

UK National Seminar

The UK national seminar was held at Middlesex University, London, on June 7 2010. There were some 30 people in attendance. Three presentations were given, including a summary of the draft UK report. These are summarised here.

1. The Management of an Ageing Workforce: A Comparative Multi-level Assessment of Organizational Policies and Practices in Germany and the UK.

Presented by Professor Michael Muller-Camen and represented research done by him with other colleagues.

Abstract:

Demographic developments will force organizations to change their youth-centric HRM approach. However, it is unclear whether one model of age management will emerge or whether this will differ between countries. Based on qualitative multi-level case study analysis of four matched pairs of British and German organizations, we found that the commitment, scope, coverage and implementation of age management differ due to country specific institutional factors. It appears that the need to abandon youth-centric HRM is more urgent in Germany due to stronger pressures by internal labor markets and higher dependencies on State pension systems.

2. Older workers as vulnerable workers in the new world of work

Presented by Professor Malcolm Sargeant on behalf of himself and Dr Andrew Frazer of the University of Wollongong, Australia.

Abstract:

The paper aims to identify whether older workers as a group are particularly vulnerable in the contemporary and emerging labour market - especially given their tendency (and desire) to take part time work, and the increasing and lengthening labour market participation of older workers. This is part of a larger project which examines the context and effectiveness of anti-discrimination law in dealing with employment discrimination against older workers. The research aims to identify the nature and extent of the problem in two countries: the United Kingdom and Australia, which have significant similarities and differences in terms of history and legal systems. We aim eventually to extend our research to New Zealand because it has some particularly high levels of older worker participation.

3. Elder employees during restructuring: stress and well-being

Presented by Dr Matt Flynn on behalf of the UK ELDERS project

Abstract

Matt Flynn provided a summary of the UK strand of the Elders project research. He began by noting that there are three ways in which a link between organisational restructuring (and associated job insecurity) has been linked with health and well-being: First, there is a job-loss model which focuses on the “shock” a worker might feel in either losing her/his job or finding it in jeopardy. Interventions might include a social safety net or counselling to mitigate the loss. The model is important, but can overlook the cumulative effect of persistently poor or insecure working conditions. For example, some studies have suggested that casual workers are less likely to have health problems during a redundancy situation than permanent ones. An alternative approach is to look at the balance between effort and reward. High effort for little reward will lead to health problems. Insecure workers may work longer hours, take fewer breaks and perhaps cut corners in terms of safety in order to stay demonstrably productive. This model takes into account both immediate and persistent job security, since low job security is reflected in low job reward. Interventions might include improving both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards in work, including flexibility and learning. Finally, there has been a body of research which focuses on the impact of job insecurity on workers’ sense of job control, and the impact of “helplessness” on physical and mental health. Interventions to mitigate the impact may focus on employability, training and adaptability.

The UK has a relatively weak employment regulation structure, leaving responsibility on stress and job security to employers. The Health and Safety Executive has produced a guide, but not a code of practice on stress, and there is limited job protection for workers. Education and training opportunities, both in terms of employer and state provision are focused on younger people.

As part of the research, a survey was conducted of workers 50+ who had experienced workplace transitions. These were civil servants whose workplaces had been privatised over the past decade. The survey found support for all three models described above. Workers who had experienced job loss over the previous five years were more likely to experience stress and fatigue, as were those who described their job security as low. Respondents who felt it would be difficult to find alternative employment if necessary or to stay in their jobs until retirement also suffered from work associated physical and mental health problems including fatigue, stress and feelings of hopelessness.