Designing for our ageing workforce

As the workforce ages companies will face the rising challenge of leveraging knowledge held by their most experienced employees. Rather than moulding incentive schemes, training, knowledge management strategies and workplaces around attracting young talent, the focus will shift to designing for the aging workforce...

Our aging population

Like many western nations the shape of the UK population is changing. Over the past three decades increased life expectancy and lower fertility rates have been raising the average age of the UK citizen. However, the consequences for employment, healthcare and pensions are only now emerging, as the swell of baby boomers (born 1945-1960) reaches retirement age. In 1980 the average worker was 35 years, in 2008 he will be 41. By 2050 34% of the working population will be aged 50-64 years old.

The increasing number of older workers (defined here as over 60 years) is driven mainly by three factors. Firstly, organisations need to employ older workers to fulfil their resourcing requirements. Secondly, insufficient pension provision is driving people to work later in life through financial necessity. Thirdly, more people actually want to work past traditional retirement age, being fitter and more active than their predecessors – over 70% of current workers say they would like to work past retirement age in a part-time or flexible role (Help the Aged). Obviously the workplace will have to evolve along with the workforce if it is to support healthy and productive businesses. Companies must recognise and respond to the fact that older workers have different skills and needs from younger staff.

Obviously we are as diverse in our attributes when we are 60 as we are in our twenties but older workers, on average, may be expected to differ from younger workers in the following ways:

**physical needs** – from the age of 40 or 50 we inevitably suffer a gradual loss of functional and sensory abilities

**skills base** – due to different educational and employment experiences, the older generation of workers have a different skills base to others, and tend to operate most productively when employing those skills in a particular way

**job expectations** – generally older workers have different motivations for working to their younger counterparts. They expect employment to play a particular role in their life and to receive different benefits from offering their time

All three of these areas should be considered when designing a workplace for the multigenerational workforce.

Supporting physical needs

Much as we may wish otherwise, as we grow older our bodies become more vulnerable in a number of ways. Muscular strength, joint movement, balance, vision and hearing deteriorate gradually. We also become more susceptible to contracting illnesses and take longer to recover. Clearly, for our own benefit and that of our employer, sound workplace health and safety practices are essential.

Ergonomic furniture is vital for avoiding work related strains. As we age, we simply accumulate more time for repetitive strain injuries to develop, and any loss of posture and balance can make new strains more likely. Furniture should be made simple and easy to use – the best ergonomic chair will fail to have the desired benefit unless it is used properly. The millennial generation are reasonably well informed about work related health issues and are often very protective of their wellbeing. However, most older workers have not had such an awareness instilled in them
throughout their career – it is the employer’s responsibility to ensure they are not working in a way which jeopardises their health.

A range of tools, both simple and technologically complex, exist to assist employees who are hard of hearing or have poor vision. Many vision related problems are simply caused by inadequate lighting – where workers have insufficient control over their environment to meet their requirements. In most cases the issue can be resolved by the provision of good, flexible task lighting. Likewise, adjustments can easily be made to change the glare on a worker’s PC, or alter the default font to a larger scale. Often these simple solutions are not utilised because older workers have not been informed of their availability, or feel the modification would single them out from their colleagues.

The most common frustration for those with hearing deterioration is the ability to distinguish key sounds from background noise. Break-out areas offer a solution, but the acoustics must be central to their design – a dug-out in a corridor may be a convenient, buzzy and creative place for some workers to have a discussion, but for older people it may prove frustrating. If informal breakout areas are not enclosed and acoustically “secure”, then an alternative space for quiet, focussed work should be made available for general use. In terms of individual desk-based work, where intermittent conversations occur with colleagues or the telephone is in regular use, innovative furniture design and acoustic technology can create acoustic pockets which protect the worker from excessive background noise. The common theme throughout these solutions is the need for choice and control over the working environment. These elements are valued by all workers regardless of age, and reduce the chance of people working in a way which is damaging to both health and productivity, but they become more beneficial to us as we age. Incorporating flexibility and facilitating choice is also the best way to meet the needs of the multi-generation workforce, young and old, rather than just one group within it.

Maximising skills

Evidence shows that today’s older workers have different skills from those of younger employees and are most productive when employing them in a particular way. Our communication skills strengthen as we age, whereas “fluid intelligence”, such as inductive reasoning can suffer. Because of the educational methods and working styles they have experienced, older workers prefer working on one task at a time and becoming an expert in a particular field. Younger workers are more efficient at multi-tasking and like the variety of operating in this way.

Clearly this presents an operational challenge in terms of job allocation, but the workplace can also play a role. Older workers who find multi-tasking more difficult can benefit from display boards, note display facilities, or more creative visual prompts to support switching between tasks.

In today’s knowledge economy the experience of older workers should be recognised as a highly valuable asset, but it can easily be left untapped. A company’s knowledge management strategy should always include methods for transferring implicit knowledge between employees – whether through formal mentoring schemes, or informal notes and discussions. Learning from older workers in this way should be a particular focus in the future. As the way we work has changed from being largely task-specific towards more multidisciplinary work we have fewer true specialists than before. By learning from older workers who have spent years building specialist expertise, younger workforces can compensate a little for having to spread their skills over a wider variety of areas.

Meeting expectations

Everyone has slightly different motivations for working. For most people it is primarily a financial necessity, with other factors being of secondary influence. However, older workers often choose, rather than need, to work and thus the “secondary” factors become far more important in retaining and motivating them. Research shows there are number of common factors, besides financial gain, which motivate us to continue working past 60 –

Social contact – We do not want to sacrifice the varied social contact which employment provides as soon as we reach retirement. Surveys illustrate that older workers value being part of a multigenerational workforce. A workplace that is conducive to social interaction is thus a draw for older workers. A common problem in recent design trends is that social areas have been designed in a format that appeals very much to younger workers – typically the bustley café with take-away coffee and benches. However, there must be spaces which appeal to all generations, and where they can mix. Research shows that older workers often fail to take breaks when they are entitled to. Again because of the working practices they have experienced in the past, when firms were more hierarchical, they tend to seek explicit permission to take breaks and use social facilities. All workers should be introduced to the workplace and
informed about how the facilities can be utilised, otherwise they will miss opportunities to socialise.

**Learning** – Contrary to many expectations, older workers have a greater demand to learn new job skills than younger workers. Too often training older workers is viewed as “waste of resources” – 9 out of 10 employees aged 50 and over receive no training at work (Employers Forum on Age). However, older employees have a below average turnover rate and most businesses would benefit greatly from maximising the skills of their most loyal employees. This said, to be most efficient training must be designed to suit the way in which older workers are used to learning. Older workers –

value a real understanding of the reasoning behind facts and information if they are to apply them (whereas a younger worker will be comfortable remembering it “off pat”) prefer more “practical” training where processes are physically demonstrated, or information is related to existing knowledge dislike using on-line resources to learn and may be deterred from participating in training by the use of technology

**Recognition** – A sense of recognition is vital for everyone's job satisfaction, but considering many older workers are not employed out of financial necessity, it is even more important. Surveys suggest that older workers value the fact that their colleges rely upon their contribution. Designing incentive schemes to recognise achievement and effort obviously signal recognition, but the workplace can also contribute. Because older workers often take on part-time positions their working environment can be overlooked. They may be given the worst desk in the office, or have to hot desk to fit in with other workers. This runs contrary to their desire for control, privacy and a personalised space. While efficient space utilisation cannot be ignored, some form of fixity is important in making employees feel recognised – especially with older workers who traditionally have not been used to flexible working patterns. Even if hotdesking is necessary, office design should facilitate a degree of personalisation, so to allow a feeling of belonging and importance in the company.

The workforce in the average office will look very different within 20 years. In the recent “battle for talent” the focus has so far been on attracting the youngest, brightest employees – we have consequently seen workplaces adapt to include gyms, coffee houses, bars etc. However, in the future a shortage of skilled workers will lead companies to put just as much effort into attracting older workers. This means designing job roles, incentives schemes and workplaces which support their physical wellbeing, maximise their best skills, and fulfil the personal needs they are seeking to meet through continued employment.

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The Workplace Intelligence Unit was founded by forward thinking inc. and Herman Miller

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