

Sustaining working lives



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Sustaining working lives

A framework for policy and practice

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1 Older workers, choice and sustainability

In recent years, many older workers have found it hard to meet their goals in the labour market. Some have been forced to leave work earlier than they would have liked to, for example because their employers have downsized or their skills have become redundant. Some have left work relatively early because of poor health or because they are dissatisfied or disillusioned with work. Others have continued working because they cannot afford to retire, even though they have grown to dislike their jobs, do not feel respected by their employers and fellow workers, or find life extremely stressful partly because of responsibilities outside work, such as caring for elderly relatives.

Many other older workers, however, feel happy in their jobs and some are able to continue to do fulfilling work well beyond state pension age. Experience of work in later life, in other words, is highly varied. Yet there has been a growing sense of unease about the situation of older workers and about current retirement patterns. This has stemmed from concern about the following.

- The fact that, in recent decades, we have been living longer but in many cases having shorter working lives, which may not be economically sustainable.
- The ways in which many people have been leaving work – whether taking very early retirement packages or drifting out of regular employment and finding it extremely difficult to re-enter the labour market.
- The disillusion of many people with working life at times in their forties, fifties or sixties when they are still relatively fit and capable of making an economic contribution. Some negative public and employer attitudes towards older people appear to contribute to this disillusion, by making older workers feel that they are not valued.
- The particularly severe effect that these trends are having on disadvantaged groups, particularly those with low skills, with little or no pension provision and with health issues that make labour market participation harder.

How should government policy and workplace practice respond to these issues? One approach is to take steps actively to promote longer working lives, for example by creating financial incentives for people to work longer. Such an approach, on its own, is not likely to get very far. It addresses the macroeconomic case for people retiring later, without either getting at the underlying causes of earlier job exit or acknowledging that different people have different needs and aspirations in relation to how long they continue to work. In particular, it does not get at the reasons why

many people who have had disadvantaged working lives are finding it hard to sustain work up until state pension age.

An alternative approach is to aim to improve *choices* and *opportunities* for older workers, allowing people to stay longer in their existing jobs, to find new paid roles later in life, or to follow routes to retirement that meet their needs and preferences. If, as the evidence suggests, many people are being pushed into premature retirement by employer decisions, by a lack of flexible employment opportunities or by negative experiences of work, then a system that removes barriers to work and improves the quality of the options available should lead to a net increase in employment rates. Thus the macroeconomic imperative of increasing the average age of retirement could be achieved without putting pressure on each individual to work for longer.

How, then, can choices and opportunities for older workers be improved? Those who are experiencing difficulties in the labour market can be helped directly in a number of ways. For example, government employment services and other measures designed to help disadvantaged groups in the labour market can help people to become 'work ready' and to look for work. Age discrimination legislation will, from 2006, seek to improve the prospects of older workers by 'levelling the playing field' to help workers of all ages to compete on equal terms in the labour market. The hope is that the legislation together with government campaigns such as 'Age Positive' will help change attitudes and mores that create difficulties for older workers.

However, research carried out in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF's) 'Transitions after 50' programme (Hirsch, 2003) and elsewhere suggests that the problem will not be solved only by attempting to reconnect non-working older people with the labour market, or even by ensuring that employers pay less attention to people's ages when they hire, fire, promote and train them. Often the labour market difficulties that older workers experience result from a complex set of factors that have developed in the course of their working lives, which interact with the limited opportunities available to them in their later working years. These can include the following.

- Poor job quality, which makes many workers, particularly in lower-paid jobs, feel negative about work and pleased to stop it as early as possible.
- Problems with health and stress, which can build up over the course of a working life and eventually lead employees to feel that they have no option but to stop work for the sake of their health, or to be forced to do so by their employers.

- A lack of attention to learning and self-development in the course of people's working lives. Not everyone is able to progress through coherent career pathways and many workers have not acquired the skills to adapt as work changes around them.
- Competing priorities in people's lives, such as caring for parents, partners and grandchildren, which may become difficult to reconcile with work unless it is flexibly structured to enable people to balance home and work priorities.
- Limited options for changing roles and working status as one's situation changes throughout working life, so that, too often, the choice is between continuing to do exactly the same job or retiring completely, rather than being able to work in new ways including part-time work or self-employment.

Thus, a strategy to improve the position of older workers and to give them more options about how they make the transition to retirement needs to rest on creating more *sustainable working lives*.

Helping older workers in this way is fundamentally different from helping other sub-groups of workers. Older workers are not a separate group within society: later working life is a stage that most of us will pass through. So it is not just a matter of ensuring that a disadvantaged minority gets extra assistance or does not face discrimination, important as these things may sometimes be for older workers confronting labour market disadvantage. Solutions need also to think about ageing in work as a *process* that needs to be better managed.

There are two reasons in particular to give priority to sustaining working lives, rather than just 'rescuing' workers who have dropped out of work.

The first is because rescue is so difficult. Once someone has stopped work after the age of about 45, their chances of ever working again are remarkably low: panel evidence suggests, for example, that only a small minority of men of this age will return to work once they have become economically inactive (Campbell, 1999). While intensive help in re-entering employment may raise prospects at the margins, the best hope of improving choices and opportunities in work is clearly through 'retention' rather than 'return'.

Second, changing demography means that, for possibly the first time in history, the adequacy of labour supply will in the future depend crucially on making employment sustainable. This is because the age structure of the population is becoming less pyramidal: within 20 years, there will be no systematic decline in the population of

successively higher ages before about 70. Already today, there are more people in their late fifties than in their late twenties, and a majority of that older cohort will live another quarter of a century, to beyond age 80. By the middle of the 21st century, there will be two people aged 20–64 for each one aged 65+, compared to nearly four today. Thus, most people reaching 65 in future will be neither nearing the end of their lives nor entering a small minority of the adult population who might expect to be supported by the working-age majority.

In this context, employment policies that make work humane and rewarding are desirable, not only, as they have always been, from the point of view of individual welfare, but also because they are likely to encourage and enable individuals to remain in work for longer.

A framework for policy and practice

The improvement of working lives is a huge agenda, which has been pursued at least since reformers and trade unions started campaigning for better working conditions in the nineteenth century. This paper aims more specifically to suggest a framework for change that could make working lives more sustainable by helping people to continue to play a productive and rewarding role in the labour market as they get older.

It suggests that Government, employers and individual workers need to think about how to improve sustainability in three main ways:

- by ensuring that workers are able to plan their futures better, and to prepare for them through learning and career development
- by ensuring that work is structured in a way that gives sufficient flexibility for people to balance priorities in their lives inside and outside work
- by paying attention to features of work that promote workers' health and sense of fulfilment and satisfaction with their working lives.

In all three of these areas, progress requires a productive partnership between employers and employees in which they share responsibility for improving sustainability.

This discussion follows on from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Transitions after 50' research, which has been particularly concerned with the most disadvantaged groups in society. These are the groups least likely to think of their jobs as 'careers',

least likely to feel that their skills are valued by their employers, least likely to be able to find alternative job pathways if their existing roles become redundant and most likely to suffer long-term ill health before reaching state pension age.

The following framework is not intended as an alternative to measures that address the immediate difficulties of older workers in the labour market, on which considerable attention has been focused in recent years (see, for example, Cabinet Office, 2000; DWP, 2002). Its suggestion of a longer-term perspective, concerned with how we might reduce the incidence of such difficulties by changing working lives, is complementary to such measures. However, in this as in so many areas, if we look only at remediation rather than prevention, we can expect only to alleviate the symptoms, rather than addressing their underlying causes.

2 Personal and career development, guidance and learning

'Working life' has a very different meaning for different groups of people. For some, it is a developing narrative, in which an individual can progress and develop, with each chapter bringing new experiences that help sustain interest and enthusiasm. Others see it as a recurrent, routine means of earning a living, by carrying out a more or less standardised set of tasks, which remain largely the same after any initial period of induction or training. While these are simplified caricatures, many people in lower-earning and lower-status jobs tend towards the latter view, while professionals and managers are more likely to think in terms of having a 'career' as well as a job.

Continuous career development, in its widest sense, is an important ingredient in job sustainability, for two main reasons: first, it can help sustain *motivation*; second, it can help sustain *capacity*. Finnish research on 'work ability', described in Chapter 4 of this paper, underlines the importance of motivational characteristics alongside people's competencies in influencing whether they continue in work beyond a particular age. The JRF's own research (e.g. Barnes *et al.*, 2002, Arthur, 2003) found that many people leaving work early dislike their jobs because they do not feel that they are leading anywhere, and feel undervalued by their employers. In-work learning and career development can both increase workers' capacity to meet new work demands and make them feel more positive about work itself.

In this context, learning and career guidance are things that can be of value to all workers throughout their working lives, rather than being restricted to a minority and concentrated around the time of initial entry into work. Geoff Ford of the Third Age Employment Network, in his report (Ford, 2005), summarised later in these papers, gives an overview of how policies can better promote a continuation of learning and guidance into later working life.

Avenues for change

Reforms to policy and practice could address the following *avenues for change*.

Promote learning in later life

Despite widespread calls for an ethos of 'lifelong learning', education and training remain heavily weighted to younger age groups. This is true even within adult learning: people are much more likely to take 'mature' courses and receive training earlier than later in their adult lives. Taking work-relevant learning seriously for older adults does not just mean helping people to retrain when their skills have become redundant. It also means removing the heavy bias towards young people in learning

that allows careers to develop before workers reach a crisis point because they lack useful skills. This requires a new mindset that does not equate the strengthening of the skill base with the training of young people. As Geoff Ford points out later in these papers, public programmes continue to discriminate in this way. Employers are a long way from accepting that investment in people in their forties and fifties can potentially bring strong returns, given that someone of this age is likely to spend longer in the future with their present employer than someone in their twenties, who is more likely to change jobs.

Geoff Ford proposes a wide-ranging agenda for moving in this direction. This would involve strengthening and better co-ordinating initiatives by Government directly to help older workers improve their skills and to encourage employers to make better provision. An important feature of such a strategy is to avoid adopting a 'deficit' model focusing mainly on those who have difficulties with literacy and other basic skills. Although it is important to reach disadvantaged workers, the disadvantages of older workers in the labour market is much more wide-ranging than the lack of basic competencies. In order to progress, they need to be able to build continuously on their skills and, in some cases, will have to learn to negotiate new roles. Thus, a third age learning strategy requires much more than a basic skills agenda.

In this respect, the Government's target of reducing steadily the number of adults with qualifications below level 2, and the proposed new focus of funding for learning at this level, pose some challenging questions. In terms of meeting the target, it raises the issue of how to reach more of the over-forties who comprise 57 per cent of all working-age adults without level 2 qualifications, who have been relatively hard to attract to take up courses. Further, the proposed change in funding arrangements in the Learning and Skills Council's 2004 consultation on taking forward the strategy emphasises the provision of courses leading to level 2 qualifications, raising the question of whether people wanting to pursue other kinds of course to meet their particular needs will be able to access appropriate funding.

Promote learning as an ongoing part of everyone's working life

Efforts to avoid age bias in the provision of adult learning opportunities can do only a limited amount to make jobs sustainable as long as many workers neither expect nor receive any work-related training at any age. In general, people who already have higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to receive further training through work. Efforts to change this culture are important, not just in order to promote equality and fairness, but also to improve sustainability. Older workers who have never received any training from their employers find it difficult, when their skills become redundant, to start acquiring a learning ethos, or to believe that employers

or the Government have suddenly become interested in their personal development. Thus, a huge culture shift is needed in the ways in which employers train and develop all their workers. At the same time, individuals will need to think in new ways about their own development: career-long learning requires them not only to be passive recipients of periodic skill upgrading but also to learn to manage the development of their own 'human capital'. To do so, they will need considerable help and guidance, as discussed in the following two sub-sections.

Promote guidance among older adults

Until recently, the concept of career guidance was limited largely to the counselling of young people around the time that they leave school. Over the past few years, the Government has promoted the provision of guidance to adults, in particular through the establishment of local information, advice and guidance partnerships. As Geoff Ford spells out, this has had a limited impact, particularly for older adults, partly because of low take-up and partly because such services are better designed to provide relatively low-level advice and information rather than potentially life-changing guidance. Another limitation has been that these services tend to be located outside the context of people's work, and therefore have less of an impact on the development of their working lives than if they had been provided by an employer.

Yet sound guidance is likely to be central to the ability of older people to find satisfactory ways of sustaining their working lives. This revolves in many cases on improving the ability of the individual to take control – to work out what new skills they need to learn, to negotiate new roles within an organisation and in some cases to change jobs or become self-employed. Such opportunities are not handed to people by their employers and depend on an individual having a clear sense of direction.

What could be done to give older people much better access to guidance at the times that they need it? There is no easy answer, and two tricky issues are the cost of good guidance and the difficulty of ensuring take-up by those who need it. However, as outlined by Geoff Ford, there have been promising initiatives at the local level, which need to be nurtured and spread. Most importantly, Government, employers and local organisations need to be willing to observe and learn from 'what works' in terms of the kind of service that older employees respond to.

Extend the concept of career

A 'career' is typically conceived of by professional workers as comprising a sequence of linked roles of ascending responsibility and status in a particular field over the course of a working lifetime. Many people do not find themselves in a work structure that lends itself to the idea of an ordered progression, nor do they encounter personnel departments encouraging them to do so. Those in lower-status jobs in particular are more likely to think about the immediate characteristics of their jobs rather than placing them in a longer-term framework. Yet guidance professionals believe that a wide range of people are more likely to achieve their potential at work and in their wider lives if they are able to think ahead.

An alternative way of thinking about 'career' is as a sequence of events relating to people's lives inside and outside work. These include movements in and out of different jobs, personal self-development and managing the relationship between one's work and the rest of one's life. It is important in this context for public policy to be supportive of career paths that do not always lead to paid work, valuing other contributions that people can make. This can be especially important for disabled people and others who are not necessarily able to access permanent paid employment, but who have other contributions of value.

One function of life guidance is to help people to make progress in their life careers in ways that help them fulfil their goals. In the case of an older worker, this includes finding forms of work that match one's life circumstances and bring job satisfaction. However, just as 'lifelong learning' is difficult to introduce abruptly later in life when things start to go wrong, so guidance works best as a process for planning throughout one's life rather than just as a response to dislocation.

This does not imply that everybody needs intensive help from a life mentor on a permanent basis. A hierarchy of services ranging from good information to intensive guidance will be appropriate for different people at different times. The challenge for policy and practice is to ensure that those services are accessible where they are needed, including in workplaces and in communities. This implies a partnership between Government and employers to improve what is presently a very minimal framework of provision.

3 Characteristics of work (1): time, flexibility and work–life balance

Recent research has consistently shown that many people in their fifties and sixties, both those who remain in work and those who have left it, have encountered difficulties reconciling work with the rest of their lives, and would welcome greater work flexibility (see, for example, Hirsch, 2003; McNair *et al.*, 2004). For example, a strikingly large number of respondents across surveys express interest in the idea of working part time for some period before retirement.

Part of this phenomenon can be attributed to the intuitively powerful idea that a ‘cliff-edge’ retirement, by which people move instantly from a full-time career job to no paid work, is unsatisfactory for many people, particularly those who are relatively fit yet still wish to scale down their working lives. However, deeper analysis of the research suggests that older workers have diverse needs and preferences, more complex than simply a desire for ‘bridge jobs’ in between career jobs and retirement. As Sue Yeandle points out later in these papers, different people acquire a number of new needs and perspectives as their lives change as they get older, including:

- new responsibilities outside work, for example caring for older family members or for grandchildren
- new perspectives on work and life, causing them to reassess work–life balance
- changing capacities in terms of the pace of working life, for example in terms of capacity to respond to stress, which in some cases may be tied up with long-term illnesses or disabilities.

These changes will produce different requirements for different people – whether, for example, to work more flexibly, for fewer hours, in different kinds of job, or to take a career break. None of these needs is unique to older workers, and nor should one stereotype all older workers as being suited to a particular kind of work pattern. Rather, we can conclude that flexibility to change one’s working pattern to suit changing life situations is an important ingredient for sustaining working lives.

If we accept this conclusion, the rationale for taking work–life balance seriously extends greatly. Much policy debate and action promoting a balance between home and working life has focused on the needs of parents, especially mothers, seeking a balance between the responsibility of bringing up children and the demands and opportunities of the working world. This is starting to be extended to take account of other caring responsibilities, most particularly in the proposal to extend the right to

have a request for flexible working to be considered by one's employer, from parents of nought to five year olds to include anyone with caring responsibilities. Yet, to maximise the degree to which working life becomes more sustainable by being more flexible would require employers to address the nature of work generally, rather than thinking about the needs of just specific sub-groups. The problem with the latter approach is that people's need for work–life balance arises from such diverse circumstances that it is in practice impossible to identify fairly entitled groups, and indeed to do so may cause resentment among those excluded.

Thus, a framework for policy and practice needs to ask what changes in the way work is structured can help work and other priorities to be balanced throughout everyone's working lives. This cannot be brought about just by legislating some new entitlements – it will require long-term cultural change, some of which is arguably already under way with the recognition by many employers of the wider needs of their workers. However, particular reforms to policy and practice could address, for example, the following *avenues for change*.

Avenues for change

Extend the presumption of the need for flexibility to people other than parents

Since 2002, parents with children aged under six or disabled children aged under 18 have the right to request a flexible working pattern and their employers have a duty to consider their applications seriously. Now that employers have had the chance to experience the consequences of such a duty, it would be appropriate to consider extending it to requests from all employees. The Government's present commitment to extend it just to people with caring responsibilities raises difficult questions about both judging and justifying the eligibility of those in various circumstances. A different approach is to presume that anybody requesting such flexibility has an equal right to have their case considered in the light of the character of their job. By changing legislation and the tone of its campaign for work–life balance in this direction, the Government could lead the way for employers also to reorder their assumptions. One important aspect of the long-term culture change required concerns the continued gender stereotyping, by which employers assume that men do not have a need for work–life balance. This can harm both women and men outside work, as women are left to shoulder more caring roles.

Systematically improve options for part-time work in the transition to retirement

Judging by responses to surveys, such a measure would help a number of people to extend the length of their working lives. A first step has, after a long delay, been taken by the Inland Revenue in pledging to remove by 2006 the rule that prevents people from drawing a part-time pension in a scheme run by an employer for whom they are still working. Building on this new possibility, can employers and the Government help develop new pathways to retirement in which a 'downshifting package' becomes taken for granted as a possibility just as the 'early retirement package' became part of the fabric of retirement in the 1980s and 1990s?

An important policy question here is whether Government should be just permissive or actively encouraging of such transitions. The overall effect that this would have on the labour supply is at present far from clear. In Sweden and Finland, the public pension systems are supportive of part-time working. In Sweden, for example, part-time pensions have been available for older people in different forms for the past 40 years. In both countries, the evidence suggests that the direct net effect on labour supply could potentially be negative. For example, in Sweden, as more older people took advantage of part-time pensions in the 1990s, the employment rate did not rise, suggesting that many people used part-time work as an alternative to full-time rather than to retirement (OECD, 2003, pp. 60–1). However, this is not necessarily an argument against having such pensions. It may well be that the effect at one point in time of introducing such a policy would be to cause many people to shift from full- to part-time work, yet, in the longer term, if this improved job sustainability and caused individuals to remain in the workforce longer, overall labour supply would be higher than otherwise. Moreover, even if the net effect in these terms were neutral, there could be a social benefit, just as there is with tax credits that allow parents to work part time, in terms of releasing the individuals concerned to do unpaid activities including caring, as well as potential benefits for their health. Finally, it should be noted that the Scandinavian partial pensions have been extremely generous, creating in some cases a strong disincentive to work full time; Sweden has now switched to a system where a pro-rata percentage of pension can be taken early, which is less likely to distort unduly decisions about working among those happy to continue full time.

Develop options for more flexible working lives

Flexibility in the way that people structure working time is most commonly considered in terms of the working day or the working week. But what about the working lifetime? The career break is now a well-established feature of many women's working lives, linked most commonly to bearing and looking after young children. Yet might it also

play a role in helping to sustain working lives that have to end at a later age than we have become used to? The paper in this collection by Linda Boyes and Jim McCormick specifically considers whether ‘contributory sabbaticals’ might help sustain ‘workability’, by helping to overcome some of the factors contributing to workforce withdrawal. At first glance, such a proposal seems fraught with difficulties. For example, if it is to be partly or wholly funded by the individual, how could anyone but the most privileged workers afford it? And might employers not see it simply as a further difficulty under which workers whom they have grown to rely on disappear for six months or a year? Such objections start to look less intractable if such sabbaticals have the long-term effect of prolonging working lives, and if they are programmed well in advance and paid for over a long period. Certainly, at the financial level, working to 65 with one or two six-month breaks should be more viable, for example, than working to 55 or 60 in continuous employment. The development of new working patterns of this kind is unlikely to happen overnight, but if, in the coming decades, we expect working lives gradually to lengthen, we should consider whether the development of career breaks should be part of this long-term change.

Support the needs of carers at work

People with caring responsibilities can find it particularly difficult to balance work and other commitments. The evidence shows that some leave work because of the pressure of caring, but also that many remain in work while caring (Mooney and Statham, 2002). Among the latter, many suffer severe pressure and stress in their lives, which can reduce the long-term sustainability of work, or conversely reduce the amount of unpaid care that people are able to give.

As set out in Marilyn Howard’s review in this collection, carers face a series of surmountable barriers to remaining in paid employment while caring. These include in particular the lack of opportunities to work flexibly, a lack of supportive services and the absence of a work culture that gives sympathy and legitimacy to the position of being a working carer – in some cases resulting in a reluctance to disclose this status. Change is required both at a general level (not specific to carers) and at a specific level (responding to carers’ needs). An example of how both are needed is the case of flexibility. As argued above, extending opportunities to work flexible and/or part-time hours is something that a wide range of workers, including carers, could benefit from. Thus, restricting an extension of the right to request flexible working only to carers does not seem logical. On the other hand, people caring for older or disabled adults often need a particular type of flexibility, which takes account of the unpredictability of the demands of such a situation. Efforts to change the culture of workplaces need to address employers’ and fellow-workers’ understanding and acceptance of such carer-specific needs.

4 Characteristics of work (2): control, job quality and health

The quality of people's working lives is a fundamental ingredient for work sustainability. People who dislike their jobs, and those suffering physical or mental damage from work, are less likely to continue their working careers, either because of their own choices or because their employability declines.

This relationship between job sustainability and the nature of work came across strongly in qualitative studies in JRF's research programme, showing the strong influence of negative work experiences in relation to early departure from the labour force. The relationship is confirmed in systematic Finnish research on 'work ability'. Longitudinal analysis in the 1980s and 1990s studied the determinants of the work motivation, prospects and competence of Finns in their late fifties, which was found also to be correlated with productivity. The strongest predictors of future work ability among workers in their forties and fifties concerned work demands and the work environment, followed by aspects of work organisation. Poor physical aspects of the work environment were important, but so were a number of mental and psychological factors. Workers who enjoyed the most control over their work and the least ambiguity in roles were less likely to face difficulties later on.

The importance of psychological as well as social influences on people's working lives is underlined by the changing character of Incapacity Benefit recipients. Today, a third of people receiving Incapacity Benefit have mental health problems, and the numbers are rising as new claimants are more likely to have such problems than existing claimants. The fact that there is also a trend towards more female claimants, and more from white-collar and public-sector jobs, illustrates the extent to which work-related health difficulties are no longer experienced primarily by manual workers in heavy industries.

Some commentators attribute these trends to an intensification of work, contributing to stress. Research confirms that new pressures have negative long-term effects on workers (see, for example, Burchell *et al.*, 1999), but these are not caused by just higher pressure to perform and long-hours cultures. Crucially, they are also linked to a sense of a loss of control. In the 1980s, it was thought that the decline of process-oriented manufacturing industries would result in greater flexibility and control over working lives. However, information technology has made it possible to exercise a highly detailed form of supervisory control over workers in service industries, as exemplified by call centres, where every keystroke and action can be monitored. A very big challenge is to develop jobs that have meaning and allow autonomous action in this new, performance-oriented environment.

This is a vast agenda and it is unrealistic to expect that the imperative of extending working lives will in itself create a reorganisation of work. However, in some respects, it can make a contribution. Again, Finland provides a good example. As described in Box 1, issues raised by problems faced by older workers can stimulate a wide debate about how companies operate, which contributes to changes in working practices. The Finns are willing to use statutory instruments to oblige employers to participate in these efforts, and there are clearly limits to the extent to which the UK is likely to follow suit, given our caution about imposing new legislative obligations on companies. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the most important effects of the Finnish efforts have resulted from awareness raising, dialogue and voluntary initiatives.

Box 1 Finland's Programme on Ageing Workers¹

Finland identified a serious problem of changing demography and falling older worker participation earlier than most countries, and has run a co-ordinated and high-profile programme to improve things for older workers. A principal focus was the Older Workers' Programme (1998–2002), a joint initiative of the Ministries of Social Affairs, Labour and Education, which also involved local authorities, the Social Insurance Institution, the Institute of Occupational Health and pension companies.

The research on the multiple influences on 'work ability', mentioned above, encouraged Finns to address the whole work environment rather than just isolated features such as accident prevention. Moreover, even though an important aspect of the strategy is to adapt employment services to the needs of older people, it pays just as much attention to improving retention as to aiding re-employment.

The tools for doing so are numerous. They include the following.

- An Act on Occupational Health Care, putting a duty on employers to have systematic approaches to care for their workers in collaboration with other authorities, including health and education services, addressing such issues as working hours, rest periods, shift work and overtime.
- A network of occupational health inspectors responsible both for ensuring compliance with the law and the provision of expert advice, and now required to take account of ageing issues as a central aspect of good practice. This is also a priority for the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, which is

(Continued)

involved in a training programme to support organisational development, which addresses both the physical and mental well-being of workers as they grow older.

- Action by the Ministry of Education to ensure that older workers systematically receive information on training and other learning opportunities open to them, along with an initiative to make adult education more tailored to individual adults' needs, under a programme in which 40 educational institutions provide vocational education to adults.

Results of the programme, according to the Finnish authorities, have been to make workplace health promotion more common, to affect the ways in which organisations are managed and to increase the training provided for employees and employees' means to influence management.

Avenues for change

Redefine occupational health to aim at creating health-promoting workplaces

A first step is to think more widely about occupational health. Health and safety at work tends to be thought of primarily in terms of avoiding hazards. It might be possible to think about it more proactively, in terms of what creates a health-promoting workplace. This would mean moving away from a purely regulatory approach to health and safety, and encouraging managers to think about how the whole working environment affects the long-term health of workers. It would also mean moving beyond the conceptualisation of the occupational health professional as, typically, a nurse focused on troubleshooting difficulties as they arise, and move towards occupational health advisers who look at the whole work environment.

Yet this version of occupational health cannot rest entirely on the employment of professionals: it involves the engagement of workers and managers in thinking about how work is organised. At best, it involves a dialogue between workers and employers, potentially with the help of trade unions, about how to work well. One way this can come about is through specific local initiatives in workplaces, some of which have already been seen in this country. Examples are the Sandwell 'Work Well' project and the follow-up 'Well-being at Work' project, described in Box 2. Such initiatives take a broad view of healthy working, linked to organisational development and to worker learning as well as to specific physical aspects of the work environment.

Box 2 Well-being at Work²

The charity Partnership at Work is being funded by the Department of Health, to run a project to promote and pilot a healthy working network of participating voluntary and community organisations in Sandwell and Sefton. This provides free, in-depth services to local organisations aimed at increasing the well-being of staff at work. The results will be used to inform similar work within the sector. This work builds on the work of two Health Action Zone projects, the Sefton Strategic Health at Work Partnership and the Sandwell Work Well Project, which have aimed to tackle workplace inequalities, for example by linking occupational health issues to the acquisition of basic skills.

The project aims to develop support structures to improve the organisational capacity of small community-based voluntary and youth organisations, with no in-house expertise in human resource management. Working alongside other support agencies, it develops sector-specific information and resource tools, shared learning and advice, to assist a change in working cultures to improve the health, safety and welfare of the voluntary-sector workforce and volunteers.

It is based on the following principles:

- encouragement of work–life balance and workforce partnerships to underpin a healthy workplace culture, where safe and healthy working conditions are embedded in the core of organisations' working and management practices
- application of good practice, as well as legal compliance, within the sector
- instigation of a healthy working environment as a key component of high-quality voluntary-sector public service delivery
- effective use of quality systems and other benchmarking tools, to include workforce relationships as well as customer satisfaction, and to develop a Kitemark to celebrate and promote good health at work in the voluntary sector
- an increase in work and volunteer jobs for unemployed people suffering from long-term illness or disability
- encouragement of diversity, equality and dignity at work, with special emphasis on ensuring that the needs of black and minority ethnic led organisations are taken into account.

Part of the aim is to work to reduce the level of workplace sickness, particularly those due to work-related upper-limb disorders, back pain and stress. Toolkits and other resources aimed at the sector are being developed to help tackle these problems.

Develop specific initiatives to address health needs of older workers

The Health Development Agency's Midlife programme has recently been looking at ways of developing support for the health of workers in their fifties and early sixties. At the end of 2003, it reported on its evaluation of eight pilot projects with this objective, and drew lessons from them, in its report *The Gap Years: Rediscovering Midlife as the Route to Healthy Active Ageing* (Bowers *et al.*, 2003). This study illustrated a wide range of methods of getting individuals and organisations to become actively involved in the promotion of midlife health, involving partnerships between different agencies. It emphasised that no single model is appropriate in all cases, but an underlying theme was that better knowledge and understanding is often the starting point. This is why an initial step is often to offer health checks or audits of individuals or organisations, and it also explains why one of the most promising forms of partnership is between employers and primary health care organisations. Such partnerships can build links between the promotion of preventative health care and a 'preventative' approach to premature job exit. These two missions overlap but are not identical, since health prevention is not limited to the context of work, while preventative approaches to job exit may include features such as personal skill development and guidance as well as health matters.

Create more flexibility about how people work at different stages of their lives

A striking theme that emerged from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Transitions after 50' research was a lack of systematic attempts by employers to look at how people's work advantages and limitations change in the course of their lives, and thus how they might be redeployed as they grow older. For example, in the health service, there appears to be no strategy by employers to retain older nurses by shifting them away from more physically demanding jobs where appropriate (Watson *et al.*, 2003). In devising strategies to improve job retention, employers may need to start thinking about worker needs long before they reach a stage where they no longer want to do a standard full-time job. Reducing undue stress or excessive physical strain at an earlier stage may be an important factor in prolonging their capacity for work. Research has shown that those who have made satisfactory job changes are indeed more likely to want to stay in work (McNair *et al.*, 2004).

5 Changing the culture: sharing responsibility for sustaining working lives

This introductory paper has suggested a framework for thinking about change that improves the sustainability of working lives, by paying greater attention to how workers develop their skills, make career choices, remain healthy and are able to access a flexible range of work opportunities compatible with other life demands and priorities. Other papers in this collection suggest in greater detail how particular parts of this framework can be developed.

At Joseph Rowntree Foundation workshops to discuss such a framework in late 2004, the dominant conclusion was that implementation of such change will rely heavily on partnership and trust among interested parties.

This can be illustrated by considering three potential obstacles to change.

The first concerns the limits to how much attention employers are willing to give to the nurturing of specific employees. A familiar manifestation of this is the conflict between individual and collective interest in training. Collectively, employers want a well-trained workforce; individually, each one finds it more convenient to recruit in workers trained by others, and fears loss of investment if they train a worker who leaves. This problem is even greater when it comes to helping workers to develop their lives more generally, for example by providing guidance, which might potentially cause some of them to move on into different jobs with different employers. Yet there are great potential advantages in situating both guidance and training in the context of people's workplaces; this can also apply to health promotion if it is to be relevant to working life.

A second, converse risk is that workers themselves take insufficient responsibility for their own development. It is tempting, especially for workers who have not been encouraged to think of jobs as 'careers', to think of training, for example, as something that is 'delivered' to you by your employer, rather than part of a package of self-development that you play some part in managing for yourself. The same can apply to health development, and part of the idea of moving away from traditional notions of occupational health is to think about not only a healthy environment that is provided by an employer, but also how actions by individuals can contribute to their own health at work.

It may be helpful, in light of these two opposing difficulties, to think in terms of the need to build a closer partnership between employers and employees in which neither relies wholly on the other to manage strategies for sustaining working lives,

but in which they work together. Already this concept is familiar in calls for 'co-financing' of lifelong learning. A key ingredient for progress is a building of trust in which employees genuinely believe that employers are committed to promoting their long-term interest; and, like any form of trust, this relies on recognising mutual advantages. An important ingredient may be the realisation that early reports of the death of the job for life have proven premature: the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) 'Future of Work' programme has emphasised the continuation of long-term links between workers and firms (Overell, 2005).

The third potential obstacle could be a failure to join up policies within Government. Government is likely to play an auxiliary role in changing working lives, but could be an important influence nonetheless. As set out in the above framework, there are a number of areas where its policies need at least to be consistent with, and at best to help promote, measures to improve the situation of older workers. So far, most measures that have been specifically related to helping older workers have been directed either towards helping unemployed or inactive older people to return to work – with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) taking a lead, or dealing directly with age discrimination – with the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) in the lead, although working closely with the DWP and the Cabinet Office). When it comes to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) promoting lifelong learning, the Department of Health (DoH) promoting public health or the DTI promoting work–life balance, links to the older worker agenda are much weaker. As referred to above, in the case of age restrictions on training subsidies, sometimes such programmes can continue to discriminate against older workers. With the establishment of an Extending Working Life Division in the DWP, the scope for and importance of such joining up is increased, particularly if the long-term view of job sustainability argued for in this paper is accepted. In this case, the points of intervention available to the DWP through the benefits system and employment service are inadequate on their own to tackle the problem.

A change of culture that stops treating older workers as an expendable resource, and starts considering how to nurture our skills and well-being as we get older, may require many years. Widespread recognition of the desirability of this objective has been an important first step in this culture change. Further progress will require concerted efforts among all interested parties – Government, employers, individuals. If each of these stakeholders can contribute to making work more sustainable, we can start moving towards an extension of working lives that is rooted in positive opportunities, rather than a reluctant acceptance that we must 'work till we drop'.

Notes

- 1 For a good description, see Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, *The Many Faces of the National Programme on Ageing Workers*, <http://www.stm.fi/english/tao/publicat/manyfaces/themanyfaces.pdf>.
- 2 Information from Partnership at Work web site: <http://www.partnershipatwork.org.uk/content.asp?id=1218131236&cat=5>.

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