



ASPIRE – Active Ageing through Social Partnership and Industrial Relations in Europe *

Aspiring to Age Actively? We Really Must Talk About it!

by Chris Ball

At a recent seminar convened by the London School of Economics and the Centre for Research on the Older Workforce (CROW) we heard research evidence that **UK employers are nervous of even mentioning retirement to their employees**. What a state we are in! What is the problem? Have employers become coy and oversensitive to discussing age issues? How can they possibly plan for the future if they don't know who will be working for them?

One employer had withdrawn a scheme designed to support more gradual retirements, because lawyers had (over-cautiously) advised it might breach age discrimination legislation. Discussion of retirement has become a no-go area. This is just one example of how we are all getting things wrong in the ways we deal with ageing issues at work. Before 2011 it was lawful to have fixed retirement ages, which were discriminatory and prevented able and willing people from working longer. But now, while we can work longer if we wish, we seem unable to flesh out the implications.

On the other hand, everyone knows employers may need people to work longer and should be finding out how to make this possible. What hope is there if they are too timid to utter the dreaded words, “when are you planning to retire?” Of course, they need to raise the issues as part of a gentle process, but that shouldn't mean they are off limits.

Actually, the research referred to above also found that many employees would like to have a discussion about their retirement plans and the issues that might spin off them.

The bigger picture is that public policy now favours active ageing. Retirement is often seen as the ultimate in inactivity. “Feet up”, “arm chair”, “nothing much to do”... It was always an exaggeration but now *active ageing* is the widely preferred option. It is better for social engagement, health and the individual's pocket. Many people are already working longer, but more *aspire* to do so. Why can't we all age actively, perhaps working a bit longer or being engaged in useful things? After all, it is much better for our health, not to mention the value of continuing to earn and supplement one's pension. The UK Government's *Fuller Working Lives strategy* is urging employers to make working longer possible but only a tiny proportion of employers have formulated positive policies to “recruit, retain and retrain” older workers, as the Government urges.

Following on from the *2012 European Year of Active Ageing*, a Newcastle University led project is trying to find out how employers and unions can improve matters by “social dialogue” – talking about the issues in short. The project is called “ASPIRE” - which stands for *Active Ageing through*

Social Partnership and Industrial Relations Expertise, though the acronym equally captures the positive approach to ageing, which many would prefer.

ASPIRE brings researchers in Newcastle, Italy, Spain and Poland together, to learn how their countries' industrial relations systems could be better used to promote active ageing. In some countries, collaborative “social dialogue,” between employers and unions is widely favoured, with a strong emphasis on joint problem solving. Often use is made of works councils and consultation arrangements between employers and unions in regions and sectors. But this pattern is unlike the UK and the ASPIRE partner countries.

At Pan - European level a ground breaking agreement has been sealed between employers and unions on active ageing. It urges “...life-cycle approaches to productive working.” It sounds good but may carry little weight if industrial relations structures do not support “social dialogue” approaches.

All sorts of changes can help us to age “successfully”. Some of these are already reflected in agreements between employers and unions in given sectors or regions. In the German Chemicals industry for example, “demographic funds” provide a resources pot to pay for interventions that will adapt workplaces, provide retraining and keep the worker healthy and active to the last.

ASPIRE is using joint workshops, interviews and desk research to learn about and spread good practices that are already being followed as well as to flesh out what employers and workers need to make further progress. One of the project outcomes will be guides and a training module for joint workshops and courses.

This may seem futuristic and a long way from the stereotypes that still condition thinking around what it means to grow older. Despite the fact that more people are working longer, discussion about active and healthy ageing is patchy at best. In Spain, there is a common view that it is *immoral* for older workers to carry on working whilst young people have difficulty getting jobs.

Many employers observe the law and avoid age discrimination but fail to go the extra mile with positive active ageing policies. Any programme to help people rethink their approach for a longer life course, must involve a personal agenda, so talking about it is vital. With a few exceptions, the emphasis is on “*employers' policies.*” The UK Government’s *Fuller Working Lives* campaign has been doing good work with the business facing charity, *Business in the Community*, but there is not much evidence of buy in from employees. As is so often the case, there is an unhealthy tendency to “do” things to or for the workers, without getting them on board.

If we are serious about active ageing, employers' policies alone will never be enough. We need employees' buy in if we are to change attitudes and behaviour. Their collective voices expressed through their unions should be heard. Somehow we need to develop active ageing cultures so that we live longer healthily and productively. As the BT adverts say, “We *have* to talk!”

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*The ASPIRE project (“Active Ageing through Social Partnership and Industrial Relations Expertise”) is co-funded with the financial support of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, budget heading VP/2016/004 (Grant agreement VS/2016/0379), Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue. [Click here to learn more.](#)