

# Developing Career Development Strategies for Older Staff

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## Why?

For the foreseeable future, indigenous growth in the supply of labour will be firmly concentrated in the group aged 45 and over. Whilst business and government leaders appear to agree that the UK's economic well-being depends on keeping older workers employed, the majority of organisations, large and small, are yet to come to terms fully with the profound impact of the shrinking labour pool.

It is predicted that between 2010 and 2020 60,000 fewer young people will enter the job market each year, whilst approximately 1.3 million new jobs will be created. In addition, by 2020, 22% of the workforce will be well into its 60s. By 2030 half the UK population will be over 50 and one-third over 60. Although the state retirement age is expected to rise to 66 in 2024, 67 in 2034 and then reach 68 by 2046, organisations are facing a growing skills shortage with knowledge and expertise being lost faster than they can be gained.

The ability of business to maintain productivity in a globally competitive market will depend on its ability to reframe its view of the pool of available labour and develop new strategies to adapt to this changed environment.

## The opportunity

The period of 'nearing retirement' brings opportunity for both employers and employees.

For the employer:

- the timeframe to set in place processes for capturing knowledge (including tacit knowledge) and providing for its transfer to the next generation of staff
- a programme of phased retirement allows continued access to talent, experience and skills
- in ensuring that promotion routes and career progression programmes are neither blocked nor stratified by age distribution
- by allowing the maximisation of intangible benefits that directly or indirectly impact on company performance – such 'soft benefits' as staff welfare, morale, staff support and employee satisfaction

- treating people well and allowing them to maximise their personal contribution over an extended period of time will bring 'reputational' benefit both within the organisation and externally
- enabling 'nearing retirement' staff to contribute more widely to society if they wish to do so e.g. in voluntary, not-for-profit roles will, again, enhance the reputation of the organisation and its corporate social responsibility obligations.

It is not suggested that employers become 'age blind'; more that if the nearing retirement cohort was seen as a useful and productive part of the workforce rather than the group of decline and lost skill and ambition, there is significant benefit to be won. Allowing older staff to still have the opportunity to access new learning and skill opportunities will, if properly managed, open up new possibilities in areas such as inter-generational coaching and mentoring, intrapreneurship and product and company advocacy.

For the individual:

- the pursuit of a more flexible work/life balance that is shaped according to the needs and circumstances of the individual
- the moment to reflect and to weigh up one's needs and their financial underpinning – the balance between time (paid work/unpaid work/societal contribution/family and leisure) and money (salary/pension/casual income/savings)
- the opportunity to contribute to the organisation in new and different ways but capitalising on a lifetime's bank of knowledge, experience and people skills
- the opportunity to contribute more widely to society but still utilising one's personal stock of knowledge and talents
- and aggregating all these factors, the time to consider and re-define one's personal notion of 'career' in relation to the next five, ten or 20 years.

A recent survey of over-50 year olds<sup>1</sup> concluded that 89% thought the skills and talents of older people were being wasted, 22% thought their jobs were mundane, and 20% didn't feel valued.

<sup>1</sup> CROW (Centre for Research into the Older Workforce) Postal Survey, 2004.

## Developing strategies

**“Most adults at midlife want meaningful...rewarding work but have little idea how to get it.”**

**Don't Stop the Career Clock, Helen Harkness 1999**

Few companies have yet taken on board the idea that there is as much a need to invest in how people exit the organisation as in how they are hired. Firing and downsizing done well is inevitably better in human, economic and reputational terms than that done poorly or haphazardly. The transitioning of staff from full time employment to whatever they and the organisation seek from the 'nearing retirement' phase is similarly of importance. For any career development programme to be successful, it will be essential that it be perceived within the organisation to be a wholly positive initiative and not a cynical move to either shed or marginalise older workers or to save costs. Indeed, the initiative should seek to embed the notion within the organisational culture that the employer both wants and needs to invest in the career development of its older staff. To this end, it will be important to ensure that top level/board support for, and encouragement of, the initiative is visible within the organisation and that all shares its inherent values. The education and awareness raising of line managers will be critical.

## Some of the Elements

### *Intergenerational learning*

All individuals will reach a career plateau at some time in their working life and this can either be a personal plateau or one imposed by the organisation. If imposed, and the individual considers promotion as an indicator of success, this can lead to de-motivation and a downturn in performance. It is therefore important for individuals to recognise that reaching a career plateau is part of the natural pattern of working life and not a sign of failure.

The notion of a career plateau is often bound up with age, and learning at work between generations is one way of demonstrating that the plateau may be more open-ended than is normally assumed. Building succession planning and knowledge transfer pathways that transcend age is more than just cathartic for all concerned: it can release new energy and enthusiasm and thereby provide for improvement rather than stagnation.

The role of older staff in developing protégés, mentoring and coaching and in providing some of the roles that are normally associated only with younger staff e.g. graduate recruitment, external representation, giving talks and seminars can be supported by learning from younger staff around new knowledge, new technology and more recent experience.

### *Phased retirement and flexible working practices*

It is of importance that HR policies accommodate arrangements that will help and encourage older staff just as they do for younger staff and new recruits by way, for example, of induction processes, social amenities, childcare support etc. Thus, there should be a range of 'wind down' options including job-share, part-time working, downshifting and time out sabbaticals. It is also useful to consider more flexibility around time away from work, for example by allowing a paid/unpaid 'time off bank' on which staff can draw more flexibly than that allowed for in traditional leave arrangements.

We have had some discussions around the creation of alumni groups including high level alumni support teams of semi-retired personnel that can be called upon when higher levels of experience and skills are required for a specific project for a limited amount of time. Similar thinking can embrace alumni learning sets and alumni mentoring.

### *Line management*

Addressing performance issues with 'older' workers is something that is avoided within many organisations, with line managers choosing to find it is easier to let employees close to retirement stagnate rather than to challenge their behaviour and performance.

It is often difficult to open those frank discussions about an individual's pre-retirement thinking without the conversation appearing at least threatening, and at worst as if the organisation no longer wants to engage with the individual. This is particularly relevant when the organisation has not got an overt and well-communicated policy in relation to the management and career development of its older staff.

Both these issues can be compounded when a 'younger' and sometimes inexperienced manager is working with an 'older' employee who has more knowledge and experience, and in many cases has worked for the organisation for many years.

It is therefore imperative that one aspect of any career development programme for older workers pays attention to the development and support of line managers. This support might well take account of innovative and highly regarded work in this respect by Wendy Hirsh and Charles Jackson, two NICEC Fellows who have developed a model for career discussions at work.

### *Pre-retirement planning*

Older workers' attitudes and orientations to work have usually been formed in youth, and have been influenced by prevailing expectations about working lives at the time they entered the workforce. As workers age, inevitably the prospect of work ending comes into view. This evokes a range of responses, including acceptance and denial.

For many the thought of retirement can be a daunting prospect. Some measure their worth through the nature of work itself seeing it as a key source of pleasure and personal satisfaction. Others will miss the social network they have established or the status they have achieved. Many are unsure of their financial position and factors such as pension income and paid for benefits become the dominant consideration in considering the implications of possible retirement. For others the major concern will be whether or not they will have the opportunity to use skills, capacities and expertise that are relevant in the workplace but may have limited visibility or relevance outside employment.

The best pre-retirement programmes will acknowledge the array of concerns and emotions in play and provide expert advice and assistance across the range from the financial issues to those around health and well-being. One to one support in the form normally associated with outplacement counselling would be of significant benefit.

### **Conclusion: further learning opportunities**

Adults in their early 20s are twice as likely to engage in learning as their 55+ co-workers: The corollary being that the older people are, the less likely they are to participate in learning.<sup>2</sup>

Organisations that do not provide the opportunity and incentive for older employees to continue to develop skills are likely to find that older workers may be regarded as essential but are perceived to be stagnating in situ. Further learning for older staff will be beneficial for both employee and employer provided it is thoughtfully constructed in particular with an understanding of generational differences in preferred learning styles.

Such further learning requires the active engagement of line managers who must be encouraged to continue to give feedback to older workers on their training and development needs and to help staff to keep their knowledge up to date, regardless of when they plan to retire.

Age is neither a barrier to productivity nor its guarantee. Older staff need to be treated on an equal footing to others and be afforded comparable opportunities. Older people as individuals need to be prepared to re-adjust and realign their working lives. Between employers and employees there is a productive dialogue to be constructed.

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<sup>2</sup> NIACE Adult Learning Survey, 2005 and 2007