

A literature review on the ageing workforce

A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE AGEING WORKFORCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review examines the general area of the ageing workforce from the perspective of: the physiological and cognitive aspects of ageing; the consequences of ageing; and the promotion of active ageing within the workforce. For each of these sections the relevant literature is reviewed and summarised. The summaries for each section and sub-section can be easily found in text boxes.

The general conclusions from this review are:

- Classifying someone as an older worker on the basis of chronological age is often meaningless.
- Occupational capability depends on genetics, health habits, illness, environment and occupation (Figure 1). Large inter-individual variability exists in most of the functional capacities assessed, irrespective of age.
- The literature does not conclusively support that ageing results directly in a negative effect on work performance. When abilities are matched to job requirements and expertise is taken into account, age has a limited impact. Poor health, chronic diseases and lifestyle factors were the largest factors associated with being out of the labour market, not age.
- The health and physical activity of the worker appear to be the most important factors in determining labour longevity and demographics and ensuring work ability across occupations and sexes.
- There is no clear relationship between age, accident rates, injury and absence.
- The area where there appears to be a clear difference between younger and older workers is that of recovery from work-related demands. However, there is limited occupational research on the need for recovery in older workers or interventions that may assist.
- There is a large literature providing recommendations and guidelines on the employment of older workers. Whilst this literature is of value, it is often based on relatively weak scientific evidence, due to the difficulty of conducting definitive studies in this area.
- The management of older workers should not be based solely on workers over a certain age, but as an ongoing continuum through the working life of the employee ranging from occupational support, job adaptation and retirement plans.
- The cumulative benefits of physical activity across adulthood on physical performance in midlife have been demonstrated. Increased activity should be promoted early in adulthood to ensure the maintenance of physical performance in later life.
- It was possible to identify a number of key trends in the policy documents dealing with the management of older workers; these are highlighted in the main text.
- Those interventions that have yielded the best results have used task analyses to come up with a multifaceted approach including factors such as activity, diet and social support within the intervention.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is projected that two billion people will be aged 60 years or over by the year 2050 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, 2007). In the UK 50 % more adults were aged ≥ 50 years in 2007 compared to 1951 (Dunnell, 2008; Khan, 2009). Inevitably, this has a direct impact on the number of older workers; this has been increasing since 1993 after a previous decline (Hotopp, 2005).

According to a report by Age UK (2012), there are nearly 900 000 people in the UK currently working past the age of 64; eight million aged 54 to 64 years and 735 000 older than 50 years that want to be in work. This is in conjunction with the state pension age set to rise to 66 by 2020 and 67 by 2026 for both men and women. It has therefore become essential to have policies in place to support the extension of working lives (Age UK, 2012). The promotion of working life will become ever more important, not just to secure pensions, but also as a solution to the changing age demographic and demographically-induced labour shortages (Clancy, 2009; Henkens & Schippers, 2012).

As the global population ages and working lives are extended, there is an increasing need to identify modifiable factors that influence the physical performance demands of the ageing workforce. This has led to the World Health Organisation's proposal of 'active ageing' which is the process by which opportunities for health, participation and security are optimised to enhance quality of life as people age (World Health Organisation, 2002). It should be noted that the term 'active ageing' is often used interchangeably with the terms 'successful ageing' and 'healthy ageing' (Oxley, 2009; Boundiny, 2013).

In dealing with an ageing workforce, clarification is first needed concerning the age that best describes an 'older worker'. Based on responses from 1 033 participants the average age perceived as constituting an older worker is 56 years for a man and 55 years for a woman (Chartered Institute of Professional Development [CIPD] & Chartered Management Institute [CMI], 2010). This shows that there are still (albeit small) perceptual differences regarding men and women. The study by CIPD & CMI, (2010) reported that as the age of a person increases so does their perception of what constitutes an older worker e.g. those worker ≤ 30 years perceived older workers to be in their 50s, whilst those aged 59 to 62 years perceived an older worker to be someone over 65 years. In terms of the scientific literature there is variation in the definition of 'older workers'; these range between > 30 to ≥ 55 years (Taylor & Walker, 1994; Hotopp, 2005; Pransky et al., 2005). The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has classified older workers as individuals perceived to be different from their colleagues and peers in terms of increased age (Benjamin & Wilson, 2005); however, for the purpose of the HSE literature, older workers were classified as those over 50 years old (Benjamin & Wilson, 2005; Yoemans, 2011). Literature examining older adults as opposed to workers have considered the term 'older' to refer to those over 65 years, but also considered the term relevant to those individuals aged 50 to 64 years who demonstrate clinically significant chronic conditions of functional limitations that affect movement ability, fitness or physical activity (Wojtek et al., 2009). It is also worth noting the distinction between 'older workers' and 'ageing workers'. Ageing workers have been considered to be individuals of 45 years and older (Ilmarinen, 2001; Naumanen, 2006b).

Classifying someone as an older worker on the basis of chronological age assumes people age at the same rate. Physically, age depends on genetics, health habits, illness, environment and occupation (Griffiths, 1997; Naumanen, 2006b). As a consequence, the relationship between age and performance is not simple. There are many factors that affect an individual's

capability to work; these can be classified as 'determinants' with age being only one of these. Figure 1 details the interaction of a number of key factors in an individual's ability to work.

It has been suggested that the physical requirements of work should decline with advancing age (Shephard, 1999). However, it has been reported that across Europe exposure to high physical work requirements is still common across all ages. With nearly 50 % of older workers (aged ≥ 45 years) exposed to repetitive work, approximately 30 % of these workers reported poor work postures and 15 % to 20 % were handling heavy loads at least 50 % the time (Ilmarinen, 2002). Many occupations place a physical demand on employees, thus in an ageing workforce, the preservation of the physical attributes necessary to undertake required tasks and promote the longevity of experienced workers can be a key objective (de Zwart et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2011; McCarthy et al., 2013).

An ageing workforce creates a demand for research to support evidenced-based practices and policies which promote the productivity, work ability and quality of life of older workers, especially in occupations with a high physical demand. The aim of this document is to review the existing research and policy documents relating to the ageing workforce, taking account of Figure 1. Consideration will be given to whether sufficient evidence-based advice exists for an ageing workforce in jobs with a high physical job demand.