

Older women in the workplace

The benefit of experience:
older women's access to skills development and training

Introduction

With the rise in State Pension Age¹, women are working for longer than ever. In many cases this is because they cannot afford to survive on their pension and are working longer to make up gaps in pension contributions, and in other cases it is because they enjoy working and wish to remain engaged in their career. Older women face a particular set of barriers to equality in the workplace, and a key barrier is access to skills development and training opportunities.

Older women often struggle to access training opportunities, particularly those who work part-time, and this is also one of the factors which makes it difficult to progress out of low paid work. Part-time work has a scarring effect on wages, and even working part-time for a short period increases the likelihood of being low-paid over the longer term². Part-time, low-paid women are the group of workers that are least likely to access training and development opportunities.

Women make up two-thirds of the public sector workforce, and are therefore disproportionately affected by public spending cuts that have resulted in redundancies, reduced hours, pay freezes and cuts to training budgets. Employers face losing the skills and experience of this group of workers if they fail to value their talents, and union reps are ideally placed to make the business case for supporting and developing older women in the workplace.

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¹ www.gov.co.uk/calculate-state-pension

² Francesconi, M and Gosling, A, (2005) Career paths of part-time workers.

The link between gender, skills, and age

Women and men tend to work in gender-segregated occupations and sectors. There are many factors which underlie this segregation, including stereotyping about men and women's capabilities and skills, the types of jobs that are available on a flexible or part-time basis, and the broad range of factors which influence the education and career choices of young people at the start of their working lives. Although job segregation restricts choices for men and women, the jobs that are most likely to be done by women are also those associated with low pay and limited possibilities for progression. These are sometimes referred to as the '5 Cs': cleaning, catering, cashiering (retail), clerical work, and caring.

Occupational segregation, where men and women do different types of work and different levels of work, is one of the main causes of the gender pay gap, which in itself makes women more likely to be at risk of poverty, especially pensioner poverty. If a skills programme does not consider occupational segregation, and stereotyping and assumptions around men and women's capabilities, it is likely to entrench older women's inequality further. Developing an understanding of how gender, age and skills are related will help trade unions to think about the best ways to avoid making inequalities worse, and to identify steps to narrow gaps in participation.

Training and progression in the workplace

Evidence gathered by the TUC as part of its 'Age Immaterial' project shows that older women are much less likely to receive training, with 51 per cent of those aged over 65 saying they

had received no training in the last three years, compared to 32 per cent across all age groups³. Many older women feel that training opportunities are not open to them. Research by the Age and Employment Network found that female jobseekers were significantly more likely than men to disagree with the statement 'I have every opportunity to upgrade my skills to fit the needs of today's employers'⁴. Nearly half of all women surveyed disagreed compared to one third of men.

The 'Age Immaterial' report highlights that many women identify confidence as a barrier to accessing learning opportunities in the workplace. However, it is not women's lack of confidence in their own capabilities, but confidence in the fairness of the system or processes by which training opportunities are accessed.

Working part-time is a further barrier to accessing training in the workplace. Many older women work reduced hours for various reasons, including caring for children or relatives. Part-time workers should have the same access to training opportunities as their full-time colleagues, but part-time workers often find it harder to fit training courses into a shorter working day or week, and they may find themselves overlooked by managers who are unaware of their duty to provide equal access to training for all employees.

Training that is scheduled to take place outwith part-time workers' hours, or held at off-site locations that are not easily accessible, particularly impacts on women working part-time.

³ www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Age_Immaterial_Women_Over_50_Report_2014_LR.pdf

⁴ www.taen.org.uk/uploads/resources/JobseekerSurveyReport_Final_0313.pdf

This is particularly the case for women with caring responsibilities who are less likely to be able to attend training outside of working hours.

Updating skills and retaining experience

Older women in the workplace are in danger of both missing opportunities, and being a missed opportunity for employers. The broad range of skills, knowledge and experience of older women, whether gained in paid or unpaid work, is often not recognised by employers. Because so many older women have lost their jobs through the public sector cuts, many employers are now facing a huge skills and experience gap, which cannot be filled through existing staff development. And for older women themselves, without support and development opportunities, those who are trapped in low paid work have very little chance of progressing in their careers or developing new skills which could open doors to other career opportunities.

A particular issue facing older workers is a lack of opportunity to develop the skills required to compete successfully in modern recruitment processes, and those skills required to remain relevant in a rapidly modernising workplace. Many older women may be concerned that they lack the skills to compete successfully in modern interview situations, particularly given the increasing focus on competency-based assessment. Younger workers are more likely to have had recent training and experience in this environment, and therefore older women may find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of progression opportunities.

What reps can do

Older women are significantly under-valued in the workplace. They are more likely to be impacted by public spending cuts, and employers face losing the skills and experience of this group of workers if they fail to properly value their talents. Union reps are ideally placed to make the business case for supporting and developing older women in the workplace.

Actions for reps:

- Work to influence employers to ensure that training opportunities are available to all, and that older women are not discouraged or denied the opportunity to develop their skills.
- Review employer learning programmes and policies to check for unintended bias or discrimination.
- Review any learning programmes or opportunities offered by your union to check they are accessible to older women workers.
- Workplace learning surveys are useful tools for ULRs to gauge whether age is a barrier to training or development opportunities.
- Ensure employers are aware of simple ways they can support greater skills development, for example:
 - Temporarily adjusting targets, and providing individual training support, during any period of workplace change to allow workers time to improve their skills in the relevant area.

- Older women may need additional training and support to cope with the increasing modernisation and computerisation of the workplace. Younger members of the workforce are often much more comfortable and experienced with technology. There may be opportunities to develop a mentoring 'skills-exchange' where younger workers share their skills and experience around IT, and older workers share the benefits of their broader workplace experience.
- Reps should work with public sector employers to ensure they are meeting the public sector equality duty⁵. Under the duty employers must gather gender-disaggregated data on their workforce, including around training and development. Reps could support public sector employers to gather and analyse age- and gender-disaggregated data on participation in skills and training programmes to build a picture of, and the barriers to, older women's participation.
- Under the duty, public authorities are also required to carry out equality impact assessment of training programmes and policies. As part of this process, public authorities must consider relevant evidence, and union reps should participate by gathering and submitting evidence on their members.
- Reps could also support and encourage private sector employers to gather and analyse age and gender-disaggregated data on participation in skills and training programmes.

Resources

www.stuc.org.uk

www.closesthegap.org.uk

www.oneworkplace.org.uk

www.scottishunionlearning.com

www.acas.org.uk

Contact details

For further information on issues affecting older women in the workplace please contact your union office.



Published: December 2014