

Case Studies

We have produced some case studies to demonstrate how businesses already benefit from employing older workers.

South Wales Forgemasters

South Wales Forgemasters is a medium-sized engineering company which supplies forgings to the automotive industry.

The business has a very low turnover of staff; in the last four years only two people have left. Most of the company's older workers commenced with them as young people and have seen no reason to leave. Their practical knowledge is seen to be an advantage.

No retirement age

South Wales Forgemasters has removed its fixed retirement age and some of its workforce is now choosing to work beyond pension age. To reduce the risk of sudden loss of skills and expertise, the company examines its age profile to determine when people are likely to retire and makes the necessary contingency plans. A previous example of this was where a skilled toolmaker, due to retire, was involved in the development of a new trainee who worked with him to learn all aspects of the job.

Another previously retired individual had been asked to return to work within the CAD department to develop designs for a new project. The company was very keen to retain his services because his skills would have been virtually impossible to find elsewhere within the locality. These examples of re-employment have been of mutual benefit to both parties, enabling the company to retain valuable skills and experience and the member of staff to continue working and contributing.

Recruitment

The nature of the business, heavy-duty metal processing - with a dirty, noisy environment - makes it somewhat less attractive as an employment opportunity than those offered by many of the other companies in the locality. South Wales Forgemasters believe that whether an applicant is 16 or 60, they have a part to play in the company.

The company factors age out of all of its recruitment and retention policies. Job application forms ask for basic personal details, including age, as well as education and work history.

Although the company includes age on the application form, it makes no reference to it when selecting individuals for interview, or during the interview process itself.

The company recently employed an electrician, Simon Herbert, who at 57 was concerned that his age might be regarded as a negative factor. However, the company was keen to reassure him that, in line with discrimination law and a positive attitude to older workers, they were only interested in recruiting the most suitable applicant.

Training and development

All employees undergo a formal induction period, after which the company and employee agree any necessary training and draw up a training plan. The company assesses the abilities of all employees annually, matching these to the work within the plant and arranging any necessary training.

“Many of our older workers provide excellent support to many of our new workers from a practical industrial point of view as well as passing on their experiences.” Paul Brabban, Managing Director, South Wales Forgemasters.

When the company found that some older workers felt reluctant to undertake training, they made the style in which it was delivered more flexible. This makes the workers feel more comfortable within a learning environment, and appreciate the benefits training can bring.

An older worker who was recently trained in basic computer literacy has continued to learn more about computers and software. He has been instrumental in helping to install some preventative maintenance software into the organisation's computer system.

The benefits for South Wales Forgemasters of its approach to age diversity:

- helps to recruit and retain skills in a business where it's hard to attract workers into heavy-duty metal processing
- very low turnover of staff
- older workers support to new workers from a practical and personal perspective

Allevard Springs

Allevard Springs specialises in the design and manufacture of coil suspension precision springs for the automotive industry. At its factory in the Rhondda Valley, Glamorgan, staff turnover is very low, with 83 per cent of employees having worked in the plant for over five years.

Recruiting the right staff

The company has a positive view about employing older workers; there is no reference to age on application forms and recruitment decisions are based on a person's ability to carry out the job or task allocated to them and not on the basis of age.

Despite a high level of unemployment in the area, Perry Stephens, management services manager, says that:

“There is a shortage of skilled maintenance people, which older people play an important part in filling. For example, the company currently has five 'super skilled' engineering technicians and two of them are over 60 and one is over 50 years of age.”

The company's view is that employers can benefit enormously from having older people in their workforce, bringing with them skills learnt during their working life coupled with a willingness to continue to learn. Continues Perry: “If somebody is capable of doing whatever job function is required, then age doesn't come into it.”

Keeping good staff

The atmosphere at the company's modern plant in Tonypany is friendly and Perry believes that the wide age spectrum is partly the reason for this. Absenteeism is low at less than two per cent, including long-term sickness.

Perry says that although he is aware of the misconception that older people may take more time off work because of illness, this hasn't been his experience:

"I find that it's the exact opposite. There's quite a number of older people who haven't missed any time whatsoever, such as Paul, who's had one day off in over 20 years."

Perry also finds that older employees are just as happy as their other employees to work the usual shift patterns; "We've got quite a few people in their late 50s still doing the regular shifts: 6.00-2.00; 2.00-10.00; 10.00-6.00."

Each individual's training and development needs are informed by annual staff appraisals. Again, age is irrelevant in this process as is seniority. All staff, whether on the shop floor or in senior management, receive their appraisal.

Flexible retirement

The company's retirement age is 65 but it is happy for employees to work beyond that. Jane Hughes is one employee who is interested in this possibility, after joining the organisation at the age of 60.

Jane was recruited on a temporary basis to help the purchase ledger clerk when the factory's accounts department found itself shorthanded. She had lots of previous experience and was able to use all of the necessary software programmes. When the accountant became aware of how skilled she was, she was asked to help with some other work.

Jane soon became a permanent employee and enjoys her role: "Work keeps you active and keeps your mind alive, especially when you're learning new things. It also gives you a routine and you make friends too. It makes no difference whether you're young or older - working is a benefit to everybody."

Other staff have retired and decided to return to the organisation; one for a further 15 months and another who is still enjoying work and plans to continue.

The business benefits for Alleverd Springs of an age diverse workforce:

- low staff turnover - 83% of employees have worked in the plant for over five years
- recruiting from wider talent pool and retaining experience helps to fill skills shortages
- wide age spectrum makes for a relaxed, friendly culture