

Ageism and the staggering cost to the economy

Over 50s need not apply.

No recruiter can say this without breaking the law but nonetheless, too many enforce this mind set and it's costing the UK dearly: some £50 billion a year, according to research by Business in the Community and International Longevity Centre.

That's nothing compared to the problems we'll face in the coming years if outdated perceptions don't change. Last year the CIPD announced that if we failed to 'recruit, develop and retain older workers' the UK economy will struggle to fill one millions jobs by 2035.

That's less than 20 years away. All that expertise, all those skills, gone. Could this be one reason for the skills gap that's taking its toll on UK productivity?

According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 12.5 million vacancies will have opened by 2022 due to people leaving work for whatever reason. Now consider that 2 million additional vacancies will be created. It all sounds good, until you consider that only 7 million young people will be entering the workforce. Talent will have to come from somewhere.

Barclays Bank and coach operator National Express know that. They've opened up their apprenticeship programme to include over 50s, but those companies are still a minority.

Another report by ILC-UK looks at the state of productivity caused by unemployed older workers beyond 2035. "Without a substantial rise in workforce productivity to offset the anticipated fall in employment, GDP per capita growth rates across the Eurozone may only reach 1% per year up to 2050."

Workers aged over 50 contributed a staggering €2.5 trillion to Eurozone GDP in 2013, proving that perceptions about older workers are clearly unfounded. In fact, research by the British government finds that up until to the age of 70, older workers are just as productive as younger workers within the same workforce. Referring to the same research, *The Guardian* writes, "Mixed-aged teams are shown to increase the relative productivity of older and younger workers alike."

The Guardian goes on to point out, "Age discrimination comes in many guises. More often than not, it is the result of lazy stereotyping. So, the middle manager who feels threatened by a candidate with more experience than them or the recruiter who shows an unconscious bias towards candidates his or her own age."

These perceptions are not going away any time soon. *The Financial Times* says many companies are retaining older workers – the problem is in recruitment.

Recruiter doesn't dispute this. "Ageist perceptions and stereotypes still dominate the recruitment industry." In a survey, recruiters passed the blame onto their clients. "Nearly half of the recruiters said clients would be concerned if they put forward an older candidate for a position that is stereotypically a 'younger person's role'."

One respondent believed it would take many years to make the required culture change to eliminate age discrimination: "It has been nearly 30 years since sex discrimination legislation and we are still fighting stereotype gender discrimination."

As always, changing minds proves the most difficult hurdle to overcome in improving productivity. But if recruiters and their clients don't take a second look at older candidates, the economy will only get worse, and that affects all of us.

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