

TAEN - The Age and Employment Network

Defining Age Management: Information and Discussion Paper

Though the term ‘age management,’ strikes British ears rather awkwardly, it is alive and well in Europe. ‘Age management’ can mean many things. It can refer to interventions at the level of the individual older person, the labour market or the organisation.

Leaving aside demographic and other ‘facts’ about the ageing workforce, how might we define ‘age management’? Walker (1997) defines it as referring to;

‘... the various dimensions by which human resources are managed within organisations with an explicit focus on ageing and, also, more generally, to the overall management of the workforce ageing via public policy or collective bargaining.’

Hence, ‘age management’ can encompass attitudes towards the older worker or the older worker’s attitudes to work and career. It can deal with learning and qualifications, interventions by the state (locally or nationally), seek to change the older worker’s situation in the labour market generally or address issues of health and work, job design and many others. By this definition, TAEN is already deeply involved in ‘age management,’ and has been since its formation. The focus, as we have already noted, can be at the level of the individual, the labour market or the organisation. There is a particular need to address the organisational dimensions of age management and its implications for human resource professionals and others among the managements of companies.

One problem with Walker’s definition could be that it excludes issues around younger workers. Arguably, this is significant, especially as European and UK law on age discrimination applies to *any* age and discrimination against younger and older people is, seemingly, considered equally important by a number of authorities (Employers’ Forum on Age, 2004, 2005.) There are a number of answers to this line of criticism however.

Firstly, in the literature, the overwhelming emphasis stems from concerns about the situation of *older* people in the workforce. Sources stretch from reports such as is offered by Muson (2003), newsletter articles (Credit Union Executive, 2005) to the outpourings of significant research projects such as the OECD's 1999 and 2006 studies and Reday-Mulvey's 'Working Beyond 60' (2005). In all of these, the emphasis is on the older worker and issues concerning younger workers are not even mentioned.

Moreover, it is clear in reading the policy background to the EU initiative which resulted in legislation against age discrimination (Europa web site), that the real issue concerning economists and policy makers at the time, arose from the state of older, rather than younger, people. The pincer movement of older workers' early exits from employment and the growing cost of their pensions and welfare payments, together with their dauntingly growing longevity, provided a policy conundrum it was becoming impossible to ignore. It appears that out of these sorts of concerns, the concept of age management has emerged and it is really not necessary to invent a definition now which artificially bolts on another worthy cause – e.g. a perfectly proper concern that younger people should not suffer age discrimination.

A second point to note, is that it would defy biological reality to pretend that the problems of the young are similar to or on a par with the problems of older people. The truth is that we *all* become old and for many of us, this means suffering some deterioration of physical or mental capacities to such an extent that a time comes when we feel no longer able to work. Life is finite and decline is gradual. Though age is linked to these (ultimately irresistible) degenerative processes, it should neither define the prospects of older workers nor the ways they are perceived. The ideal of course, is a successful and rewarding career in which neither mental nor physical decline inhibits performance. The reality may be somewhat different, giving rise to a need for interventions targeted either at the individual or his/her work.

Hence, the need for a body of knowledge and practice to deal with a 'given' in the human condition - age. In a sense then, good practice around the management of older people is quite different from good practice in relation to youth which has been denied its chances. None of these comments though, should be taken to preclude youth oriented initiatives either separately or alongside initiatives directed towards older workers, nor that interventions to benefit older workers, should necessarily be seen as *solely* benefiting them.

Limitations in Use of 'Age Management' Terminology

Age management appears to suffer a recognition problem at present. Sources of advice on good practice in relation to older workers frequently do not use the expression. The CIPD's guidance note (2005) for example, uses the phrases, 'Age and Employment,' and 'Diversity and Equality,' while in its survey (2005) the CIPD uses the phrase, 'Tackling Age Discrimination.' In a document of some 25

pages dealing with many of the elements that are certainly encompassed within our definition of 'age management,' the CIPD appears not to recognise the existence of this concept.

The American Conference Board's 'Managing the Mature Workforce' report (2005) and a further publication (Parkinson, 2002) both come out of the Board's Engaging Mature Workers Working Group. 'Age management' as an expression is not used, even though it is clear that they are dealing with precisely the same issues.

ACAS (2005) adopts the title, 'Employing Older Workers;' Age Positive (2002) uses the phrase, 'age diversity.' While the Department for Work and Pensions (2001) uses various terms including, 'Good Practice in the Recruitment and Retention of Older Workers,' it does actually use the phrase 'age management', explained further in section 5.4 below. (One is left to wonder however, whether this blip of recognition on the Government's radar was occasioned by the guide's anonymous draftsman being no less than Walker, the academic champion of the concept!) In all of these documents (with the exception of the DWP guide previously mentioned), elements of age management are explained or advocated, even though the term itself is not adopted.

The question of course arises, 'does this matter?' In one sense it does not, because after all, whatever 'age management' is called, it is certainly taking place in various forms and circumstances. On the other hand, it is helpful to adopt common terminology in the interests of clarity. Moreover, common language and a common understanding of concepts are essential for learning and passing on knowledge.

In summary and support of the term 'age management' being more widely adopted, the following points may be made. First, *age management* refers to a body of knowledge and practice which is potentially transferable and valuable in the field of business. Second, it refers to a range of approaches which have evolved cross culturally and have been extensively researched and documented. (Reday-Mulvey, 2005; Walker, 2005; Walker and Turner, 1998; Walker, 1998; Rolland, 2004.) Third, while terms other than 'age management' might well describe some of the practices adopted by UK employers in relation to age, packaging diversity and anti-discrimination initiatives as *part* (but not the whole) of the age management process, could lead practitioners to consider other elements available to maximise the contribution of older workers.

After reviewing good practices around the human resource management of older people, one is drawn to the conclusion that the term 'age management' is indeed part of a widely accepted body of terminology and practice and should be generally accepted as such, at all levels in organisations, among the professional bodies supporting management practice and among policy makers seeking to influence the way issues of age and employment are managed at work.

Interventions in Age Management

This discussion brings us to the kinds of things that organisations can do, to promote particular aims and objectives relating to their older workers. In other words, the tools of age management – what do they comprise? The range of interventions constituting age management in organisations has grown over the years. Hence, Casey, Metcalf and Lakey (1993) refer to initiatives covering job recruitment and exit; training, development and promotion; flexible working practices; ergonomics and job design; and changing attitudes towards ageing workers.

A guide commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (2001) outlines three principle dimensions in addressing age disadvantages at work. It advocates, formal policies on age discrimination, creating organisational cultures valuing older workers and ‘introducing actions that support older workers.’ It comments, ‘... employers should consider combining these dimensions by developing an “*age management strategy*”...,’ and suggests, ‘the strategy should deal with, ‘recruitment; training and development; promotion; flexible working; redundancy and retirement.’

Case Studies and Examples

Whatever the precise range of interventions, case studies are indispensable in putting flesh on the bones. Two substantial bodies of work confirm the range and diversity of approaches. The first is the Age Positive set of case studies (2006) which have been compiled by this DWP based awareness raising organisation. The scope of examples is limited somewhat by its method of data collection - an Age Positive Champion application form which focuses explicitly on age diversity to the exclusion of other dimensions. On the other hand, some 84 cases are included giving an opportunity to examine initiatives in a range of organisations and sectors and not all are restricted by the Age Positive limited perspective.

The second case study set arises from the European Foundation’s project, ‘Employment Initiatives for an Ageing Workforce.’ This has examined more than 150 case studies of good practice. Some of them have been drawn on for a Portfolio of Good Practice (Walker and Taylor, 1998) and a Guide to Good Practice (Walker, 1998) but a separate web accessible data base has also been maintained by the European Foundation. The latter presently covers 64 of the case studies from nine countries.

Categorising Age Management Interventions

In the data base of age management good practice maintained by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, age management interventions are classified according to the following categories: changing attitudes; recruitment; training, development and promotion; health and well being; wage policy; ergonomics and job design; exit policy; redeployment and a separate category to indicate whether or not the approach is ‘comprehensive.’

Walker and Taylor's 'Portfolio of Good Practice,' based on the same research, offers a more sophisticated classification system. Each of the intervention categories offers scope for a range of widely different change measures and actions. Organisations or consultants faced with particular sorts of problems, in which age is a dimension, may wish to draw on experience of others who have trod similar ground. If there were a satisfactory way of classifying interventions, such learning from the experience of others would be made more straightforward. The European Foundation data base (web version) includes contact details for specific cases, offering opportunities for HR managers to compare notes internationally through cyberspace. A summary of the *'Employment Initiatives for an Ageing Workforce,'* based on the same research, was published in 2006. Though this provides a helpful overview of the many different approaches adopted, there is no attempt to categorise them in a way that might render knowledge and experience transfer more straight forward.

It should be noted that neither of the categorisations of age management is the final word – there is scope for further development. Neither is presently particularly helpful from an analytical point of view, though developing such an analytical tool might well prove difficult. A further briefing note will be prepared shortly, looking in more detail at interventions categorisation and offering suggestions as to how their present shortcomings might be addressed.

The Management Side of Age Management

Walker (2005) argues that in order to achieve good practice in age management, policies do not necessarily have to be labelled 'older worker' policies, a point which must be self evident and in any event reflects our discussion about the place of youth in age management, above. He argues that in general terms, 'good practice in the employment of older workers consists of providing an environment in which each individual is able to achieve his or her broad potential without being disadvantaged by their age.' (page 692)

Broad descriptions of good practice in job recruitment, training and development, flexible working practices, changing attitudes in organisations, ergonomics and job design can all be relatively easily visualised. Numerous additional sources illustrate these in considerable detail (Reday-Mulvey, 2005; Department for Education and Employment, 1999; ACAS, 2005; NHS Employers 2006; Employers' Organisation for Local Government, 2006; Employers Forum on Age, 2004 and 2005).

The problem is not where to go for ideas, but rather, how to tackle the information overload which will follow. Various suggestions in the literature appear worth taking further. Rolland (2004) produces a matrix model of age management, encouraging the identification of interventions at various points from recruitment, through progression to exit in the context of learning and development, communication, health and well being and leadership. (page 12).

Her recognition that no single response to the changing labour supply will be sufficient, echoes the work of other writers, already mentioned above. In a further interesting application of a managerial method, Rolland provides an assessment profile to analyse risks which ageing workforces pose to organisations, and she proposes the use of age profiles to implement and manage recruitment.

Arguments around the construction of a business case for age management interventions, are put forward by a number of writers (Walker, 1997; Patrickson and Ranzijin, 2005; Turner and Williams, 2006.) For them, such a case would involve a more attenuated treatment of older workers than the rather generalised claims sometimes made of their business benefits (CIPD, 2005) and need to build on the distinctive arguments for different categories of workers (Patrickson and Ranzijin, 2005). The business case therefore involves a more subtle assessment of the value of specific categories of older workers.

A report for the Australian Employers' Convention (Brooke, 2002) demonstrates one approach that might be adopted. Employing cost-benefit analysis, it compares older workers against the rest of the workforce. Besides debunking many of the stereotypes around older workers the report shows that retention of workers over 45 contributes benefits to businesses by developing more stable workforces with lower turnover costs.

Walker (2000) offers a catalogue of success indicators based on the findings of the European Combating Age Barriers, project. He argues that for any age management initiative to be successful it requires backing from senior management, a supportive HR environment, commitment from the ageing workers concerned and careful and flexible integration.

What is clear from the foregoing, is that successful age management is not simply a question of spotting good ideas. It involves understanding the business needs of the organisation, devising suitable, fit for purpose interventions, carefully preparing the ground in terms of having the necessary support of stakeholders and implementing them in the same way as one would implement any change programme, so as to maximise prospects of success. A key factor in the success or otherwise of any age management initiative is likely to be the presence of an HR practitioner who both understands and is willing to champion the business case for change.

Concluding Comment

This paper has sought to address a need identified in TAEN for a background briefing on age management. We are all in a similar situation in one sense, in that this is a new area of management science and knowledge; there is clearly a great deal more for us all to learn. Hopefully this paper will go some way towards providing a background which will enable further discussion and learning of this important area to occur.

Table: Classification of Interventions, from ‘Removing Age Barriers’ Research

<p>1. Job Recruitment</p>	<p>1.1 increasing maximum age limit 1.2 elimination/absence of particular age barrier 1.3 positive discrimination 1.4 support of self-help group to promote their own employment 1.5 training programmes to promote recruitment policies 1.6 employment exchange/job centre for older workers 1.7 other</p>
<p>2. Training, Development and Promotion</p>	<p>2.1 development of training and educational programmes, 2.2 in particular for older/ageing workers 2.3 existing training and educational programmes opened to older/ageing workers 2.4 creation of learning environment and workplace mentorship for older workers 2.5 career development 2.6 evaluation of performance 2.7 promotion of age-specific policy in work organisations 2.8 other</p>
<p>3. Flexible Working Practice</p>	<p>3.1 job rotation 3.2 promotion of age-specific policy in work organisations 3.3 flexible working hours/age related working time 3.4 age related leave 3.5 demotion (without change in wage level) 3.6 part-time jobs 3.7 flexible retirement/early exit scheme 3.8 gradual retirement scheme/part-time “early exit” 3.9 self regulation of pace 3.10 other</p>
<p>4. Ergonomics, Job Design and Prevention</p>	<p>4.1 ergonomic measures/improvement work conditions/ workload 4.2 organisation of tasks 4.3 mix of young and older workers 4.4 age related health and/or wealth control 4.5 older workers excluded from shift labour 4.6 other</p>
<p>5. Changing Attitudes within Organisations</p>	<p>5.1 research related to ageing and performance 5.2 programmes to change attitudes and opinions towards older workers 5.3 other</p>

6. Changes in Exit Policy	6.1 elevation of minimum age of early exit 6.2 abolition of early exit programmes 6.3 elevation of normal retirement age 6.4 other
7. Other Policies	7.1 general age related policy; seniority programmes 7.2 sectoral age related policy as result of Collective Agreements 7.3 future plans 7.4 recognition of caring responsibilities 7.5 other

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