The Ageing Workforce in the United Kingdom and the Design of the Work System

Peter BUCKLE

Imperial College, London, UK

Keywords. Ageing workforce, older worker, systems design, review

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a review, requested by the UK Government Office for Science, to assist with policy developments for the ageing workforce (Buckle, 2015). Workplaces in the UK must accommodate an ever-widening demographic age range. This necessity arises from generational longevity and the increasing burden that this places on pension and related welfare and benefits. This need has coincided with a period of financial austerity within the United Kingdom that has led to increased pressures on most industrial sectors. A significant literature is emerging regarding the role that older members of the workforce might play in the future. This review sought to capture this evidence and to utilise this knowledge to develop new ways of thinking that will benefit both industry and individuals. This paper considers changes to the infrastructure of the workplace and the environment that may enable a larger number of people to successfully and productively remain in the workforce beyond traditional retirement ages. It also addresses how we might enable people to remain in employment whilst also enduring some common health ailments that are prevalent in an older demographic.

Aims: i) to consider what are the changes to the work system (including workplace infrastructure and environment) that will enable large numbers of people to successfully remain in the workforce for longer? ii) to consider the barriers that ageing workers face and how they can be overcome within certain timeframes? iii) to review these issues across a variety of work sectors.

2. Methods

This study has:

- Undertaken a review of the literature (research, policy and practice, including grey literature where readily available) to describe both the relevant historical drivers for change and what is known about the current situation.
- Identified and reviewed design based initiatives that are seeking to address these challenges.
- Engaged with the design community re. 'Future look' research.

3. Results

Physical and psychological work demands on older workers frequently exacerbate existing conditions or lead to ill health. Improved design of work systems, including equipment and the organisation of work, should make use of the existing extensive knowledge base of the needs and capacities of older workers.

Some good examples of such design have been identified but there is a paucity of

examples and evidence in many work sectors.

Risk assessment of work for over 65s lacks a sound evidence base. Current guidance has predominantly been drawn from studies of a younger working population. This is especially evident for risks arising from the physical demands at work.

Evaluation of the impact (benefits) of workplace interventions and designs for older workers is needed. This evidence should be based on appropriately designed trials. Designers of infrastructures (including technology) should consider co-design/participatory approaches as essential when considering older workers.

Work system interventions based on one workplace factor alone are unlikely to be sufficient to demonstrate a significant effect. This is because work is a complex sociotechnical system with interrelated dependencies. Sector-specific policy is required as the requirements appear to vary significantly across industrial work sectors. This is particularly noticeable where technology is advancing rapidly or where physical work demands remain high.

Older workers are considered valuable employees because of their knowledge, skills and experience. Managing an ageing workforce requires additional training to maximise the potential and contribution of older workers. Older workers will need appropriate motivation to retain them in employment. Programmes are required to enable managers to gain these skills; such programmes are available in other EU countries.

The modelling of the workforce for 2025 and 2040 is generally poor. Until this is addressed, assessing the needs of older workers and prioritising resources will remain speculative.

Reference

Buckle, P (2015) Workplace Infrastucture Foresight Government Office for Science. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-ageing