



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

Discontented Older Workers: a Threat to Economic Growth

by Chris Ball

Throughout my childhood growing up in Britain, a BBC variety show, “Workers’ Playtime,” was broadcast from works’ canteens around the country. It began in 1941 as part of a Government campaign to boost morale, and support the war effort. “A happy worker is a better worker,” was the theory. Well, which employer would not prefer an employee with a smile on their face? Happiness and job satisfaction are important elements in “employee engagement.” Many studies have shown that older workers are generally more “engaged,” more committed to their organisations than younger workers and experience higher job satisfaction. A great argument then for older workers! In truth, people of all ages can find work a pleasure or a misery. As a generalisation however, older workers are often more satisfied to be where they are, than their younger colleagues.

Growing discontent among older workers

There could be many reasons for this. One is that unhappy older workers will probably take the first opportunity to retire, leaving more engaged colleagues to soldier on. “The survival of the happiest,” you could call it.

The ground has been shifting over twenty years however. Back in the 1980s, factory closures and early pensions provided people with incentives to retire early. Those days are no more. Now a mix of financial penalties and incentives supports a Government drive to extend working lives - and it is not so easy to get out, happy or not in the job.

But society is ageing and Governments want people to remain working longer. People are no longer obliged to retire at a given age and many are working longer because they need to. For many, the pleasure of the job and the social contacts are an important attraction.

Older workers are needed to supply skills and fill jobs, particularly as the shortage of younger workers will worsen with Brexit. However, some employers now worry that older workers may coast downhill to retirement, lacking job engagement and the motivation to quit. It is a gloomy scenario; if true, productivity would suffer.

These fears may be exaggerated but researchers from Westminster University and the Policy Studies Institute believe the older worker premium of more positive attitudes and job satisfaction, has been slipping. Using statistical analysis of a number of attitude studies stretching back to 1992, they have shown that the older worker’s organisational commitment and job satisfaction compared with younger workers, has gradually eroded over this time period.

Why should older workers be less happy with their lot at work?

Why should this be? From the point of view of the older workers, there had been a deterioration in the quality of working life so that the jobs they once enjoyed are no longer the same.

As one 61-year-old man put it, “I used to love my job but it’s changed now. They have moved the goal posts and are making it harder and harder.” A retired staff nurse, commented, “In the past ten,

fifteen years or so we've lost sight of the patient and the empathy with the patients... there isn't time to talk and it's you know, in, out, how much does this cost... It's a different ball game."

Numerous factors emerge to explain this growing discontent. Firstly, work has become more intensified. The use of information technology to control, monitor and change the ways we work is one factor. Many organisations are in a permanent state of flux. Continuous changes impose new stresses on those responsible for implementing them and create fundamentally different working conditions.

For example, performance based pay has been widely adopted, eroding the reassuring comfort of service increments, particularly in public service employment. Older workers especially, are feeling the effects of these changes.

Secondly, work has become more precarious. Older workers are affected by an increased probability of unemployment or diminished jobs as they approach retirement, including through employers' use of redundancy to achieve organisational change. With the increase in state pension ages, older workers are competing in a growing sector of part time, temporary and casual jobs.

Thirdly, there has been a gradual process of reducing the autonomy offered to employees in the way they do their jobs. This has had wide repercussions and is particularly hard on older, longer serving employees who would normally expect to draw on their long experience and skills where they are experts in highly specific work fields.

Something has to change

So the job and the workplace feel different to those which older workers entered years ago. Deteriorating working conditions, increased demands, bureaucratic overload and cultures of continuous change mean that once loved jobs have sometimes become a nightmare.

Clearly, if the Government's ambition to add a million more older workers to the labour force is to be met, something will be needed to make work itself, fulfilling, less stressful and dare we say, fun? Bringing back Workers' Playtime may not be the answer – but who knows? It could help!

The research, funded by the ESRC was led by Deborah Smeaton of the University of Westminster and the Policy Studies Institute.

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