

Executive Summary:
**Facts and Misunderstandings
about Demography and
the Workforce**

Commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions
on behalf of the Age Partnership group

Tony Warnes and Alex John
Sheffield Institute for Studies on Ageing

age**partnership**group
Targeting Employers





Aims and purpose

This pamphlet is about the ageing of the British population and labour force and, more generally, about 'age' and 'workers'. It is particularly concerned to get the facts straight and to dispel the common myths about both demographic ageing and the capabilities of workers of different ages. It deals with the changing age structure, and summarises what we know about the comparative strengths of younger and older workers. The final sections examine inappropriate and good human resources practices in relation to age, and looks to the future. There will be further ageing of the labour force: how should employers and managers respond? This booklet provides the background information, and will help in the formulation of human resources practices that are more productive and rid of age-discrimination.

The Age Partnership Group (APG)

This research is one of a number of projects commissioned by the *Department for Work and Pensions* (DWP) on behalf of the *Age Partnership Group* (APG) as part of the *National Guidance Campaign* (NGC). The APG was formed in 2002 and comprises 19 national organisations that represent different aspects of employers needs, for example, small business representatives, trade unions, HR and Personnel Managers, local government, other government departments, accountancy, insurance and training organisations.

The NGC aims to raise employers' awareness of, and ability to adopt, practical information and guidance on age-diverse employment practices, including flexible employment and retirement opportunities, in order to increase the recruitment, selection, promotion, training and retention of older workers, prior to the implementation of age discrimination legislation, scheduled to be introduced October 2006.

Legislation

The Government has supported the European Employment Directive on Equal Treatment and made a commitment to introduce age legislation, covering employment and vocational training, scheduled to be implemented October 2006. The implementation period has given time to consult widely with employers, individuals and expert groups, towards the development of clear and workable legislation. It is intended that employers be given sufficient time to familiarise themselves, and adapt their practices, before legislation is implemented.

Views have already been sought on a number of issues including: retirement age, recruitment, selection and promotion, pay and non-pay benefits, unfair dismissal, employment-related insurance and statutory redundancy payments. The last consultation closed on 20 October 2003. There will be a further consultation on the draft age regulations when they are published in 2005.

Disclaimer

The *Age Partnership Group* (APG) and the *Department for Work and Pensions* (DWP) have commissioned this report to provide information towards ongoing development work. Responsibility for the views expressed in this report rests solely with the authors. The members of the APG and the DWP do not accept responsibility for the authors' views.

Summary of key findings

Population ageing

1. The long-term ageing of the British population has recently been reinforced by both a very low birth rate (at 'below replacement' level), and faster reductions in death rates during old age. The United Kingdom population is likely to decrease from the 2030s. Contemporary concerns about population ageing stem from the prospects of more rapid progress in reducing old-age mortality and, in the long-term, of new ways of managing the basic physiology of human ageing.

Changes in the age and gender composition of the labour force

2. The normal working ages have contracted, with a rise in the average age of entry to work and a fall in the average age of exits. Over 50 years, there has been a massive decline in the participation in work of men aged 65 (State Pension Age for men) or older, and for the last 20 years a marked fall in the rates among those aged 55-64 years. At the same time, women's labour force participation rates have increased, not least among those aged 50-59 years.
3. The combination of demographic ageing, increases in the duration of full-time education and college-based training, and earlier retirement ages has serious implications for the labour force and the economy. There will be an increasing number of dependent children, 'trainees' and 'retired' and, unless current trends change, a reduction in the size of the labour force.
4. Within the habitual working ages, changes in the age composition of the labour force are intricate and reflect the recent history of fertility and, more particularly, annual birth

totals. The consistently low birth rate since the 1970s produced low total births during the 1990s, which means that from the mid-2010s a persistent fall in the number of people aged 20-29 years begins.

5. The most likely scenario in the medium term is for a decreasing supply of very young workers, and a relative increase in older workers, aged 50 or more years. To maintain and increase the labour supply, the skills and productive capacities of older workers need to be retained.

The strengths and limitations of older workers: facts and myths

6. There are changes in the 'average' human body and brain with increased age, but most of the substantial changes occur well after the normal working ages and are totally irrelevant to the workplace. In any case, the changes are average tendencies, and the individual variations are immense. There is virtually no evidence of a decline in work performance with age.
7. To raise older workers contribution to the workforce and the economy, the key change required is that training is carefully tailored to their learning abilities. The notion that older workers are less 'trainable' is simplistic, and much of the problem lies with poor training.
8. Stereotypes about the restricted capabilities of older workers should be scrapped and replaced with an individualised appraisal. Companies and the national economy will benefit if the capacities and potential of older workers are more fully realised.
9. The first steps are further to dismantle the incentives for early retirement, and to find ways of encouraging 'phased retirement'.

Section 1 Population ageing and the labour force

Main Points

- The British population has been ageing for over a century.
- Interestingly, the rate of ageing was higher during the 1950s and 1960s than today.
- Since the 1970s, there have been two principal causes of population ageing: a very low 'below replacement' birth rate, and faster reductions in death rates during old age.
- The contemporary concern about population ageing is fuelled by the prospect of more rapid progress in reducing death in later life, both from the most common ailments and, in the future, through new ways of managing the physiology of human ageing.

1.1

Just about everyone in Britain is aware that the population is ageing. Statements such as 'we are living longer' are as commonplace as 'the traffic is getting worse'. That does not mean, of course, that many correctly understand the process. Few can evaluate whether assertions such as 'we will all live to 100' or 'we are going to have to work until our seventies' are forecasts or fantasy. Neither of these predictions will ever be literally true, but they are not dismissed as nonsense. What more subtle changes do they refer to?

1.2

The ageing of the population, and even more the changing demographic profile of the labour force, is a complex process. Both understandably give rise to many garbled accounts and misconceptions. In particular, several myths and common simplifications have gained currency, like 'we will all live to 100'. This pamphlet and the accompanying fuller research report clarify what is fact and what is fanciful. They aim to help employers and managers respond positively to the ageing of the workforce.

Population ageing

1.3

The British population has been ageing since the 1870s. This means that both the average age and the percentage that are 'older' have been growing. Although the age that we take to define the beginning of old age is arbitrary and disputed, for most purposes, 60 or 65 years of age is useful. In the labour force, however, older workers are normally taken as those aged 50 or more years.

1.4

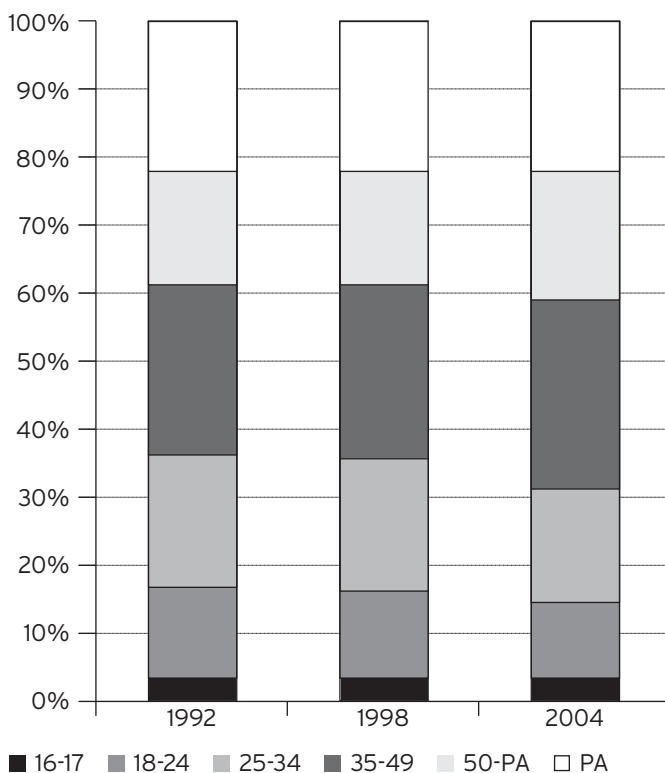
A fall in births promptly reduces the number of children in the population. Without any other change, that quickly results in older people becoming a larger share of the total - even if the number remains static. Indeed, the level of fertility is the main control on the age structure of a population. The very low birth rates during the 1930s depression and the early 1940s were a major boost to population ageing. The share of the population in the pensionable ages increased from 9.6% in 1931 to 13.6% in 1951.



1.5

After 1944 there were two decades of relatively high fertility, but from the early 1970s the birth rate again fell to a very low level. It is now well below the 'replacement rate' in many European countries. That means that births are fewer than deaths, which implies not only that the population will continue to age but also, unless things change, will soon decrease. An early sign, a reduction in the number aged 25-34 years, was the most striking change in Britain's adult age structure during the 1990s (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The changing age structure of the adult population in Great Britain



Source: Labour Force Survey, Historical Quarterly Supplement 2004, Table 6a. Available online at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7906>

1.6

There is however another important control of the pace of population ageing, death rates or mortality. Until the middle of the 20th century, the main gain from improved living conditions and advances in scientific medicine was a huge reduction in infant mortality. This continues and has reached very low

levels. As recently as 1900, one-in-seven babies died before they reached one year of age: now the figure is 0.5 in a thousand.

1.7

For the last three decades, and with accelerating pace, there have been substantial reductions in late-age mortality. Average life expectancy at age 65 years has increased from around 12.5 years in the early 1960s to around 17 years today, with women living longer than men. For more than two decades, one result has been that the official projections of the growth of the older population, particularly in advanced old age, have consistently undershot. Sensible adjustments have been made in many fields, but we have been slow to adapt both our retirement and pensions arrangements and the ways in which we manage workers of different age.

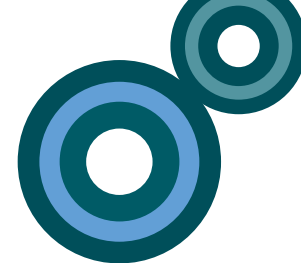
1.8

The third influence on population ageing is migration. The smaller the region, the greater the likely effect on the age structure. London and the South East has a strong net in-movement of very young adults, both from abroad and from the rest of the UK, but it loses people aged in the thirties and above. As a result it has a younger adult population and labour force than the rest of the country. Its age structure contrasts strongly with that of South West England (which attracts retirees more than any other region), and Scotland (which loses more of its young adults than any other region). The population of Scotland is already declining.

1.9

Advances in scientific medicine have recently been accelerated by genetics, and serious biomedical scientists envisage major breakthroughs in understanding the most common pathologies of old age. They also foresee, on a longer time scale, therapies that intervene in the basic physiology of ageing. As, moreover, there is no prospect of a higher birth rate, further population ageing is universally predicted.

Section 2 The age structure of the labour force



Main Points

The British labour force is ageing:

- partly because of the reduced population aged in their twenties and thirties;
- because of the later age that young people enter work;
- and through the spread of early retirement.

- The number of workers aged less than 35 years is falling, with the fastest decreases among those aged 18-24 years.
- Since 1992 the number of workers aged 50 or over has increased, partly through rising female participation, and partly through the reduction of early retirement.

- The changing age structure of the labour force is accompanied by a progressive rise in skill levels and therefore career aspirations, particularly among young workers.

2.1

The age structure of the labour force has changed considerably in the long term and in recent decades. One reason has been demographic change, but 'modernisation', 'social policy' and 'custom' factors have also been important. Put simply, since mid-Victorian times we have transformed the life course into three stages: childhood, the years of economic and family 'production', and retirement. The first and third of these stages of life have expanded at the expense of the 'working years'.

2.2

Social policy has converted childhood and beyond into a protracted period of education and training, and it has 'invented' retirement as a normal stage of life. Until the 1870s, most children were working by the age of 12, if not for a wage in domestic production or on farms. Through the first half of the 20th century, many men continued working into their late sixties and even older. Retirement wasn't really an option until after 1944 when state and occupational pensions spread.

By the 1960s, except for the self-employed and agricultural workers, 'retirement' was near universal.

2.3

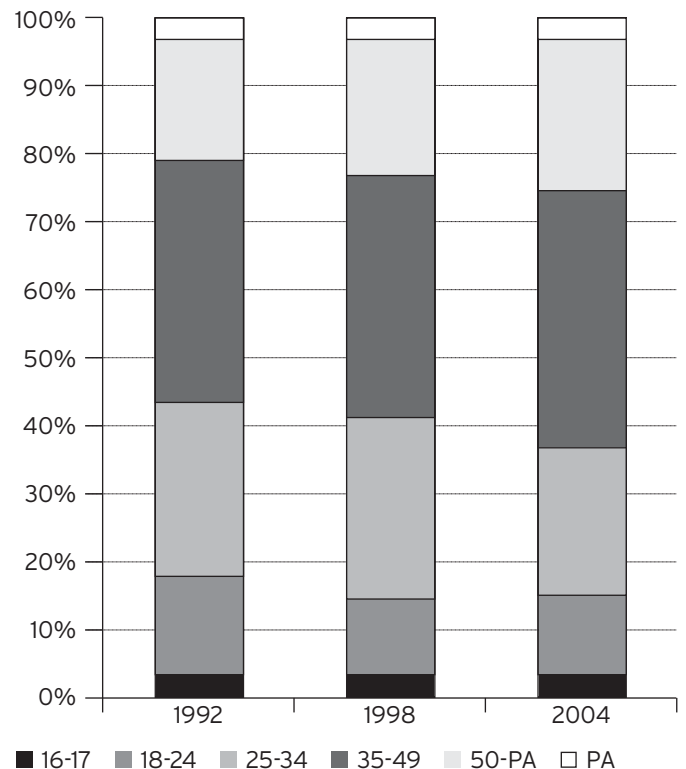
The overall effect has been to constrict the working period to fewer years-of-age, for most now from the late-teens or early-twenties to the late fifties. This has been accompanied by two other radical changes: the rising skills of the labour force, particularly through the reduction of unskilled-manual work, and the substantial increase of women in paid work.

2.4

These trends continue and partly reflect the changing population age structure. The average ages of those in the working age groups and in the labour force are rising. As shown in Figure 2, the major change over the last 12 years has been the decreased number of young workers. Those aged less than 45 years have fallen from 43 to 37 per cent of the total. The number aged 18-24 years fell faster than the numbers aged either 16-17 or 25-34 years. Why is this happening? It is

partly a demographic effect (the low birth rates of the 1970s compared to the 1960s), and partly the result of the spread of further, higher and college-based vocational education. The most rapidly growing age group of workers (by 22%) was from the fifties to the statutory pensionable age. The reasons were again partly demographic (the high birth rates of the 1940s compared to the 1930s), and partly the consequence of workers' decisions and changed behaviour - early retirement has recently stabilised, and there has been rising participation by women aged 50 or more years.

Figure 2. The ageing of the labour force of Great Britain, 1992-2004

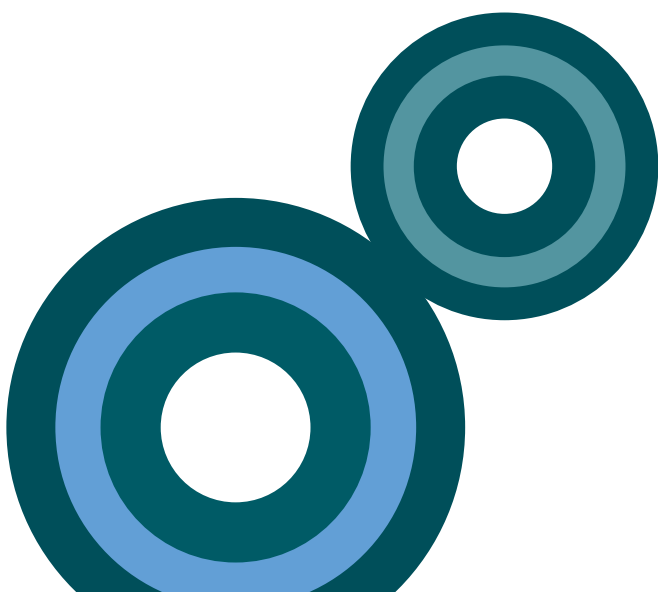


Notes: PA is the current 'pensionable ages', 60 or more years for women, 65 or more years for men.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Historical Quarterly Supplement 2004, Table 6a: Summary by Age (All persons) (seasonally adjusted). Available online at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7906>

2.5

The main implication for employers is that the labour force is ageing. The effect should not be exaggerated, but the approximate average age of the labour force has risen from 38.9 years in Spring 1992 to 40.6 years in Spring 2004. The supply of novice and young workers is falling. More particularly, the supply of very young workers with few skills or clear views about what work they are willing to do will fall markedly. Some employers, perhaps particularly in the personal service and retail sector, will face increasing recruitment problems. Employers need to adjust to a larger share of middle-aged and older workers. The starting presumption should be that they are a resource, not a liability, and their capabilities and potential should be carefully assessed. It is in the interest of employers, future older people and the national economy that the capacities and potential of older workers are more fully realised.



Section 3 The dynamics of the labour force: facts and myths

Main Points

- The labour force is highly dynamic and the age, gender, income, class and ethnic profiles within the labour force create constant change
- There are continuous 'entries' and 'exits' to and from the labour force; jobs are created and die every day. The resulting churn is vast, and costly in recruitment and induction.
- For three decades, early retirement increased, and we are only now starting to see a slowing down. With the requirement for people to save for longer to supplement their retirement - this will have to change.

3.1

Labour markets are highly dynamic, and the age, gender, income, class and ethnic profiles of the labour force change constantly. Who is actually in and out of work turns over every day. The churn is similar to the fluctuating population of city centres, where people come and go to workplaces, shops, hospitals and colleges all the time.

3.2

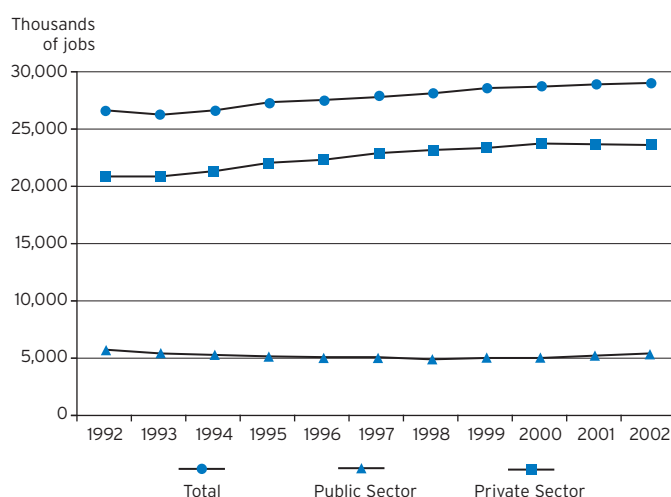
The exaggerated metaphor emphasises the constant changes in the labour market, and challenges the still widespread view that the number of jobs in the economy is fixed. This 'lump of labour' fallacy could not be countenanced in the United States, where millions of jobs are created or lost in one year. It survives in the UK partly because frequently we have in mind the 'economically active' population (which includes those actively seeking work but unemployed), not the number actually in jobs.

3.3

Over the long term the number of jobs fluctuates with booms and slumps, with the participation rates by gender and at different ages, and with the size of the population. The basic demography comes last. It is true that over the last decade the total number of jobs in Britain has shown steady if moderate growth (Figure 3).

For private-sector jobs alone, the number increased by more than 25% between 1993 and 2000 (although some of this gain may have been the privatisation of public-sector jobs).

Figure 3. The size of the British labour force, 1992-2002



Source: Ole Black, Rhys Herbert and Ian Richardson, *Jobs in the Public Sector*, June 2002. Office for National Statistics, Newport, Wales. Available online at http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/economic_trends/ETSep03_Black-Herbert.pdf

3.4

Who is actually in work at any time is the result of both employers' and employees' decisions. Many people enter and leave the labour force every month and every year. Those leaving full-time education and those starting final



retirement play a part. If, for the sake of argument, the working ages are from 18 to 59 years of age and at each single year of age there are the same number of people, then 2.4 per cent of the labour force will exit in one year, and 2.4 per cent will join. Near enough, one-in-twenty of the labour force turns over.

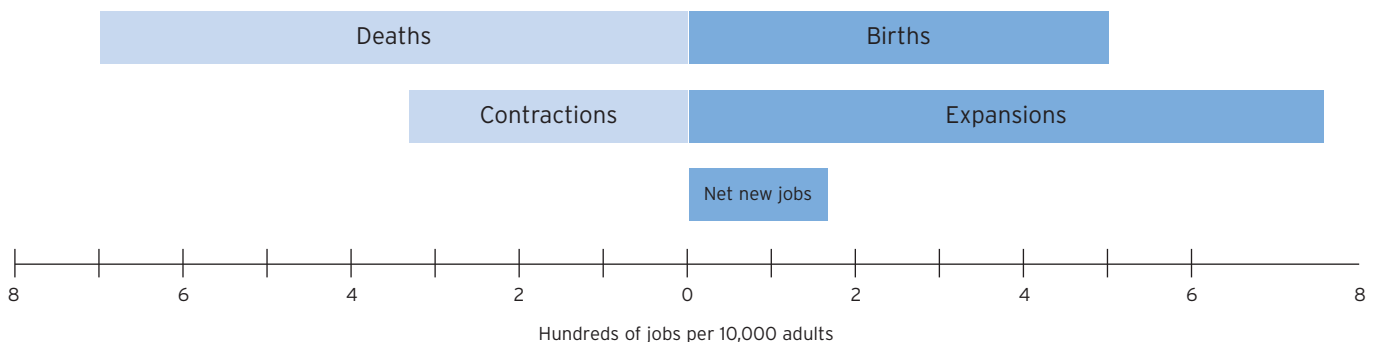
3.5

But there is much more to churn than first entries and final exits. A recent study of job creation with special reference to small businesses compiled government statistics on the 'births' and 'deaths' of jobs during 1995-99. The amount of churn is impressive. Altogether, 1,252 jobs per 10,000 of the adult population were created, and 1,090 jobs expired, giving a net increase of 163 per 1000 (Figure 4). If we add the absolute numbers involved in both the gains and losses, the turnover was 2,362, or 591 per year. This rate is similar to the churn brought about by first entries and final exits (but of course the two sets of people affected may only slightly overlap).

3.6

The dynamics of the national labour force are one thing; the age profile of the payroll in one company or at a single workplace is another. For an individual company, particularly SMEs, 'generational succession' is a demanding management task. If we are honest, early retirement is a useful device for dismissing a less than enthusiastic but expensive older employee. It is however incorrect and damaging to a company's productivity to assume that all older workers give a poor return. Companies and organisations need to adopt rational age-management practices that seek to maximise the contributions of workers of all ages. This brings us to the facts and the myths about the capabilities of people of different ages.

Figure 4. Gains and losses of jobs in the United Kingdom, 1995-99



Source: Trends Business Research 2003, *Small Firms and Job Creation*. Report for the Federation of Small Businesses, Trends Business Research, Newcastle upon Tyne, Table 2.3. Based on statistics from the DTI Small Businesses Service and the Office of National Statistics. Available online at http://www.fsb.org.uk/policy/archivePubs/assets/Role_of_SMEs_Report..pdf

Section 4 The dynamics of the labour force: facts and myths

Main Points

- There are changes in the 'average' human body and brain with increased age, but most occur well after the normal working ages and are totally irrelevant to the workplace.
- Verbal abilities and inductive reasoning improve with age, and cognitive performance shows little decline until the late sixties and older.
- Research has shown that older workers cope with complex tasks under time pressure. Numerous studies show no age-related downward trend in work ability or performance.

4.1

This section summarises the research evidence about the relationship between age and performance in work. Numerous studies over many decades have established a sophisticated understanding of the capacities and limitations of younger and older workers. In very large populations (or samples), significant relationships between age and competence are found, but both researchers and employers stress that few of the effects are large and that the dominant feature is individual variability.

4.2

Physiologists and cognitive and occupational psychologists have researched the relationship between age and the ability to perform physical and mental tasks since at least the 1940s. The most obvious fact is that physical strength, dexterity and other physiological abilities, particularly the senses such as hearing and the acuity of eyesight, decline with age. The relationships with mental abilities and attitudes are more complex and much less clear.

4.3

While there are declines with age in the speed of information processing and physical responses (psycho-motor functioning), for most practical

purposes the effect is slight until well after the normal working ages. The more complex the information processing demands, as in dual or multiple tasks, generally the greater the age effect. These neurological and physiological factors are pertinent to some daily tasks, such as car driving, but their practical expression at the workplace is negligible. Studies of air-traffic controllers, for example, have found no evidence of age-related decline in performance.

4.4

There is a clear discrepancy between laboratory research that find decreasing mental functioning with age, particularly from the sixties, and the many studies that show no age-related downward trends in work abilities and performance. Yet there are real differences between older and younger workers and it is our responsibility to identify their range of ability, and to distinguish fact from assumption, and reality from myth. The most authoritative studies of 'age and performance' are reviewed in the fuller research report. Our summary of the most consistent findings appears in Table 1.

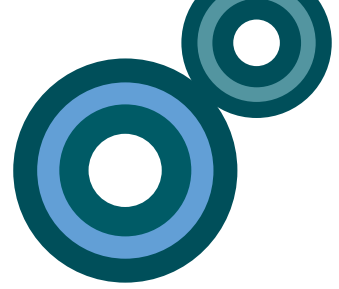


Table 1. The comparative strengths and limitations, on average, of younger and older workers

Note: This table summarises the most well established findings from thousands of studies of age relationships. It is important to understand that they are generalisations for large populations, and the listed attributes should not be associated with every person in the two age groups. To illustrate, ‘aggression’ tends to be high at 17 years-of-age and very low at 57 years-of-age. This does not mean that all 17 year-olds are aggressive, or that no 57 year-olds are aggressive.

Attribute	Younger workers	Older workers
Vigour, strength		Reduced
Sickness absence	More frequent days off	Less frequent, but longer blocks of sickness absence
Learning abilities	Depends on educational experience and attainments	Slower for demanding cognitive tasks from age 60 onwards; otherwise highly dependent on acquired learning skills
New technology skills	More familiar with IT	Less familiar with IT
Inter-personal skills (with colleagues or customers)	Generally fewer	Generally more
Experience	Fewer life skills, and less acquaintance with non-routine events and their impact on productivity	More life skills, and more experience of effective responses to non-routine events
Knowledge	Recent knowledge	Corporate knowledge, specialist skills
Commitment to organisation	Contingent on ambitions	Contingent on domestic circumstances and learning demands
Willingness to move	Relatively high	Relatively low

4.5

The most important of the consistent findings is that age is associated with greater experience, which brings many benefits, not only to the individual's but also to their colleagues' productivity. This is true even for basic psychomotor tasks, as with the classic demonstration that while older typists are unable to type as many characters per minute as a younger person, they make fewer mistakes. An older typist's productivity can therefore be higher, but so also the manager's, for they spend less time fielding the trivial and awful consequences of the mistakes. In more complex tasks, and particularly those that require tactical or strategic choices and judgement, experience counts for much more.

Section 5 The dynamics of the labour force: facts and myths

Main Points

- Many generalisations circulate about the strength and limitations of older workers, but most are imprecise lay assessments and few have a basis in systematic evidence.
- A common view is that older workers are less trainable. It is true that those born in the 1950s have different learning skills from those born in the 1980s - it is a result of their education. It is however a myth that older workers are less willing or capable of learning new skills.
- Much of the problem is that training is delivered inappropriately. More needs to be done to make training more effective.
- Age-based stereotypes about the capabilities of older workers are damaging to both employees and companies and should be scrapped. The most rational and constructive approach is for individualised appraisal.

5.1

Table 2 summarises the most common generalisations, stereotypes and myths about older workers. It is based on a review of policy documents and academic and mass media commentaries. Numerous and remarkably diverse positive and negative generalisations are made, some with a basis in evidence, but many from only one establishment or company. The enthusiasm to generalise is greater than the interest in validation. Interestingly, opinion surveys of employers and managers more often refute than confirm or elaborate the attributes listed in Table 2. Respondents stress how much individuals vary. The careful assessments of employers about several of these generalisations are summarised in the main report.

Table 2: The most common generalisations about older workers

Older workers are less:	Older workers are more:
Adaptable	Responsible
Trainable	Reliable
Effective in their work	Conscientious
Ambitious	Stable
Accepting of new technology	Experienced
	Communicative with the public

5.2

Many of the attributes most commonly ascribed to older workers are character and personality traits. The assertions derive more from lay assessments rather than from formal psychological measurements. They have rarely been tested, and it appears that many generalisations now survive independently of workplace experience. They are copied from one document to another, and repeated on panels and in focus groups and academic reviews.

5.3

There is a widespread perception among employers that older workers are hard to train. Research has shown that the learning abilities of younger and older people are different, but this is not intrinsically a result of age - it is cohort difference, one between people born at different times and who have had contrasting educational and occupational experiences.

5.4

Until the 1950s, most British children left school at 15 or 16 years of age. Until the 1990s, therefore, even among the most successful white-collar workers and businessmen and women, most had relatively little formal school education.

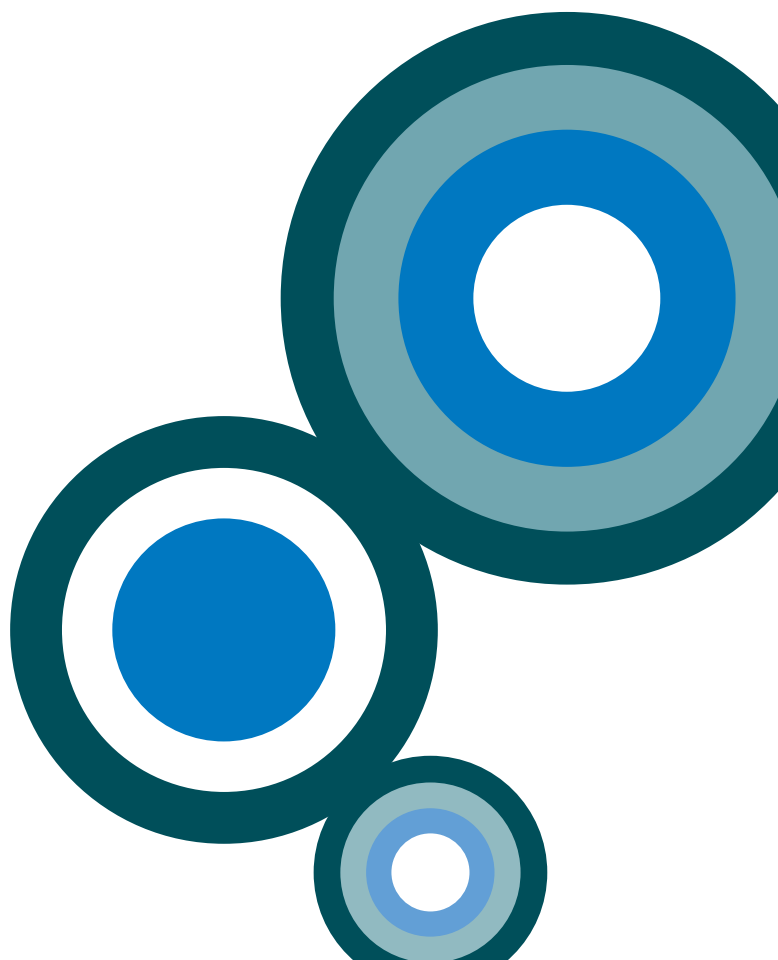
They were taught - many very well - reading, writing and arithmetic, but few had much exposure to information gathering and synthesising skills, still less the kind of independent 'project' work that is now favoured. Many of course received or undertook considerable vocational and professional education after beginning work, either instigated by the employer or self-directed.

5.5

At work, skills were learnt by watching others, demonstration and trial and error. Whether it was learning how to fashion an accurate 'mortise and tenon' joint, or how to persuade a customer to buy life assurance, learning was through doing and experience. It was an informal kind of life-long learning, and an individual's productivity rose progressively, if slowly, with age. A worker aged in the fifties may be keen to continue in work and to be a valued colleague, but anxious about their ability to learn new skills through formal training.

5.6

At any age, training needs to be adapted to the individual's current knowledge and abilities. The pervasive problem, not least in vocational education, is that there is much less experience of training people of differing ages who do not fall into the category of young trainees or apprentices. There are serious questions about the ways in which training is delivered, and specialists in the field argue that more account needs to be taken of the learning skills and styles of older workers before concluding that they are 'less interested' or 'less able' to be trained.



Section 6 Conclusions

Main Points

- Projections of continued population ageing, the rising skill levels of the workforce and extensions of full-time education, aspirations for rising retirement income, and even international economic competition, make it imperative that the country makes greater use of the skills and productivity capacity of middle-aged and older workers.
- There is no evidence of a relationship between age and work performance across the customary working ages, and it is a myth that older workers are less willing or capable of learning new skills.
- Age-based stereotypes about the capabilities of older workers are damaging to both employees and companies and should be scrapped. The most rational and constructive approach is to adopt both individualised appraisal and active mixed-age workforce management.

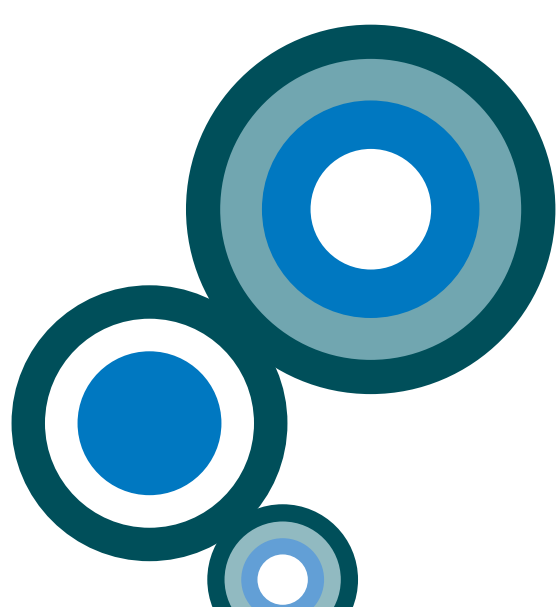
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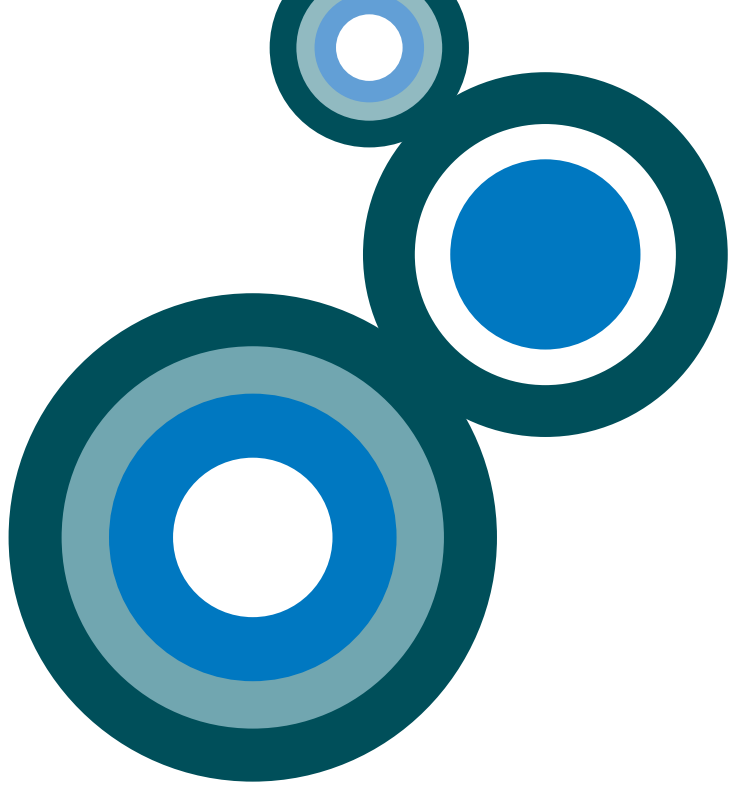
Recent research has shown that assumptions about the strengths and limitations of workers of different age harm the management of knowledge and skills in a workforce - they result in sub-optimal deployment. At a time of consistent GVA¹ growth and intense international economic competition, both governments and companies should give increasing attention to making maximum use of the job skills in the population and, more specifically, of raising the contribution of those in and beyond late middle-age. The most constructive change would be to replace the use of age-based decision making with the widespread implementation of individual appraisals.

6.2

The required changes also require concerted action by both government and employers, particularly to instil phased retirement. Many studies have shown the willingness of older employers to continue in work part-time, but are frustrated by both 'custom and practice' and fiscal impediments. Too few opportunities to continue 'income-generating' activities have yet been put in place. Employers will abide by the letter of the anti-age-discrimination legislation but need to do more: the greater challenge is to adopt the spirit of the reforms and apply imagination and creativity to the task.

¹GVA - Gross Value Added







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