Age-friendly employers: Influencing decision-makers

The UK's ageing population means that older workers make up a vital part of the workforce, both today and in the future.

Right now, only 1 in 4 employers are taking steps to create workplaces that support multi-generational workforce we need. But Ageing Better's research shows that most employers could be persuaded to adopt age-inclusive policies and practices if approached about the topic in the right way by the right people.

We commissioned YouGov to produce a survey of 2,247 senior decision-makers, from a representative range of employers. The survey indicates what approaches would be suitable for different types of employers. Sixteen employers also gave in-depth interviews about age in the workplace.

As part of the survey, we identified four segments of employers, loosely grouped by their understanding of, and attitude towards, older workers. These are: Evangelists, Sceptics, Meritocrats and Detractors – characteristics of each are set out later in this paper. While there were many commonalities, how best to engage and influence employers varied by segment.

The sections below set out the key findings from our research and include considerations and recommendations for engaging with employers on this issue.

We have also produced a set of 'evidence cards' on employers' attitudes towards older workers, and on the benefit of being an age-friendly employer. The cards are designed for use by organisations that work with employers and recruiters, providing a snapshot of how employers view older workers and on routes to influence.

Perceptions of older workers

Approximately half (49%) of employers in the survey had diversity and inclusion policies covering age, although these often covered multiple protected characteristics.

And only 1 in 6 of all employers said that they were very likely to develop age-friendly policies in the next 12 months.

Perceived benefits of older workers

- The top perceived benefit of older workers in the workforce for employers was increased knowledge and skills sharing (79%)
- Reduced staff turnover (45%), and helping staff to work longer (44%) were also identified as strong benefits of age inclusivity
- Employers also rated older employees' work ethic as higher than that of younger workers (56% compared to 25%), and felt they were more likely to help those around them (49% compared to 21%)

Perceived disadvantages of older workers

- Nearly a quarter (24%) of the sample did not see any potential downsides of having older workers in their workforce

- Of the employers who identified a disadvantage related to employing older workers, 58% felt that older workers might be less technologically capable than younger workers, including half (60%) of low-wage employers
- Other potential disadvantages included having ingrained habits (43%)

Routes to influence employers

The most common age-inclusive practices employers had in place were providing internal training, e.g., unconscious bias training (29%) and removing dates of birth from CVs (29%). Collecting workforce data and providing mid-life career development were much less common (8%).

Employers who intended to introduce age-inclusive policies in the near future identified a number of potential barriers to implementation as well as a range of things that would enable progress.

<u>Barriers to change</u>

- Large and public-sector organisations were more likely to identify prioritising age amongst other protected characteristics as a barrier than smaller organisations (38% vs 21%)
- Smaller organisations identified lack of time (22%) as the main barrier to change, over lack of knowledge (15%) or resource (16%)

<u>Drivers of change</u>

- Visibility: Having a clear business case (22%), seeing other organisations in their sector adopt age-inclusive practices (12%) and having visible individual ambassadors (7%) were identified by employers as potential enablers
- YouGov's analysis was used to predict what would increase or decrease the likelihood of introducing age-friendly policies while controlling for independent variables. This found that a desire to increase staff morale and reduce turnover were the top drivers of potential action

<u>Messaging</u>

- When it came to terminology, employers favoured 'multi-generational workforce' (42%) and 'age inclusive' (40%) over 'age-friendly' (20%)
- SMEs were more likely to favour messaging that outlined the damage of age-discrimination and the fact older workers were being denied opportunities. They were less keen on messages they felt were pitting older against younger workers.
- Both the evangelists and sceptics were worried about not being seen as age-friendly. Some 19% in each segment identified being 'named and shamed' as increasing their likelihood of introducing age-inclusive policies.
- A quarter (24%) of employers said they did not want to hear anything more about age-inclusive practices.
- For employers who did want to hear more about age-inclusive practices, 40% want information to come from government publications, 21% newsletters from industry bodies
- Large employers favoured a pledge or kitemark that recognises good practice in age-inclusivity as a way to support businesses to support older workers

- Employers from the sceptics and meritocrats segments instead favoured best practice seminars and peer learning sessions over pledges or kitemarks, which some interviewees felt would not necessarily act as an impetus for change

Landscape of employer awareness

We identified four segments of employers, loosely grouped by their understanding of, and attitude towards, older workers. While there were many commonalities, how best to engage and influence employers varied by segment. The broad characteristics of the segments are:

1. Evangelists (24%): most likely to be large organisations or in the public sector, evangelists are already demonstrating best practice on age, such as implementing inclusive policies.

2. Sceptics (28%): more likely to be public sector organisations or those with lower wages. Sceptics acknowledge the benefits of older workers but are sceptical about the business case. They are more likely than others to identify barriers to implementing age-inclusive policies, and more likely to say they don't know a lot about age inclusivity.

3. Meritocrats (31%): these employers are more likely to recognise the benefits of older workers than the average, but fundamentally believe that everyone should be judged on their own merit. This means they're less likely to identify the challenges older workers might face, and less likely to have formal policies in place to mitigate those challenges.

4. Detractors (17%): more likely to be medium turnover or private sector employers, this group do not see the benefits of older workers in their organisation. They tend to place less emphasis on diversity and inclusion overall and feel age-inclusive policies might prevent progress on other D&I agendas.

Key considerations for engaging with employer segments

1. Evangelists: Evangelist employers stated a preference for pledges or an accreditation scheme to recognise their best practice. The qualitative research suggested that many would be willing to be involved in case studies or promoting their policies.
2. Sceptics: Employers in this group were aware of the benefits of older workers, but not convinced of the business case. They were also more likely to respond to being 'named and shamed' and worried about the reputational impact of being non-inclusive. They indicated a preference for best practice seminars and peer learning about age-inclusivity.
3. Meritocrats: Like sceptics, this group expressed a preference to learn more about age-inclusion from best practice seminars and peer learning. Engaging on the topic of 'older workers' broadly likely to be challenging given their emphasis on specific individuals.
4. Detractors: This group generally had lower levels of awareness of the benefits of older workers and low levels of motivation to create or implement age-inclusive policies. A good route to engagement could be through creating a business case based on skills shortages.