

Age discrimination: Older than 50, so what?

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Governments increasingly seek to increase the participation of older workers in the labour market, for example by revising retirement age provisions, says the new ILO report on discrimination at work. On the other hand, older workers often have to overcome the reluctance of employers to retain and hire them. London-based journalist Andrew Bibby reports from the United Kingdom and other countries where statistics suggest an increase in age-related complaints but also greater awareness of age discrimination and workers' rights.

The death of Buster Martin in April this year made the British press not only because of his age (he claimed to have been born in September 1906, making him a sprightly 104) but because right up to the day before he died he had been at work. For the last five years of his life he had been employed by a London firm of plumbers as the cleaner for their fleet of vans. He was, it seems, a popular member of staff who often finished his day's work with a beer with colleagues.

Buster Martin was fortunate not only to be fit to work but also to find an employer prepared to take on a new employee who at that point was in his late 90s. Stereotyped management and societal attitudes about older workers can directly affect individuals' job prospects. Indeed, workers half Buster Martin's age can sometimes find that they are turned down for jobs or for promotion simply because they are deemed too old.

Encouragingly, the new ILO report suggests that awareness of age discrimination is growing, and that more is being done to combat it. The report's principal author Lisa Wong points out that older workers are potentially particularly affected by the current economic crisis, but she adds that at least 29 countries now have legislation explicitly prohibiting direct and indirect age discrimination. "Legislation as well as policies at the national and enterprise level can play a major role in overcoming stereotypes concerning older workers. A number of countries have carried out large-scale government-sponsored information campaigns to overcome the reluctance to retain and hire older workers," she says.

Growing public awareness

Paradoxically, a rise in the numbers of reported allegations of age discrimination may point to growing public awareness of the issue and of the rights of older people. In France, HALDE (*Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l'Égalité*) received 599 age discrimination claims in 2009 compared with only 78 in 2005. In the United Kingdom, age discrimination employment tribunal claims rose from 972 in 2006–07 to almost four thousand in 2008–09. It is a similar story in, among other countries, Australia, Belgium and the United States.

The ILO specifically addressed the particular situation of older workers (usually taken to be those aged 50 and above) as long ago as 1980, in the Older Workers Recommendation (No. 162). This offers a constructive framework for decent and productive conditions of work for older workers who choose or need to have paid employment. The Recommendation calls for equality of opportunity and treatment for older workers, among other things in vocational training, employment security and career development. The Recommendation also calls for measures "ensuring that, in a framework allowing for a gradual transition from working life to freedom of activity, retirement is voluntary".

The Recommendation has been complemented more recently by a short information sheet ([Conditions of work and employment: Issues for older workers](#)) prepared by the ILO offering advice on employing older workers. This points to the benefits which employers can gain from employing both experienced older workers and younger workers. Flexibility on working time for older workers may be one way to retain experienced workers, it suggests: "By offering older workers choices as to how their working time is arranged, employers benefit from both the retention of experience and skills of these workers and from the transfer of their organizational knowledge to younger workers," it argues.

Recognizing older workers' needs

The ILO information sheet adds that there is also the need to recognize that older workers themselves have different needs. Some need to continue to work for their living, some simply want to carry on paid employment, whilst others may not be able to work or may have the financial security which means that they can retire and enjoy leisure pursuits, it says. Although the traditional abrupt line of division between working life and retirement may now increasingly be becoming blurred, the introduction of enlightened policies for the employment of older workers still needs to go hand-in-hand with adequate measures for pensions.

The call for appropriate work for older workers has been listened to at least by some employers, according to AARP, the US non-profit organization representing Americans over the age of 50. AARP was instrumental in 2006 in the launch of the Alliance for an Experienced Workforce, an initiative which also included the US Society for Human Resource Management and more than twenty US industry associations. AARP helps its members where appropriate to take up new occupations, and has among other things worked with US trucking associations to encourage older people to consider becoming commercial truck drivers.

AARP also operates an annual Innovative Employer Award which recognizes employers across the globe which AARP says operate good employment practices. The 2010 award winners included, for example, the care provider Sozial-Holding in the German town of Mönchengladbach, where about 30 per cent of the 800 staff are over fifty. Sozial-Holding offers access to specialized training for these staff, under the slogan *Älter als 50, na und?* (Older than 50, so what?). Sozial-Holding's managing director talks of the importance of harnessing both the energy of young people and the loyalty and experience of older workers.

Another 2010 award winner was the Austrian city of Salzburg's utilities operator Salzburg AG für Energie, Verkehr und Telekommunikation, which was praised by AARP for its lifecycle approach to employee management *GENERA*, designed to accompany employees through different phases of their life at the workplace. The major German retailer Galeria Kaufhof was another company praised for the training offered its older workers.

Retailers elsewhere have also taken steps to attract older workers. In the United Kingdom, the hardware store B&Q has more than a quarter of its 30,000 employees over 50, including the 96-year-old customer service assistant Syd Prior. The J Sainsbury grocery chain has also taken steps to welcome workers over 50 for its stores. There is good business sense for doing so: according to one report, an 18-year-old UK supermarket worker stays on average six months in the job, whilst a 60-year-old typically stays for five years.

Internationally, a number of companies in the retail sector are taking a lead in their approach to older workers. There will be a valuable opportunity to discuss good practices at an ILO Global Dialogue Forum on older workers in retail, which will be held in September, according to John Sendanyoye of the ILO's Sectoral Activities Department. A new ILO report which will be presented to the Forum is currently under production.