

The best person for the job?

The Government's recent moves related to ending the compulsory retirement age have given new impetus to the debate surrounding the pros and cons of an age-diverse workforce.

Whichever route the Government ultimately adopts, we already know that by 2006 the UK will be required to introduce anti-age discrimination laws alongside those on disability, race, gender, sexual orientation and religion. Employers will need to be 'age neutral', and those that fail will face prosecution. Many are therefore worrying about how this law will affect them.

By 2010, increased life expectancies - currently growing by two years per decade - mean that nearly 40% of the UK population will be over 45. By discriminating against this ageing workforce employers therefore risk ignoring the skills and talents of a significant proportion of the UK population.

According to research by the Department for Work and Pensions (2001), one in four 'older' people believe that they have suffered discrimination when applying for a job. Nearly half the organisations surveyed employed no staff aged 60 or over; Line Managers, while insisting they were 'age-friendly', were often ignorant of relevant guidelines and ageism was seen as 'more acceptable' than other types of discrimination.



So why does this discrimination continue to take place - especially when (according to Age Concern, 2002) 97% of Britons believe that age should be ranked as the least important criterion when recruiting a new member

of staff, with ability (57%) and a good track record (40%) counting for far more? Skills, knowledge and experience cannot be created overnight, yet many HR managers seem to see age (or lack of it) as a far

more important factor in selecting employees to fill their vacancies.

This preference for younger employees becomes even more difficult to understand considering the length of time that employees of different ages expect to stay in their current jobs. Research by the International Stress Management Association UK (2002) found that 54% of 18-24 year olds expected to stay in their current job for no more than the next two years (and 32% for no more than the next 12 months). This contrasted with 76% of 35-44 year olds and 74% of 45-54 year olds who expected to stay in their current job for at least the next five years.

One way of interpreting these results is that businesses appear to prefer employing individuals who are less experienced, require more training, and are less loyal than others in the labour market, simply on the grounds of age. If they continue with this strategy - given that the ageing population profile will mean that 'younger' talent will become an increasingly scarce commodity - they will also, presumably, end up paying more and more for the privilege. Another interpretation is that as employees become older, they know that realistically their chances of changing their jobs are significantly less, mainly due to ageism.

Sooner or later, employers will have to realise that by failing to employ the best person for the job, for whatever reason, the result will be a negative impact on their profit margins, and ultimately the viability of their business.



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