

Older workers (1951)



(I.W.S. PAMPHLETS)

THE ELDERLY WORKER

TOWARDS AN
EMPLOYMENT POLICY

INDUSTRIAL WELFARE SOCIETY, INC.

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THE ELDERLY WORKER ;

*A discussion of the factors
affecting an employment
policy by Gordon Bevan,
M.C., Adviser, I.W.S.,
based on a survey conducted
by the Society.*

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INTRODUCTION

This short pamphlet has been prepared as a guide to employers in considering the need to employ elderly workers. It is based primarily on the Industrial Welfare Society's Survey* carried out in 1950. The survey, undertaken on the suggestion of the National Old People's Welfare Committee and in consultation with the Nuffield Foundation, covered some 400 of the Society's member firms.

The need for the continued employment of elderly workers has become a matter of national concern, and apart from the Ministry of Labour, such organizations as the National Old People's Welfare Committee, and the National Corporation for the Care of Old People, are giving active consideration to the whole problem, while the Nuffield Foundation is conducting fruitful researches into the problems of ageing. In the light of these considerations it is hoped that the present pamphlet will help employers towards a clearer understanding of the problem, and towards the formulation of a policy for the employment of elderly workers to the best economic and social advantage.

Throughout this pamphlet the term "Elderly Worker" is taken to mean men of 65 years and over and women of 60 years and over, who are not staff employees.

* Copies are available from the Industrial Welfare Society.
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THE PROBLEM OF AN AGEING POPULATION

A great deal has already been written and spoken by way of warning on the problem of our ageing population. In fact the problem is not in any way peculiar to Great Britain, but extends to almost every industrialized (or "advanced") nation. It is the result of a decline in death rates coupled with a decline in birth rates, so that the proportion of young people in the population is reduced, and that of old people increased. The precise changes of such proportions can be predicted with some degree of certainty, and this information as it applies to Great Britain makes startling reading. The following extract from an address given by Sir Godfrey Ince, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour and National Service in December 1950, sums up the position:

" . . . In 1911, 53 per thousand of the population were persons 65 years of age or over; in 1947 105 per thousand of the population were 65 years of age and over; in 1977, 160 per thousand of the population will be persons 65 years and over. These are pretty staggering figures. Again, during the ten years to 1960 there will be a decrease of over 500,000 in the number of men aged 18-40. One other illustration: during the next ten years there will be a decrease in those aged 20-40 in the working population of about 6 per cent., while there will be an increase in those aged 50-60 of more than 20 per cent. These figures speak for themselves. . . ."

We must accept, then, a future with fewer young men available to industry to replace those who would normally be retiring. At the same time we are seeing a period of full (possibly over-full) employment which shows no sign of recession. Indeed, it appears a political necessity that it should be sustained. It therefore seems a logical (and perhaps even inevitable) step to make plans for the fullest possible utilization of elderly workers.

THE NEED FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE TO CONTINUE AT WORK

An eminent American once said "Retirement is a ticket of death." It may be difficult to agree with so sweeping a statement, but there is certain truth in it. It is an observed fact that men who have no active leisure pursuits suffer quick mental and physical decline. Even more significant is the fact that the introduction of occupational therapy in old persons' institutions has had the immediate effect of enlivening the minds and physique of hitherto failing old age.* Many old people, too, have financial commitments which make it difficult for them to retire, quite apart from an unwillingness to face a large reduction in their standard of living as individuals.

Some of these attitudes are clearly brought out in the survey made by Geoffrey Thomas and Barbara Osborn for the Ministry of Labour.† Of the sample of older people studied, 77 per cent. of men and 59 per cent. of women thought it worth while remaining in full or part-time employment after retiring age; 32 per cent. of employed men above pensionable age said that they must work (for economic reasons), while 23 per cent. said that they preferred to work. About one in six of the men questioned were prevented from continuing in employment after a fixed retiring age, although they themselves wished to carry on. The same survey also indicates that once having retired, men may experience considerable difficulty in finding fresh employment at an advanced age.

The actual proportion of employed persons aged 65-70 is given as 46 per cent., and aged 70-74, 29 per cent. While this may appear to be quite high, the Industrial Welfare Society's own survey‡ shows that the proportion of male elderly workers (as against all

* Lord Amulree "Adding Life to Years". *The National Council of Social Service (Incorporated)*. 1951.

† Thomas and Osborn "Older People and their Employment". *C.O.I.* 1951.

‡ "The Employment of Elderly Workers". *Industrial Welfare Society*. 1951.

workers) employed by individual firms has dropped from 4.3 per cent. in 1945 to 2.7 per cent. in 1950, although for women it was slightly increased. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that, while we do not know exactly how many elderly workers may be available to industry now and in the future, we are not at present utilizing this potential source of labour as effectively as we might. As to whether there is a willingness on the part of older people to be so utilized there is doubt, but since so few firms have yet adopted a positive policy for employing elderly workers, it seems more than likely that there is scope for considerable progress in this direction. It is indeed obvious that our ideas about retirement ages will have to be revised in the face of hard necessity if not by personal desire.

THE ELDERLY WORKER'S POINT OF VIEW

The attitude of the elderly worker towards continuing his employment will be influenced by many factors, which cannot easily be isolated as prime causes of his desire for work or retirement. The economic factor looms large, of course, and it is frequently held that need to forego the National Insurance Pension until the age of 70, with the continuance of contributions, makes the increased pension at 70 small recompense. For those continuing beyond 70 the fact that this pension is regarded as taxable income is a further deterrent. On the other hand it is difficult to see how a person can live adequately on the current rate of pension, even allowing for the additional grants payable in cases of hardship through the National Assistance Board. In cases where a person is also benefiting from a pension from the employer, there will certainly be less incentive to work, and continuance in employment may anyhow be precluded by a fixed retirement age. A feeling of inability to compete with younger men, or their resentment, a diminution in physical capacity, fear of learning a new job after many years of routine, and the very natural desire for leisure will all militate against a decision to carry on. Set against these are the loneliness that often accompanies old age in our present social

structure, the desire to be a useful member of the community, a wish to maintain bonds of friendship and loyalty that have matured in a period of long service, and the sheer inability to utilize leisure effectively.

Each individual will have his or her own good reasons for the decision, and it is not likely that those who have made up their minds to retire will be easily persuaded to stay on. However, where a company is anxious to retain its elderly workers its policy should be explained to each individual well before retirement is due, so that the decision is not taken in ignorance of all the relevant factors, and the advantages of remaining in employment can be carefully weighed.

THE EMPLOYER'S POINT OF VIEW

Although many employers gladly accept the employment of a number of old servants as a social responsibility (and, where they have no pension scheme, as a moral responsibility), little attention has so far been paid to the positive contribution which elderly workers can make towards production. In certain cases, skilled elderly workers have been retained out of sheer necessity, but even in such cases there does not appear to have been a considered policy. On the other hand the adoption of a policy for the retention or recruitment of elderly workers can hardly be contemplated unless the employer is fully satisfied on a number of practical issues. He will want to know what quality of work and output he can expect from the older men and women and what rates are to be paid. He will be concerned to know whether rates of absenteeism will increase and whether he will be increasing his liability in respect of accidents. He will need to assess the effect of the employment of elderly workers on his younger employees and what attitude the trade unions will adopt towards this development. Most of all, he will wish to know what type of work is most suitable for persons beyond retiring age.

There are no final answers to any of these questions. There is however a certain amount of factual information which will help the employer in his decision and this is presented in the following paragraphs.

PROBLEMS OF EMPLOYMENT OF ELDERLY WORKERS

In the survey previously mentioned, carried out by the Industrial Welfare Society, covering some 262,000 men and 87,000 women of whom 7,000 men and nearly 2,000 women were elderly workers, it was found that the majority of the elderly workers of both sexes were engaged on medium and light work. However, in certain heavy industries a high proportion of male elderly workers were engaged on heavy work, and two firms specially commented that men who had done heavy work all their lives found no difficulty in continuing on the same job after normal retiring age. It was very noticeable that only a small proportion of the male elderly workers (2 per cent.) were employed part-time, while 30 per cent. of the female elderly workers were in part-time employment.

The great majority of all elderly workers had in fact continued in the same occupation after reaching retiring age and only one in ten (approximately) were on work which had been specially selected for them on account of their age. Employers were generally agreed that where an elderly worker was able to continue with his own occupation he should do so, and this applied most particularly to the skilled trades. Where this was not possible, however, and in the case where elderly workers were to be recruited, the most suitable jobs were considered to be those of labourers, watchmen, inspectors, cleaners, messengers and tedious jobs requiring little skill.

The fact of men successfully continuing on heavy work until a comparatively late age of life lends strength to the saying that "a man is as old as he feels." Physical and mental deterioration appear to take place at varying stages of life and in varying degrees according to the physical and mental make-up of each individual. It is therefore dangerous to generalize and it is necessary that each case should be considered on its own merits.

While current medical and psychological knowledge give certain pointers to the most common limitations

of elderly workers (these will be dealt with in subsequent paragraphs), it is an observed fact that people find increased difficulty in working against time as age advances and there is a gradual movement away from piecework tasks towards jobs where speed and competition count for less than reliability and steady work. Thus occupations involving effort against time limits may be ruled out as unsuitable.

In certain cases, jobs requiring a degree of skill and dexterity have been replanned to make them as simple as possible with the specific intention of employing elderly workers on them. This is a measure occasioned by acute labour shortage in a particular area, but there seems little reason why it should not be more widely adopted. Two firms contributing to the Industrial Welfare Society's Survey went so far as to suggest that elderly workers should be subject to a similar quota system to that required for Disabled Persons. This hardly seems a practical proposition, and in any event those elderly workers suffering from some specific physical handicap may be placed on the Disabled Persons Register. However, there will certainly be jobs in every organization which are particularly suitable for elderly workers, and it is suggested that a policy for their employment should include a survey of the occupations in the organization with a view to earmarking those most suitable.

THE HEALTH OF THE ELDERLY WORKER

No reliable figures are available to indicate whether absentee rates are on the whole higher for elderly workers than for younger employees. It has been commented that because of their conscientiousness and a desire not to spoil a good record established over a long period of service, they will endeavour to maintain good time-keeping and attendance when they should more properly be at home. It does not appear that there are good grounds for suggesting that attendance deteriorates with age, and it has often been remarked that the time-keeping of elderly workers is exemplary.

Apart from the onset of natural physical decline, which insofar as it limits the capacity of the individual to move about freely appears to occur from the age of 70 onwards in most cases, there are certain physical limitations which may affect employment that occur with some frequency in elderly workers. In particular, laboratory investigations* have shown that the minimum amount of light required for visual stimulation increases significantly with age, while the speed of visual perception tends to decline—facts with obvious implications in the factory. Dr. J. H. Sheldon,† points out that foot troubles are a considerable source of difficulty over the age of 60, and that the liability to falls and to difficulty in the dark tend to increase with age and assume formidable proportions in very late life. The majority of falls seem to be due either to attacks of vertigo or to the inability of old people to regain their balance after tripping. It cannot be safely assumed however that a liability to accidents increases with age. Indeed, it has been shown that the frequency rate tends to diminish with age although the average disability period may increase.‡

On balance one may conclude that there is no reason why elderly workers should be a liability insofar as their health and accident records are concerned provided that a careful watch is kept for specific deterioration. This has led some companies to institute a regular medical examination at annual or more frequent intervals. While this arrangement has much to commend it many old people will resent the practice and it is probably wiser to maintain a careful check through the normal routine of medical supervision and by liaison between the works medical officer and individual supervisors.

* Nathan W. Shock, "The Contribution of Psychology—The Aged and Society." *Industrial Relations Research Association*. 1950.

† J. H. Sheldon, "The Social Medicine of Old Age." *The Nuffield Foundation*. 1948.

‡ Newbold, E. M. A contribution to the study of the human factor in the causation of accidents. *Industrial Fatigue Research Board, Report No. 34*. 1926.

THE TRAINING OF ELDERLY WORKERS

While in many cases elderly workers will be retained so that their companies may continue to enjoy the benefit of their skill, there will remain the problem of training of elderly workers who are transferred to new occupations. The Industrial Welfare Society's Survey indicated that very few elderly workers had in fact been trained for new occupations. Of the 376 firms participating, 27 found an inability to learn and 19 reported satisfactory results. This evidence is contradictory; but there seems no doubt that it is possible to achieve successful results providing that the inherent difficulties are understood.

The studies of the Nuffield Research Unit into the problems of ageing* suggest that older persons tend to be slower in their perception and response to new data, and that there is a general tendency for older people to stress accuracy rather than speed. Further, it was found that a group of people over 30 tended to learn better by written instruction than by demonstration—possibly due to the fact that in demonstration details not grasped immediately cannot be revised at a later date, whereas written material can. Writing in "The Aged and Society" Welford and Speakman draw the following conclusion to the experimental work on this subject:—

- (1) Older people tend to have at least an initial difficulty with many tasks, especially those which are difficult to comprehend or which have to be done in a rigidly-defined way.
- (2) That there are nevertheless wide variations between the performances of individuals in the higher age ranges.

SPECIAL FACILITIES FOR ELDERLY WORKERS

Of 376 firms completing the Survey, only 14 had found it necessary to provide special facilities for elderly

* A. T. Welford—"Skill and Age." *The Nuffield Foundation* 1950.

workers. The most important provision was a slight shortening of hours to avoid transport difficulties. Two firms were employing their elderly workers in separate workshops where entry to such shops is on a purely voluntary basis. This seems to be a most satisfactory arrangement, although there is a great deal of prejudice against segregation from younger people. On the other hand the pace which younger people set, often erratic, can itself create difficulties for the older person. The ideal arrangement would thus seem to be to place elderly workers in small groups on specific jobs which are an integral part of the main flow of work in the factory but which are not subject to special pressures. In view of the comparatively high incidence of foot troubles mentioned earlier, an attempt should be made to provide seats wherever possible or to confine elderly workers to jobs which do not involve prolonged standing. Company medical services would do well also to give some attention to facilities for medical treatment of foot conditions.

THE EFFECT OF ELDERLY WORKERS ON OTHER EMPLOYEES

Three per cent. of the companies contributing to the Survey reported the attitude of the younger employees was against the employment of elderly workers, while 22 per cent. reported it to be definitely favourable. A number of firms reported that the continued employment of elderly workers caused delay in the promotion of younger men, although it is difficult to generalize in this instance since the term "promotion" is hardly applicable to hourly paid workers. It was indicated that there have been specific objections from younger employees that the continued employment of elderly workers in teams working on group bonus systems tended to reduce their earning power. Such criticism is no doubt valid.

In some instances elderly workers were regarded as a buffer against future redundancy, being, of course, the first to leave in such an event. Very little is known of specific trade union policy towards elderly workers, and

it may be that the majority of trades unions have not yet evolved a clear-cut policy on the subject.

Many firms have commented on the stabilizing influence that elderly workers have on their labour force. The sponsor method of induction of new employees by which the new employee is guided in his first few weeks with the company by a long service employee offers a means of utilizing this influence to the full, and affording a very suitable occupation for elderly workers. They have in fact been used specifically in the training of new labour with the idea of relieving the foreman.

THE EARNINGS AND OUTPUT OF ELDERLY WORKERS

Apart from specifically measured performance against time standards in which elderly workers suffer from the disadvantages mentioned earlier, very little is known about their overall output. It has often been suggested, however, that their conscientiousness and steady work coupled with accuracy leaves them at a very small disadvantage so far as output per man hour is concerned. One firm in the Survey stated that the output of its elderly workers was one and a half times that of younger employees in the factory! Nevertheless there is not sufficient evidence to justify a conclusion that the output of elderly workers equals or exceeds the general average.

Thirteen per cent. of the firms contributing to the Survey reported that their elderly workers earned less on balance than the younger employees. While wide individual variations were noted in a number of cases, this may be taken as further evidence that the majority of elderly workers compare well with the average. Five firms reported that it had been necessary to raise piece rates in order to allow their elderly workers parity of earnings, and in one case the matter was the subject of a trade union agreement. On the other hand six companies reported the payment of lower hourly rates to elderly workers, and of these three had been agreed with the appropriate trade union. Since the reduction of hourly rates conflicts with a long established and

cherished trade union principle of the rate for the job, it is not a policy which can be recommended for adoption as common practice. It would seem a more satisfactory policy to regrade elderly workers if no longer capable of holding their own to work of a less exacting nature, and where they might release younger men from the tedious and routine jobs. Regrading also provides a possible solution to the blocking of promotion, if this should occur.

PENSIONS FOR ELDERLY WORKERS

Naturally those firms who do not have pension schemes or make special allowances to retired employees will not be concerned with the deterrent effect of a combined National Insurance Pension, company pension, and full rate of earnings. Those companies who have instituted pension schemes based on a fixed retiring age for their workers are inevitably faced with the problem of introducing some flexibility into the pension scheme if they wish to employ elderly workers. There are four main alternatives in dealing with this problem. First, contributions may cease on the attainment of retirement age and the pension may be postponed until actual retirement. This probably meets the case of both parties since there is no discouragement to the employee to continue earning, and his pension remains assured. Second, contributions may be continued to secure a higher pension on retirement. This is less likely to meet with the approval of the employee, unless he is looking forward in some confidence to a ripe old age. Third, in certain circumstances a lump sum may be paid in lieu of pension. From the employer's point of view again this eliminates a discouragement to continue earning, but the employee may well feel his future better secured if he can look forward to a pension for an indefinite period, and it would not be fair to assume that he will be able to invest the lump sum wisely in order to assure a future income from it. The fourth alternative is to pay the full pension entitlement on reaching retiring age, at which time the worker would be formally discharged and re-engaged on a temporary

basis. This is perhaps the least satisfactory arrangement although it does make for a review of the employee's future and a suitable opportunity for regrading if necessary. There is a further way—to raise the retiring age—but it is unlikely that any firm would wish to commit themselves to this rather drastic action except in pursuance of a National policy.

CONCLUSION

There is a great deal of research yet to be done into the problems of ageing before we are fully equipped to use our old people in the best national interest and to their personal advantage. Some progressive employers have in the past looked forward to the time when the normal retiring age might be reduced rather than increased, and surely no one would wish to deny that it is socially desirable for old age to be a pleasurable experience. But in present-day conditions, a *working* old age appears to be a social and economic necessity; and employers already convinced of the value of good working conditions and welfare amenities should not need persuading to evolve and put into effect a policy that would make old age not only pleasurable but productive.

CHECK LIST FOR FRAMING A COMPANY POLICY

1. Have you analysed your labour force by age groups and occupation, to predict future liability towards older employees?
2. Does your analysis reveal jobs where:—
 - (a) Elderly Workers might replace juveniles or other employees, releasing them for more essential work?
 - (b) It is specially difficult to obtain recruits, and where Elderly Workers might be suitable?
3. Have you considered each job in your organization to decide what is the most suitable age group for performing it? The following points are a broad guide:—

Elderly Workers are most suited to:—

Work requiring accuracy and sustained attention, not under pressure of time standards.

Work performed sitting and in good light.

Work on which it is not necessary to acquire new skills—except of a very simple nature.

Working in a group of similar age, but not necessarily segregated from younger people.

Elderly Workers are least suited to:—

Working against rigid time standards.

Working in competition with younger people.

Working in conditions of extreme heat or cold.

Heavy work, unless used to this all their lives.

Work requiring high manual dexterity and visual acuity, unless they have long experience of such work (i.e. if it does not involve acquiring entirely new skills).

4. Could you use the experience, loyalty and diligence of retained Elderly Workers in introducing and training young employees?
5. Would you consider paying lower rates to Elderly Workers? If so, what is the attitude of the Trade Unions concerned?
6. Have you considered the effects of retaining or recruiting Elderly Workers on:—
 - (a) Your promotion policy?
 - (b) Your redundancy policy?
7. If you are retaining or recruiting Elderly Workers, do you keep a separate analysis of absenteeism, time-keeping and accidents for them?
8. Does your medical officer keep careful observation of the health records of Elderly Workers with a view to recommending change of occupation or retirement before continued work endangers health?
9. Is the individual performance of Elderly Workers regularly reviewed to ensure that a satisfactory level of competence is maintained?
10. Are those responsible for training Elderly Workers aware of the need to develop appropriate methods of instruction?
11. Where there are transport difficulties, do you provide Elderly Workers with early passes?
12. If you have a pension scheme, and intend to retain Elderly Workers, will you:—
 - (a) Postpone pension until actual retirement?
 - (b) Continue contributions for higher pension on retirement?
 - (c) Pay a lump sum in lieu of pension?
 - (d) Terminate the contract at retirement age and re-engage on a new contract?

I. W. S. P U B L I C A T I O N S

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