

Fulfilling work roundtable - Summary

Topic: Being in fulfilling work

Background

This note summarises discussions from Ageing Better's fulfilling work Roundtable of 22nd February 2016. 22 people participated in the roundtable discussion, coming from a range of backgrounds – academic, public, private and charity sectors.

Our own research, ['Later Life in 2015'](#), highlighted that some people feel the need to work longer, or return to work to protect their financial security in later life. For those able to work longer, employment provides financial income and social interaction. It can also be an opportunity to make a valued contribution, and provide a sense of meaning and purpose. However, gaining these benefits is dependent on personal factors such as health and caring responsibilities, and on being able to find suitable employment in terms of hours, conditions and skills. While some people enjoy a planned transition to retirement, large numbers of people feel forced out of work by circumstances beyond their control.

We believe that evidence of what works is required to change behaviours among individuals, employers and other organisations to ensure that as many people as possible are able to experience a fulfilling working life.

Our segmentation work shows that many current retirees have failed to save sufficiently for later life, others have retired and miss the social aspects of work and a sizable minority want to work but face barriers either through health conditions or difficulty in engaging with the job market. Many people still in work are in the group we identified as squeezed middle aged. They are squeezed both in the workplace and at home, have not adequately planned what the rest of their working life will look like, and typically underestimate the savings required to enjoy a good later life.

On the day, three topics were proposed for discussion based on earlier scoping work by Ageing Better. These were:

1. **Returning to work:** What innovative approaches are there to support over 50s back in to work either in the UK or internationally?
2. **Planning in mid-life:** What information, support or advice does a 50 year old today need to make an informed decision and plan for the rest of their working life?
3. **Engaging employers:** What employer practices could have the greatest impact on the wellbeing of their older workers? What would convince employers that this is worth them implementing?

Summary

The topic questions led to a wide reaching discussion among participants. The main points are outlined below:

People over the age of 50 face significant barriers to returning to work

- While the overall employment rate for those in their 50s and 60s is increasing, there are still major challenges for people who fall out of paid work in their mid-life. We tend to look at the positives and the success story of increasing employment amongst older people without recognising that those people can become quite dislocated and disconnected from the world of work.
- Employment support for over 50s returning to work has been overlooked in mainstream provision.
- Over 50s have some of the worst outcomes in back to work support. Often age itself may not be the primary factor but may be coupled with health, caring responsibility, lack of skills or other factors.
- Many people who are not working between 50 and State Pension age are not in touch with employment support services or the benefit system. More evidence is needed to understand these various cohorts and to assess the barriers that people face to work.

Tailored, localised employment support services are key

- When designing interventions it is essential to involve people with lived experience and to adapt to local labour market and community norms.
- Personalised back to work support for older people, with a dedicated adviser for each individual who has an understanding of over 50 job seekers, appears to be most effective.
- Tailored provision at a local area level is important. Involving LEPs, locally devolved services, local employers and community organisations at a neighbourhood level should be considered.
- Very often there are multiple barriers to employment and factors such as self-efficacy and confidence are hugely important.

Many people are in precarious or unfulfilling work and do not see options for change

- There are inequalities in who can work in later life and many people have little choice over how and when they work.
- There are many people who feel that their current role is secure but who may be vulnerable to sudden shocks, either to their sector, their job role becoming obsolete or their employer disappearing. They may also be at risk from changes in their own circumstances or home life.
- Recruitment agencies often do not reflect older people's needs or the value that older people can bring.
- Age bias can come from employers, colleagues and individuals themselves.
- Self-employment is a growing area in the labour force, particularly for over 50s. However it is important to recognise that many of these roles are not through choice and are people who would rather be working for an employer. It may not be work that is well paid or a fulfilling job that enhances their quality of life.
- An increasing number of people are classified as self-employed as it is the only flexible work that they can find, for instance to manage a caring responsibility.
- With an increasingly flexible labour market it is important to manage transitions between full time work, self-employment and retirement.

Skills and training are as important in later working life as at the beginning

- Maintenance and development of skills throughout the life course is a fundamental part of enabling individuals to fully participate in work that is fulfilling to them. Soft skills are as important as formal training to support people to access work.
- It is not just about learning new skills, but identifying and transferring existing skills and life experiences in new ways.
- Certain skills and knowledge (such as IT and technology) are often cited as being an issue for older workers, but it is important not to pigeonhole people based on their age.
- Current provision for training and vocational education is largely targeted at younger workers and people entering the labour market.

Health factors, in particular mental health and musculoskeletal conditions, are a major reason for people leaving work

- Positive actions such as providing occupational health, or workplaces that promote health and wellbeing were seen to be good for employees of all ages and particularly older workers.
- The government Work and Health unit and upcoming strategy and Work and Health Programme should consider how older workers in particular are impacted.

The concept of workability may be one route to promoting age-friendly workplaces

- The Workability model that has been developed and shown signs of success in Europe and elsewhere may be a useful model for the UK. The model involves job roles being built around older workers with consideration on restrictions on their ability to work and what action is needed to promote good health over their working lives.
- There are practical frameworks such as the Workability index but more consideration is required to assess how workability can be transferred, evaluated and promoted in the UK context.

Planning and preparing in mid-life is important to informed decision making

- Initiatives such as mid-life career reviews as piloted by BIS offer a promising concept for planning and preparing for the latter part of people's working lives. These could include; career and skills planning; thinking about changing job roles, working patterns or sectors; consideration of potential changes to health and finances; and preparing for potential future life changes.
- Career reviews or conversations can also be useful for employers as a way of better understanding their employees and for workforce planning. An open dialogue about employee's skills, career expectations and aspirations can be extremely valuable for employers.

- It is important to consider who is best placed to deliver reviews and conversations of this kind. Employer involvement can be valuable, but an independent provider outside of normal line management hierarchy would promote trust and openness.
- There is a need for further evidence of what works for mid-life career reviews in different settings. If shown to be effective, greater awareness amongst individuals, employers and providers should be promoted.

Employer engagement and action is essential

- Many employers have already seen the benefits of creating age-friendly workplaces. In terms of a business case this is often around retention of skills and experience and transfer of knowledge to younger colleagues. There is also a benefit of diversity and having a workforce that represents the population as a whole as it ages, to create products and services in line with consumer demand.
- Flexibility was seen to be key whether through formal policies around working patterns, or around flexibility of attitude in adapting job roles.
- The line manager relationship was seen as crucial to bringing about change.

Communication with employers and within workplaces must be relevant and engaging to spread the message of what works

- Openness and dialogue in the workplace can help address bias and stigma. Many employers are afraid of discussing age in the workplace for fear of being seen to be discriminatory. Very often problems arise because there are misconceptions between employers and employees because issues are never discussed.
- Promoting knowledge of existing employment rights is important, such as the right to request flexible working.
- Role models at all levels within organisations are key, as are leaders who demonstrate and promote the value of age-friendly workplaces across sectors and industries.
- Importance to tailor and adapt evidence and toolkits to engage with employers directly. Making communications relevant and engaging to specific local employers, sectors, job roles, employer types and sizes.
- Recognition that employers, particularly SMEs, are being asked to focus on a wide range of priorities beyond the day-to-day management of their organisation. A clear message is needed to cut through and highlight why this is a topic that is important and why action is needed.

Not all work is paid and there is an important balance with unpaid work, voluntary and community contributions

- While paid work has obvious financial benefits, in terms of income and saving for later life, other forms of unpaid contributions are also essential to recognise and value. This includes unpaid caring for partners, relatives or others.
- Voluntary and community contributions also have enormous benefits for local areas and can also benefit individual wellbeing, for example as part of a phased transition to retirement.
- Voluntary work can also act as a step into employment by boosting skills, improving confidence and allowing people to be more active.

Next steps

Ageing Better is using the information and ideas gathered at this roundtable to help shape our programme to promote fulfilling work that supports people to have a good later life. Initial priorities for next steps include:

- Developing and drawing together the evidence about the most effective ways to enable people aged 50 and over to get back into work. We are partnering with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to develop and pilot a new initiative to support people over the age of 50 not in work.
- Working with employers to draw together and share evidence about age-friendly workplaces. We are partnering with Business in the Community to make the case for age-friendly workplaces, learn from what leading employers are doing, and spread what works.

We will be engaging individuals, employers, representative groups and other organisations to help us develop these areas.
