

SUSTAINING WORKING LIVES: A FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

It is now well accepted that as we live longer, many of us will have to work longer too. This has become an economic necessity for our society as a whole. But rather than force people to ‘work till they drop’, we need to improve opportunities. This means helping people pursue satisfactory careers, structured in ways that make work sustainable as they grow older. We need to think in new ways about how, throughout their working lives, people learn, plan careers, stay healthy and work flexibly.

Following its research programme on ‘Transitions after Fifty’, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has produced a framework to aid discussion of how changes in policy and practice can contribute to sustaining working lives. This paper summarises the framework, which is set out on the Foundation’s website along with a set of discussion papers at: www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=682

Evidence assembled by JRF and others shows that many people face negative experiences later in their working lives, linked partly to direct or indirect discrimination in the workplace but also to some broader influences. Some are ‘burnt out’ or have other health-related problems, including stress; some have not been able to keep their skills up to date; some are unable to find work options that fit in with changing commitments, such as caring. Those who are the most disadvantaged in working life tend to suffer most, having had least investment in their careers and being least well-positioned to negotiate new roles in later working life.

Following up its research in this area, the JRF has held workshops and commissioned expert papers to consider how working life can be made more ‘sustainable’. This contrasts with an approach that looks only at how older people who fall out of work can be helped back into jobs: retention and prevention need to be at the heart of any strategy. A framework for sustainability identifies the need for improvements in three main areas.

■ 1 Personal and career development, guidance and learning

Continuous career development has tended to be a luxury of professional and other privileged groups of workers. Yet it is an important ingredient in job sustainability for everyone, since it influences both people’s motivation to go on working and their capacity in terms of acquiring skills and being able to adapt to new circumstances.

Avenues for change in policy and practice include:

- **Promoting learning in later life** – much more vigorously than has been done to date, and removing age-related rules on access to learning subsidies
- **Promoting learning as an ongoing activity throughout working life** – rather than waiting until workers are in their 50s to tell them they must upgrade their skills
- **Promoting guidance among older adults** – rather than concentrating services on the young
- **Extending the concept of career** – using guidance services to help people to plan lifetime development



■ 2 Flexible working time and work-life balance

The concept of work-life balance has taken off in public discourse to a large extent in relation to the needs of working parents. Yet research shows that many older workers would value greater flexibility, including the chance to work part-time. This is partly about avoiding the 'cliff edge' of sudden retirement, but also about changing needs and perspectives in later life (for example, new caring responsibilities, changing capacities and changing views of work).

Avenues for change in policy and practice include:

- **Extending the presumption of the need for flexibility to people other than parents** – the government already proposes extending it to carers, but a better approach is to regard everyone as requiring work-life balance
- **Systematically improving options for part-time work in the transition to retirement** – possibly with active encouragement, as happens in Scandinavia
- **Developing options for more flexible working lives** – for example, by helping people save for mid-life sabbaticals
- **Supporting the needs of carers in work** – in particular by changing workplace cultures to acknowledge carers' need for extra flexibility

■ 3 Workers' health and the quality of working lives

Systematic research in Finland shows powerful evidence of links between the 'work ability' of people in their late 50s and aspects of their work environments 10-15 years previously. Favourable factors include not just physically healthy workplaces but also aspects of control and clarity of work roles. Good work quality can help people sustain physical and psychological health.

Avenues for change in policy and practice include:

- **Redefining occupational health aims to create health-promoting workplaces** – based around active dialogue between managers and workers
- **Specific initiatives to address health needs of older workers** – in partnership with health bodies
- **Creating more flexibility about how people work at different stages of their lives** – for example, allowing people to be redeployed to less physically strenuous jobs where appropriate

What is required to make this happen?

Pursuing these avenues for change requires strong partnerships, in particular between workers and employers, in which each takes some responsibility, for example through 'co-financing' of investment in lifelong learning. There also needs to be an effort to join up policies across government. Measures to help older workers should not be confined to the Department for Work and Pensions; departments responsible for learning, health and workplace conditions all need to contribute to promoting work sustainability.

Read more

Read the full framework and accompanying discussion papers at www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=682.

This summary was written by Donald Hirsch, Special Adviser to the JRF. The individual papers are:

- **Sustaining working lives: A framework for policy and practice**, Donald Hirsch
- **Am I still needed? Guidance and learning for older adults**, Geoff Ford
- **Older workers and work-life balance**, Sue Yeandle
- **A coming of age: Experiences of work and sustaining workability**, Linda Boyes and Jim McCormick
- **Support for working carers**, Marilyn Howard

Findings from the Transitions after 50 programme are summarised in **Crossroads after fifty: Improving choices in work and retirement** by Donald Hirsch (2003). Download or buy this report from www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop.