

'Bonkers' employers don't realise that older people make great employees

Older workers bring benefits such as calm, experience, reliability and loyalty, and act as mentors to younger workers.

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71-year-old Mario Rebellato and his boss Charlie Mullins of Pimlico plumbers. Mario was forced to take compulsory retirement from the civil service at 65

Thirteen years ago Eric Headley suffered a major heart attack. He was 70 then, but today he's more determined than ever to lead a full life. Eric describes himself as a maverick in the workplace – seemingly disorganised but with an unflinching resolve to see every job through to its conclusion.

"If I'm going to do something it's got to be done right," he says firmly. It's the reason he's been employed for the past eight years by Pimlico Plumbers in South London. "The alternative is that I sit at home and do nothing and, at my age, you don't last when you do nothing," says Eric, who tends the company's fleet of vintage vans. He works his choice of hours but, according to his colleagues, he is "as reliable as clockwork".

The family firm, run by entrepreneur Charlie Mullins, certainly has form in embracing an older workforce. Buster Martin, a former employee, was still polishing vans past his 100th birthday. He was crowned "Britain's oldest worker" until his death, at 104.

Charlie's personal assistant, 71-year-old Mario Rebellato, was forced to take compulsory retirement from the civil service aged 65. The self-confessed workaholic approached Charlie about a van-washing job but his lifetime of experience shone out and soon he was organising the boss's diary. Always one for a challenge, he has run the Marathon des Sables – a gruelling journey across the Sahara – several years in a row for charity, and there's no sign of him slowing down.

But recent figures released by the Office of National Statistics suggest that while companies with similar age-diverse policies are on the increase they are by no means typical. The number of people aged 65 or over in work went up by 25,000 to 992,000 between March and May of this year. However, the number of over-50s who have been unemployed for more than 12 months rose 11,000 to 191,000. There is also an estimated hidden 3.4m people aged 50 to 64 who are economically inactive but who exist by their own means and have chosen not to register for benefits.

As the baby-boom generation drains the public purse in pension and healthcare costs, the need to engage this age group in employment, paid or otherwise, is paramount. Between 2010 and 2020 in the UK, there will be an estimated fall of some 1.2m people in their 40s and a rise of 1.5 million in their 50s. We are living longer, healthier, more active lives and, since the raising of state pension age and the abolishment of compulsory retirement at 65 in 2011, we are opting to work longer – either because we need to or, like Eric and Mario, we want to.

More than 20 years ago, it was DIY retailer B&Q that blazed a trail with its active over-50s recruitment policy. Today, 28% of the workforce is over 50 with the company's oldest employee aged 89. For B&Q, it made good business sense. Customers instantly warmed to older staff with a lifetime of DIY expertise.

"We trialled a store staffed entirely by older colleagues in 1989. This produced 18% higher profits with six times less staff turnover," says B&Q people director Fraser Longden. The company now offer the same flexible working options and opportunities to all their staff. "We really don't believe our staff should have an age-related cut-off date. We offer flexible working – even apprenticeships – to all ages," he added.

Since then others have followed suit. British Telecom's Achieving the Balance portfolio recognises that an ageing workforce has unique needs and offers a combination of flexible working, job share, home working and "ease down", which reduces employees' responsibilities as they prepare for retirement or in response to life circumstances, such as balancing the care of an elderly parent with work. It is these kinds of benefits, along with health insurance and payment protection schemes, that will draw older people into the workforce in the future, experts believe.

But progress has been slow so far. A 2012 report by thinktank Policy Exchange highlighted a continuing bias towards recruiting younger employees. Rather than bolstering existing legislation around age discrimination, the report recommended that the government focus on developing a jobseeker programme tailored to the over-50s. This would be similar to the £1bn Youth Contract that, in 2012, pledged to help 500,000 16 to 24-year-olds into apprenticeship or volunteering roles. Employers, too, must change their perceptions and recognise that experience and expertise are as valuable as youth and energy.

The recruitment website Skilledpeople.com, launched in 2011, connects small businesses with an older workforce. According to their own research 80% of over-50s have experienced age discrimination. Managing director Keith Simpson says it is high time employers stopped seeing older people as a potential burden and took a more enlightened approach.

"Far-sighted employers should be cherry-picking the best over-50s now as an insurance policy for the future. These people need less training, are more reliable and less money-motivated," he says.

And it is small businesses that are often best placed to adapt to this growing pressure, he adds. Back at Pimlico Plumbers it's a sentiment shared by Charlie Mullins. "Employers are bonkers not to recognise the value of a diverse workforce," he says. "I'm not a charity. I expect a lot from my employees, but my older employees bring calm, experience, reliability and loyalty to the job and they act as great mentors to the younger workers. It's crazy that these people are thrown on the scrapheap."

Mario, for one, has no intention of donning his slippers just yet. "It will take time for there to be true equality in the workplace. Older people have the same hurdles as women have had to jump," he admits. But, if anyone tells him he should retire to make way for fresh talent, he has one quick-fire answer: "If you want my job, take it. There's a hundred more I can still do."

Link: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/21/older-workers-great-employees>