agreeing or disagreeing with various statements about older workers in their organisation (row percentages, n = 500)*

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	Not sure	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly	Mean	s.d.
Older workers				%			
– are hard to train	4	39	11	29	14	3.10	1.20
– do not want to train	2	23	10	36	26	3.63	1.18
– have a lot of mileage left in them	37	44	10	5	1	1.85	0.86
– lack creativity	3	19	17	37	21	3.55	1.12
– are too cautious	3	33	18	33	10	3.14	1.09
– are employees marking time until retirement	1	23	13	33	27	3.63	1.15
– are very productive employees	22	41	20	10	3	2.29	1.03
– cannot adapt to new technology	5	35	14	32	9	3.04	1.14
– are more reliable than young workers	32	43	15	5	2	2.01	0.96
– cannot do heavy physical work	8	40	19	24	5	2.77	1.08
– are interested in technological change	2	30	24	36	4	3.10	0.96
– are inflexible	1	26	12	43	14	3.45	1.06
– dislike taking orders from younger workers	5	33	14	31	12	3.13	1.18
– have fewer accidents	8	25	49	9	4	2.76	0.89

consideration in the recruitment of staff, 54 per cent stated that age was not important and three per cent did not answer this question. Nineteen per cent of respondents stated that they were seeking to recruit more older workers, 61 per cent thought they might in the future, 11 per cent said that they would not consider this option in the future, and nine per cent of respondents did not answer this question. Eighty-five per cent of respondents said that they trained older managers aged 50 years and over, while 13 per cent stated that they did not; two per cent did not answer this question. Eighty-one per cent of respondents indicated that their organisation trained other employees past 50 years of age, 17 per cent said they did not and two per cent did not reply to this question. Finally, forty-four per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that older workers were less likely than younger ones to be promoted in their organisation, 12 per cent were not sure, 40 per cent disagreed with the statement and four per cent did not respond to this question. Thus we can conclude that few organisations had a specific policy of trying to recruit more older

workers, whereas more than two-fifths of managers took the age of the applicant into consideration when making recruitment decisions. In addition, a significant minority of organisations do not train workers aged over 50, with managers slightly more likely to continue to receive training than other workers. A large minority of managers stated that older workers were less likely to be promoted in their organisation.

Recruitment, training and promotion

The main aim of the analysis reported here was to ascertain the extent to which it was possible to predict a particular employment practice on the basis of a group of attitude measures and to assess the relative importance of individual attitudes. Thus it was decided to utilise multivariate techniques which assess the ability to predict group membership or a score on a variable based on a linear combination of variables, and can assess the unique contribution of a particular variable once the effects of the other variables included in the analysis have been excluded. For the purpose of this analysis the attitude measures were re-scored so that a higher score represented a more positive attitude towards older workers. The results of this analysis are detailed in the Appendix.

Stepwise discriminant function analysis was carried out with the attitude measures as the independent variables and the responses to the item: 'Is the age of person an important consideration in the recruitment of any staff you are involved in?' as the dependent variable. The analysis indicates that there was a statistically significant association between this variable and the discriminant function. This analysis showed that employers reporting that age was an important consideration in the recruitment of staff were more likely to report that older workers were hard to train and could not do heavy physical work.

Stepwise discriminant function analysis was also conducted with the attitude measures as the independent variables and the responses to the item: 'seek to recruit more older people' as the dependent variable. The results indicate that there was a statistically significant association between attitudes and employer behaviour. The analysis shows that employers who were seeking to recruit more older people were more likely to report that older people wanted to train and had a lot of mileage left in them.

Stepwise discriminant function analysis indicates that there was a statistically significant association between the attitude measures and the responses to the item: 'Do managers in your company generally receive training past 50 years of age'. This analysis shows that

employers who did not provide training for managers aged 50 and over were more likely to report that older people did not want to train, did not like taking orders from younger workers and were less likely to report that older workers had fewer accidents.

There was a statistically significant relationship between the attitude measures and the item: 'Do all other staff in your company generally receive training past 50 years of age'. This analysis shows that employers reporting that other staff did not receive training past 50 years of age were more likely to report that older workers did not want to train and were just marking time until retirement.

The results of ordinary least squares regression analysis with the measure of likelihood of promotion as the dependent variable and the attitude measures as the independent variables are also detailed in the Appendix. There was a statistically significant association between the attitude measures and the measure of the 'promotability' of older workers. The analysis shows that employers who stated that age was related to promotional opportunities were more likely to adopt the negative position that older workers did not have a lot of mileage left in them, lacked creativity, were too cautious, and were employees marking time until retirement. In addition, they were less likely to report that older workers had fewer accidents.

Conclusions

This article has shown that the attitudes held by managers are associated with a range of employment practices which affect older workers. In particular these relate to trainability, return on investment, creativity, cautiousness, physical capabilities, likelihood of having an accident and ability to interact well with younger workers. In contrast, factors such as ability to adapt to new technology, reliability, flexibility and productivity seem to be less important in explaining employer behaviour.

There were also differences in the importance of particular factors and some evidence of difference by grade of worker. For managers a lack of interest in training and difficulties in working with younger colleagues were associated with the presence of training opportunities. For other staff a lack of interest in training and return on investment were the major factors.

Crucially, this research has indicated that workplace perceptions about older workers (and different groups of older worker) may directly influence not only their prospects for gaining employment but

also their prospects for development and advancement within an organisation. Thus this study provides some evidence of the social exclusion of older workers based on negative stereotypes at the level of the workplace. This research has also provided preliminary evidence which points to considerable complexity in the way that age is constructed at the workplace. However, much more detailed case study research is required within individual organisations, taking into account the perspectives of all the various actors, in order to understand this relationship more fully.

What are the policy implications of these findings? First, they illustrate the need to overcome particular negative stereotypes about older workers held by managers, if employment practices which disadvantage older workers are to be altered. Key areas for emphasis in education campaigns appear to be perceptions of trainability and interest in training among older workers, and their return on investment. The government favours an educative approach and seems to have ruled out legislation. However, the extent to which education campaigns will significantly alter discriminatory employment practices is an issue of considerable current debate among opinion formers (Taylor and Walker 1995*a*). As many larger organisations move towards decentralised management structures (IRS 1994), it is questionable whether education campaigns alone can achieve the level of penetration required in order to have a significant impact on attitudes and practices at the 'grass-roots' level in organisations. Indeed, some of the employers in our sample who were selected for follow-up interviews, indicated that legislation outlawing age discrimination in employment would usefully back up the positive policies towards older workers that had been introduced by senior management.

Moreover, an early retirement culture has developed in many UK organisations over the last 20 years, which has resulted in early retirement being a feature of most programmes of redundancies (IRS 1995), and which has been strongly supported by government, employers' federations and trade unions. This now means that campaigns aimed at encouraging the employment of older workers may ring hollow to some employers and older workers. Many of the present generation of workers, having seen their predecessors depart with enhanced redundancy payments or with a company pension taken early, may indeed be 'marking time until retirement', and such a profound cultural change may prove hard to achieve except over the long term.

Second, these findings highlight the disadvantages older workers face

at present in competing with younger workers. Negative attitudes and discriminatory employment practices are reflected in the fact that many older workers occupy a precarious position in the labour market. Research indicates, for example, that older people are currently considerably less likely to receive training than younger people, have a relatively high redundancy rate, and are more likely to be long-term unemployed (Convery 1996; Walker and Taylor 1993; Taylor and Walker 1995*b*). Thus, it may be that the employment prospects for many of the present generation of older workers have been permanently impaired.

Third, these findings show that attempts to educate managers about the benefits of employing older workers need to avoid treating older workers as a homogeneous group. This research has shown that factors affecting behaviour towards older managers sometimes differ from those affecting other older workers. Similarly other UK research has shown that women are considered to be 'old' at a younger age than men (Brook Street Bureau 1990; Itzin and Phillipson 1993). Moreover, these findings suggest that research into the employment experiences of older workers needs to take more account of the potential differences between different groups of older workers than has hitherto been the case.

For older workers themselves these findings confirm the view held by many seeking work and in employment (Taylor and Walker 1991), that their employment prospects are frequently adversely affected by factors unrelated to their capabilities. The challenge for many will be to maintain feelings of self-worth, work involvement and employment commitment against workplace pressure to accept that they are now 'too old'.

Appendix

The results of discriminant function analysis with backwards elimination of variables are as follows.

Regarding the relationship between attitude measures and the item 'Is the age of a person an important consideration in the recruitment of any staff you are involved in?', the remaining items (and the corresponding standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients) after backwards elimination of variables, were 'Older workers are hard to train' (0.72) and 'Older workers cannot do heavy physical work' (0.59). Wilks' lambda for the discriminant function was 0.95 and the chi-square value was 15.14 ($p < 0.001$).

With regard to the item: 'Seek to recruit more older people' (policy currently in place/consider this policy in the future, versus would not consider this policy in the future), the remaining items were 'Older workers do not want to train' (0.75) and 'Older workers have a lot of mileage left in them' (0.56). Wilks' lambda for the first discriminant function was 0.91 and the chi-square value was 26.75 ($p < 0.001$). The second discriminant function was not statistically significant.

The remaining attitudinal items for the item 'Do managers in your company generally receive training past 50 years of age?' were 'Older workers dislike taking orders from younger workers' (0.49), 'Older workers do not want to train' (0.55) and 'Older workers have fewer accidents' (0.54). Wilks' lambda for the discriminant function was 0.94 and the chi-square value was 19.14 ($p < 0.001$).

There were two remaining items for 'Do all other staff in your company generally receive training past 50 years of age?': 'Older workers do not want to train' (0.63) and 'Older workers are employees marking time until retirement' (0.62). Wilks' lambda was 0.92 and the chi-square value was 23.02 ($p < 0.001$).

The results of regression analysis of the relationship between attitude measures and the item 'Older workers are less likely to be promoted in this company', identified the following remaining items (and standardised regression coefficients):

- Older workers have a lot of mileage left in them (0.13)
- Older workers lack creativity (0.13)
- Older workers are too cautious (0.14)
- Older workers are employees marking time until retirement (0.12)
- Older workers have few accidents (0.17)

The multiple regression coefficient was 0.41 (adjusted R square = 0.15, $F = 11.72$, $p < 0.001$).

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