

HEALTH MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

Managing an ageing workforce

A recent European survey analysed perceptions of age across Europe, and found that those in the UK considered old age to begin at 59. This was the second-youngest age in the study.

As retirement ages rise and population demographics shift, the working population will continue to age. Almost one-third of people in employment in the UK are over 50, and the proportion is set to increase to four-in-10 by 2040.

While longer working lives bring significant benefits to individuals, employers and wider society, ageing is associated with physical changes which may need to be taken into consideration within the workplace.

Older workers have been found to be more engaged and to have valuable experience, but some views held by employers about them are incorrect based on stereotypes.

Key takeaways

- > Ageing is inevitably associated with physical changes and an increased risk of underlying health issues
- > Some issues can be mitigated by providing flexibility in matters such as part-time working, or modifying responsibilities to reduce risk of injury
- > There is no evidence to suggest older workers have more accidents at work, however accidents involving older people are more likely to be serious
- > It is essential to appreciate older workers as individuals with differing needs, undertaking individual risk assessments
- > Employers have a duty to protect all employees, and must identify groups of workers at an increased risk – which could include older employees
- > Discriminating against workers because of age is illegal – and equality legislation may also apply to older workers due to underlying health issues.
- > Occupational health can offer bespoke, individualised advice to help with case management

Physiological changes

Ageing is inevitably associated with physical changes; including deteriorating vision and hearing loss, decline in respiratory and cardiovascular functions and reduced muscle and grip strength.

There are large parts of the UK where disability-free life expectancy is below the state pension age (SPA), and almost half of people aged between 50 and the SPA have at least one long-term health condition.

Certain types of work can worsen health problems. Long shifts, for example, can lead to chronic fatigue and lack of sleep. Symptoms of early cognitive decline could be exacerbated by chronic stress over extended periods of time.

Objective changes seen with ageing include:



Loss of strength - by retirement age, the average person only has three-quarters of their original strength.



Aerobic capacity - a person's aerobic capacity decreases as they age, so older workers may get out-of-breath more easily.



Problems managing shift work - night shifts come with their own special stresses. Older people are less likely to be able to adapt to changing shift patterns.



Susceptibility to heatstroke - older people are less able to regulate their body temperature.



Long-term health conditions – chronic health conditions are more prevalent among the older generations. Examples include high blood pressure, heart disease and arthritis.



Delayed reaction times – as we age, we take longer to react to things and longer to learn or remember things.



Impaired vision – many people's eyesight begins to falter with age, which can cause problems if not adequately monitored.



Impaired hearing – age-related hearing loss is common.



Menopause – there are around 3.5 million women over the age of 50 employed in the UK, and many have to cope with menopause symptoms at work. Issues include tiredness, poor concentration, depression and reduced confidence.



At work

Employers should never presume that a worker's age determines which jobs they can do, but rather individual risk assessments should be carried out to determine suitability for tasks. Specific age provisions within an organisation's equality policy can underpin a framework for employment for older workers.

Employers should consider:

Task Design

Specific tasks requiring physical strength, speed or endurance should be assessed against the capabilities of the individual older worker. Heat or cold tolerance may be reduced, especially in those with cardiovascular disease or diabetes.

Vision

Roles can be shaped to accommodate the skills and capabilities of different age groups, allowing career progression within the same organisation and preventing loss of skills and knowledge. For example, in car manufacturing, workers move from the most intensive assembly line jobs, to less physically demanding roles such as quality control as they become older.

Chronic disease

Older workers are more likely to develop chronic diseases such as diabetes or arthritis, but reasonable adjustments allow many to work effectively in modified roles. Occupational health can advise.

Shift work

There is evidence that over-50s experience greater difficulty in adapting to shift work, and that women may suffer these problems earlier than men. It is therefore sensible to consider whether those over 50 should continue in shift work - or be given priority to transfer to day work.

Hours of work

A quarter of workers aged 50 to 65 have family caregiving responsibilities, and this percentage may be higher in those over 65. These groups may need a combination of reduced hours and greater flexibility. The same considerations may also apply to those with chronic disease. Each case should be assessed on an individual basis, possibly with OH involvement.

Training needs

Preferred learning styles change with age. Older workers have been shown to prefer on-the-job training, one-to-one training and practical training with older peers providing mentoring and support. It is also important to ensure older workers do not feel excluded from mechanisms of social support.



Sickness absence management

It has been repeatedly reported that while older workers have fewer spells of sickness absence, the duration of absence is likely to be longer. Allowing greater flexibility may facilitate return to work in certain instances - and need not be more costly.

Contact us to find out more



info@healthmanltd.com



healthmanagement.co.uk



Useful resources

[Access to Work](#)

[RNID](#)

[RNIB](#)