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Vickerstaff, Sarah and Phillipson, Chris and Loretto, Wendy (2015) Training and Development: The Missing Part of the Extending Working Life Agenda? Public Policy and Aging Report, 25 (4). pp. 139-142. ISSN 2053-4892.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ppar/prv018>

Link to record in KAR

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Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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Training and Development: the Missing Part of the Extending Working Life Agenda? The Case of the UK

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INTRODUCTION

The population of the UK is aging and public policy has increasingly turned to initiatives designed to encourage people to delay retirement and work for longer. The age for drawing the state pension has been raised for men and women to 66 (to be phased in from 2018) with a further rise to 67 by 2028. To develop policies around achieving an ‘extended’ or ‘fuller’ working life, the UK Government appointed a Business Champion for Older Workers to ‘drive the culture change’ needed to support older workers (Altmann, 2015). Her first report calls for a National Strategy for Skills and Adult Learning with key elements of the strategy to include: financial support for part-time study and student loans at any age; mid-life career reviews; funding for mature apprentices; and tax breaks for employer-funded training for older workers.

In reality, expanding the training and workforce development of older workers is likely to encounter a number of obstacles. This article examines three main aspects: first, the employment context for older workers; second, the current state of training and development initiatives; third, the agenda for supporting older workers that will need to be developed to meet the challenges associated with an aging society.

EMPLOYMENT OF OLDER WORKERS IN THE UK

The employment rate of 50-64 year olds in the UK has risen over the period 2001-to 2013: from 62% to 67% (DWP, 2013). More remarkable is the doubling in employment of those aged 65+ in the same period, reaching 10% in 2014. This expansion is mainly comprised of those in long-term employment (jobs held for at least 10 years) or long-term self-

employment. The latter category accounts for nearly 20% of all workers aged 50-64, and 41% of all those 65 and over. Although part-time employment is an important feature of work in later life: 28% of those aged 50-64 work part-time, rising to 66% for those aged 65 plus (all 2014 figures), the proportion of over-50s in employment who work part-time has declined over the past decade (Lain & Loretto, 2014).

Despite evidence for people staying on longer in employment, the majority of people in the UK are still likely to leave paid work at some point in their sixties. Thus whilst the percentage of people in their early 50s reaches a high of around 80 %, in employment there is a steep decline thereafter with an employment rate of just 18% by age 67 (Business in the Community/ILC, 2015). The unemployment rate amongst the 50-64 age group remains high relative to the level it was before the financial crisis of 2008. Men, in particular, appear to have been adversely affected by the 2008 crisis and subsequent recession with the male unemployment rising sharply in the aftermath (Business in the Community/ILC, 2015)

Policies to substantially reverse this trend have to date focused largely on individuals, with financial incentives to continue working, encouraging flexible working, and banning direct and indirect discrimination in employment on the basis of age (Lain & Vickerstaff, 2015). But the obstacles to extending working life are substantial given, first, health problems affecting those 50-65, with almost one-half being diagnosed with a long-term chronic health condition (DWP, 2014); second, inequalities in education, with older people competing with younger people in the labor market but having fewer qualifications: in 2010 45% of people aged 55-64 in the UK had below secondary education, compared with only 17% of those aged 25-34 (OECD, 2012: 35).

Based on the above, reversing the drift of people from work into retirement will almost certainly require a range of interventions in respect of workforce development, a view endorsed by the OECD (2006). What is the record to date on workforce development in the UK?

TRAINING AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF OLDER WORKERS

The UK Business Champion for Older Workers takes the view that: “Ensuring that older workers’ skills are kept up to date is vital to helping them remain in work...Improving skills can offer a new lease of working life” (Altmann, 2015, p. 28). However, evidence on whether skills are being updated and enhanced for older workers in the UK is not encouraging. The Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) series is the most definitive and influential study of employment relations in the UK. The latest study was conducted in 2011 and collected data from nearly 3,000 organisations, covering both large and small workplaces across the private and public sectors. It comprises a series of linked studies, collecting information from managers, employee representatives and a selection of employees. The employee survey included questions about amount of training over the previous year, satisfaction with training and skills development: the following findings are based on the 21,824 respondents who supplied their age details: of these, 30% (7042) were aged 50 or over.

Table 1: about here

The headline figures in Table 1 on quantity of training indicate a larger proportion of older workers receiving no training over the past year and a smaller proportion receiving 5 or more days’ training. A regression model was constructed to control for the main factors that have previously been shown to affect participation in training and which may vary with age: educational attainment; nature of employment (full-time versus part-time and temporary

versus permanent, length of service); trade union membership; caring responsibilities; nature of employer (workplace size and sector); occupation. While each of these had their own relationship with training: incidence of training declined with length of service and certain occupational groups, namely managers, professionals and those in caring, leisure and other services, were markedly more likely to have received training in the previous year, the age effect still persisted. That is, the lower incidence of training among over 50s cannot be entirely accounted for either by the roles they occupy or the length of time these have been held.

Analysis of the 2014 Wave of the UK Understanding Society Survey (a longitudinal study with data collected on an annual basis) confirmed that only a minority of older workers is likely to have access to regular training and updating of skills: 23% of men and 26% of women aged 50-59 reported receiving work-related training in the past 12 months; the figure for those aged 60-69 was 11%. Data from the UK Labour Force Survey also reveals important socio-economic differences in the likelihood of older workers' participation in training programmes (Newton et al., 2005; see, also, DWP, 2015). The evidence here is for a decline in training affecting all occupational groups. However, older workers in low-skilled occupations are the least likely to receive training. Part-time workers and the self-employed, both of whom are more likely to be drawn from the 50 plus age group, also receive substantially less training than their full-time counterparts.

Based on the above findings, what initiatives might be offered to boost training and workforce development? What are the options to assist those faced with an extended working life?

POLICY CHALLENGES IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR OLDER WORKERS

Developing new initiatives targeted at the older population will require recognition of the varied forms of support necessary among different groups of workers and at different phases of work careers. For example, among those in their late-40s to mid-50s, demand for job training and professional courses is likely to increase, since many in this age group will have a substantial number of working years to complete before eligibility for a pension. Moreover, a substantial proportion in this age group will have been part of the expansion of higher and further education from the 1970s onwards and may view lifelong learning as an essential part of continued employment. Among those in their late-50s and 60s, the need for new skills is likely to be an essential requirement if meaningful employment is to be secured. Mayhew & Rijkers (2004, p. 2), in a review for the OECD, stress the importance of “continuous learning during the whole of working life as a means of reducing the dangers of labour market disadvantage in later years”.

To date, the main focus of discussion has been upon keeping employees’ skills up to date and reskilling or upskilling unemployed older workers to help them back into work. Whilst both of these are important they offer a limited conception of the role that training and development activities can play in supporting an aging workforce. The image presented is one of ‘plugging skills gaps’ rather than creating an opportunity for employee growth and development. For those in employment we should take a broader view than simply their access to specific training opportunities and focus instead on the extent to which their later life careers are managed, that is whether they have access to meaningful appraisal and career advice and development opportunities (Loretto, Phillipson & Vickerstaff, 2015). Research on this wider view replicates the findings about access to training: older workers are also less

likely to have informal conversations with their manager about their job or formal performance appraisals than prime age workers (CIPD, 2011).

Challenging this narrow approach to training and development will require action in at least three areas: first, re-thinking the type of training which older workers receive; second, widening opportunities for those who are unemployed, working part-time or self-employed; third, identifying a more prominent role for universities and colleges.

On the first of these, research evidence suggests that employer (or line manager) ‘discouragement’ partly explains decreasing participation in training (Phillipson 2012). However, it is also clear that this is not a complete explanation for some of the difficulties facing older workers. In particular, they themselves may consider – after a certain age or stage in their career – that further training is unnecessary. Or, as is also possible, they may feel that the type of training and learning they are likely to receive is inappropriate given their level of skill and experience. Czaja and Sharit (2009, p. 266) make the point that although many existing training techniques are effective for older adults, we lack an adequate research database to “determine whether some training techniques are consistently differentially beneficial to older workers.” On the other hand, the literature from work-based psychological studies has demonstrated the benefits as well as limitations of particular approaches to training involving older workers (see further Hsu, 2013). Tsang (2009), for example, cites a number of studies which demonstrate how relatively small amounts of training can reverse cognitive decline and assist the retention of newly acquired skills. Conversely, the limitations of training benefits are also noted, these including reduced magnitude of learning and slower learning rates. Given the emergence of a more diverse aging workforce, attention to new ways of delivering work-based training would seem an urgent requirement. Hsu (2013, p. 294), for example, makes the point that further research is needed to: “...thoroughly examine

and account for the interrelationships and performance variability within older groups in training and basic general abilities and motives.”

Second, addressing the training needs of the unemployed, those who work part-time and the self-employed should also be a priority. Research has highlighted inequalities between full- and part-time workers in respect of access to training. However, the availability of training for those working part-time or those unemployed appears to have been reduced, with the major focus now placed on preparing younger people for entry into the labor market. Some options for consideration here might include: more imaginative use of computer-based training or ‘e-learning’ to assist those working from home or those juggling work and caregiving responsibilities (Czaja & Sharit, 2009); specific obligations placed upon employers to expand training and learning as a pre-condition for creating non-standard forms of employment; and making further training a legal entitlement for those changing careers or moving into bridge forms of employment.

Third, encouraging a more prominent role for universities and communities in workforce development should also be considered. The number of older people wishing to take advantage of higher and college education will almost certainly grow, with the ‘baby boom’ generation in particular likely to fuel demands for new types of vocational and non-vocational courses. Reflecting this, three types of initiatives might be followed by the university and college sector: first, experimenting with new types of career development courses aimed at those entering mid-life; second, launching research programmes testing new types of training for a more diverse workforce; third, developing courses aimed at assisting those who experienced educational disadvantage throughout their lives.

Conclusions

There is now a wealth of evidence to demonstrate that opportunities for training and development for older workers, regardless of their employment sector, are more limited than for younger workers. The implications of this for the extending working life agenda are obvious. There is arguably a pressing need to acknowledge that the older workforce in the UK is constituted predominantly by longer-serving employees, suggesting that paying attention to their training and development needs may be a wise investment in both retention and productivity terms. Whilst there is no shortage of ideas as suggested here: we need to re-assess methodologies and techniques for training and developing older workers; we need to expand opportunities and access to training and encourage colleges and universities to play a greater role in vocational education and career development; there is little evidence of an appetite for major policy development or reform. Discussions such as the one rehearsed in this article have been largely absent from the wider public policy and practice interest in extending working lives.

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Table 1: Number of days' training received in previous year

Number of days' training	Under 50	50 and over
None	29.2	38.1
< 1 day	12.8	12.7
1 - <2	17.2	16.8
2 - <5	23.2	20.5
5 - <10	10.5	8.0
10+	7.0	3.9
	100%	100%

Source: Workplace Employment Relations Study (2011).