

# An Age and Work Laboratory – Proposal

## What is the issue?

As the UK leaves the EU, falling migration from Europe will carry implications for British businesses. Most observers agree that employers will need to optimise their use of existing labour, particularly the older workforce. The challenge of workforce ageing has been recognised for some years (most recently in the government's 2017 Industrial Strategy). However, how ready are employers and our institutions for the challenges of a significantly ageing workforce? The Government's *Fuller Working Lives* strategy summarises the challenges under the slogan of "recruit, retain and retrain," but this is an over simplification. Meeting all of the challenges of effective deployment of the older workforce will be crucial for economic success.

## A genuine collaboration between a multidisciplinary research team, employers and other stakeholders

The last decade has seen increasing interest in the ageing workforce by academic and policy researchers. Through our networks with the British Society of Gerontology Older Workers' Interest Group, TAEN and CROW, we are aiming to put together a multigenerational research group with specialisms in HRM, health, sociology, technology, and public policy in order to come up with holistic approaches to workplace active ageing. However, we don't want to just work with academics: we want the 'age and work lab' to foster collaborations between practitioners and academics in order to develop, pilot and embed approaches for transforming ageing workplaces. We are informed of international best practices, from Europe, Asia/the Far East and North America.

## The limited usefulness of ageing research

Many "big picture" studies have provided valuable insight into macro-economic trends in the labour market, especially at the older end and drawn conclusions on the impact which extended working life would have on older people. Generalised case studies have identified "good practices" which have limited applicability in different industries or regions. While such approaches can produce useful and interesting evidence, it often falls short of what people "at the sharp end" really require. They may seek customised solutions which seem "just right" for their sector or organisation.

It may sometimes appear to managers that few of the issues they face are *directly* connected with workforce ageing. This may be because they fail to see problems through the lens of ageing, or because age is only an issue in combination with a wider range of factors, such as competency, the health, well-being and resilience of the workforce, training and skills issues and more.

A further problem is that research may provide only partial answers to seemingly intractable problems, directed at organisations which are widely different in sector or scale and may make only small inroads into the unconscious bias of managers against older workers.

Useful research needs to overcome these difficulties. Among other things, good, timely and relevant research may stand a chance of convincing sceptics to embrace older workers as a genuinely welcome resource.

Many questions require an understanding of the effects of ageing. For example;

- *Health* - How well will businesses in future manage much larger numbers of workers with increasing and varied health needs?
- *Organisational management* - How will employers support workers, helping them to be happy and healthy at work, when their new norms may include coping with chronic health conditions which may seem to be grounds for *giving up* work?
- *Career guidance* - Will career guidance and recruitment systems help people move out of retirement back into employment?
- *Training* - Will our training / re-training approaches help workers to maintain their employability later in life?
- *Age management* - Will managers be able to identify workplace practices best suited to an ageing workforce and know how to implement them?
- *Strategy and analysis* - Will they have the tools to analyse problems and engage with their employees on these issues?
- *Transferability*- How can practices which work well in one industry, region or country inform management practices in other contexts?

### **Our approach**

Our approach is to design research looking below the surface at the real problems which older people face in the world of work.

We believe in looking for solutions and in finding them through working jointly with employers and employees.

We believe in problem oriented collaboration between employees and employers.

Given that many answers to problems arise from an understanding of what motivates and energises the older worker, we see the value of engaging all stakeholders in research design and enquiry.

### **An Age and Work Laboratory**

It is with this spirit in mind that we are exploring the establishment of an “age and work laboratory.” We have in mind an institution to bring the benefits of multi-disciplinary research to real workplace problems and issues, with a particular strength and focus around the ageing workforce. We invite you to share in discussion of this concept with us, and then to help us turn it into reality.

### **What are we proposing?**

*Multi-disciplinary, “what works?” approaches* – We support the idea that research should aim to better understand “what works?” by drawing from a multiplicity of disciplines. Actors need to be informed by studies in psychology, organisational behaviour, employee relations, health, economics and sociology, just to mention some.

*Solutions will not come in neat, one-size fits all packages.* - Issues of culture, sector characteristics, the skills and attitudes of all of the actors on both management and employee sides and the industrial relations background of organisations or specific industries will all come into play.

*“Horses for courses” answers* – We need to consider the specific issues in different industrial sectors and at regional and local levels if Britain’s economy is not to be compromised by the challenges that lie before us. “Copy-cat” attempts to replicate and transplant successes, may have their place but the limiting factors and constraints of context all need to be considered.

*Replicability cannot be taken for granted* - Too many management guides, “how to do it” books and articles, assume replicability of ideas without clarifying such complications. Too often they convey the idea that organisational innovation is a “cut and paste” matter, leading to predictable frustration and disappointment.

*The UK can learn from good practice in other countries*- Almost every country in the world has ageing populations and many have innovative public, social and organisational policies for managing age and intergenerational labour market issues. Solutions are rarely ‘off the shelf’, but an international focus can help UK business learn and apply good practice from abroad.

We believe that real, practical solutions are needed to the many issues highlighted above.

### **Developing the Age and Work Laboratory concept**

Drawing on our funded research with ESRC, EU, Centre for Ageing Better and government as well as our network of stakeholders, we propose the development of an Age and Work Laboratory which would bring together academics and practitioners to develop active ageing HRM, social and public policies which are bespoke to different organisations, occupations and regions. The laboratory will address existing research and public policy gaps in: 1) industrial diversity in the implementation of active ageing HRM; 2) the heterogeneity of experiences of later life work and retirement transitions; and 3) public policy interventions to support ‘hard to employ’ older workers into sustainable work. Within each question, we will establish clusters of specialisms: HRM; health and well-being; skills and education; work environment research and cross-national comparative research. By working with employers, government, unions and older workers themselves, the academic team will co-produce, pilot and embed innovative approaches to support active ageing workplaces.

As things stand this is a raw and incomplete plan. We need to develop it and know who would like to support it. Our aim is to develop a costed proposal which we will submit to the ESRC. We want it to be inclusive of all the relevant disciplines and we are looking for research collaborators and potential partners among our many stakeholders.

### **Action**

If you are interested in the ideas outlined in this paper, please get in touch with us so that we can discuss it with you. We have no entry fee or fixed agenda but we are looking for partners and supporters who are enthusiastic and can contribute what they have, whether research skills, ideas, access to workplaces or tangible resources.

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