**Active Ageing through Social Partnership and Industrial Relations Expertise (ASPIRE)**

**Workshop for Unite Reps in Financial Services Sector Newcastle 7th**

Present: Five Unite reps plus Matt Flynn and Chris Ball

Preamble:

Matt explained the purpose of the workshop and the aims of the ASPIRE project. It is a project funded by the European Commission. Workshops are being run by our partner organisations in Spain, Italy and Poland. We are looking at areas where there may be opportunities to improve working conditions for older workers but our focus is on creating the conditions for “active ageing,” which we will define in a broad way as creating the conditions in which people can have choices around work, retirement, civic engagement, community activity and healthy living in later life.

Each member of the group explained a little of their own work situation and the position of the union in the organisation in which they were employed. The discussion turned around the presence or otherwise of older employees and the balance between young and older people in the workplaces concerned, what work meant to the older worker in contrast with the younger worker, how older workers were treated, how management regarded them and valued them or otherwise. The discussion was relatively unstructured but there was considerable enthusiasm for the subject and ideas sparked off one another’s contributions

Alan gave the example of his own workplace where there were people who had continued working longer because of their family circumstances and the possibility of continuing to work part time or flexibly. He had one colleague who was carrying on working although she was quite old and could easily be retired but she seemed happy to carry on working, in part for financial reasons but also because she was single and alone and (he felt) gained from having a work role and therefore a role in society as well as the income that resulted from it. He commented that many of the older people had acquired skills and were therefore useful to the company. No undue pressure had been put on people to retire because of their age. There had been no redundancies lately and many people who had been in the organisation for some time had been allowed to continue working beyond “retirement age.” Older workers were seen as more stable but also they were probably more expensive. On the other hand they had more experience and the company seemed willing to accept the extra costs of employing them (at least at the moment) having regard to the benefits they brought.

Steve had worked with a number of different teams in a call centre environment, including older women. There was a strict regime of measurement of performance and he noticed that it was not uncommon that these older women encountered difficulty in meeting their performance targets. As a result they were sometimes put under pressure including having to defend themselves in “capability procedure” process. Steve contrasted this situation with the position of a person with a disability who would be able to claim the right to a “reasonable adjustment” of the work and working methods, including making some allowances for their inability to work at the same pace as other able-bodied workers. He felt that the physical slowing down of older workers should be seen in a similarly understanding way. It was a fast moving and fast changing environment and many people, including older workers had difficulty coping, but there were no concessions made to recognise the changes that occurred as a natural part of life in the human body. He believed the company should have arrangements so that individuals could put their hands up and ask for such concessions, though in his company (Barclays) the disciplinary procedure was the predictable route. Regarding the value of the older worker, Steve could see that customers were sometimes reassured hearing an older voice at the end of the telephone and he felt that there should be recognition of the business advantages older workers brought instead of simply counting their calls and monitoring their performance in the mechanistic ways adopted. (This view as endorsed by other contributors – ‘Whether you are 16 or 75 you are expected to hit the targets,’ was one way it was put.)

Corrie explained that she was originally ‘on the front line’ (she was now in a different role) where she had seen older men being brought into the organisation but not lasting long as they were working in areas where there was a high sensitivity to security and risk. Because of errors made by these older men they had been picked up by the company as ‘risky’ and their working lives had been blighted as a result. The problem however had been avoidable if the company had adopted a different approach to training and instead of throwing these older workers into the front line before they were ready, the should have insisted on a longer and more careful training programme so that they were completely ready to do the work being expected of them.

Michael (Newcastle Building Society) described the process that the company had taken to benchmark jobs, pay grades and pay in his organisation using Towers Watson Perrin approaches. Whilst this had been a useful way of ironing out inconsistencies in pay there was more clarity about the wage-work bargain and there may now be less tolerance of below par performance. This may not be so good for the older worker who may be a bit slower in the job (Have I got this right? Chris) On

Michael also talked about the company’s recent adoption of a carers’ policy, including various forms of support for working carers. The policy had been introduced at the company’s initiative without the benefit of discussion with the union. Michael felt that *had* there been discussion of the policy it might have been better in some respects, notably in the extent of managerial engagement and preparation for the implementation of the policy, awareness of reps of the policy and its provisions and therefore greater ability of the reps and management to ensure the policy was implemented. He acknowledged the company had good intentions and wished the policy to work but he felt that the case for social dialogue or partnership was clear in the way the policy had been introduced. As it was there was a degree to which employees seemed scared to ask for the provisions of the policy, as though they felt that despite it being the company’s policy, they would be penalised in some way for asking for the provisions it offered.

Paul mentioned that he worked in a complaints handling unit with a lot of temporary staff, most in their 30s, or 40s with fewer older workers. There was a high turnover with people seldom retiring but quitting before they reached this stage. The problem was the target driven culture in the organisation. Pace of work and age did not easily co-exist in such a climate. He had noticed the changes in the nature of work and the pressure on people having taken time out of work to bring up his children and then returning after a period of more than ten years. People used to get credit for experience in his view, but now he noticed that this was no longer the case. In other words the climate in the workplace had become less tolerant of older people who could not stand the pace of this fast moving fast changing environment. Managers were no longer appointed for their people management skills but were more likely to be appointed for their technical knowledge. Managers did not know how to get the best out of people, they were only interested in figures. They failed to offer support. Years ago older people were generally allowed to be in a job or move to a job which was within their capabilities. So now people were more likely to come under pressure, perhaps struggle in a job role and may end up facing some kind of capability procedure or disciplinary action.

There was a discussion about the kinds of support the union could give to members in the kinds of situations discussed. Alan noted that when it came to appointments and promotions people were being appointed largely on the strength of their performance in an interview whilst a record of success in their job roles was not considered to be so important. This was regrettable and put older workers at disadvantage because they may not have had training in interview techniques and so on and indeed probably lacked recent experience of such procedures, in contrast to the younger worker who may have had relevant training and could be less likely to be nervous and thus perform badly. The question was asked, “How would older workers respond to training of this kind?” and this developed into a discussion about the possibility of the union providing employability training to its members or to people who were willing to become members if they were applying from outside the company. One suggestion was that an employer could work in partnership with the union to enhance the employability skills of applicants.

There was a discussion about attitudes to working longer, having regard to Government policies and the changing demographic of the workforce. Did people *want* to work longer nowadays? What did reps think about this? There was an interesting exchange with reps giving examples of workers who were happy to work and saw intrinsic value in the job and being in the workforce but also being driven first and foremost by economic reasons and the increasing pressure on people who had poor pensions and savings to draw on in retirement. Cory gave examples of people retired and then tried to come back to work – this was quite common in her experience. On the other hand there was concern from other reps that people who simply wanted to retire were increasingly being labelled as “benefits scroungers,” and that whilst the right to work was important this should be balanced by a right to retire. There was general recognition however that retirement and work are more fluid and Retirement didn’t need to be for ever. This led on to some interesting discussion about career and life guidance with a general recognition that guidance and support of various kinds were really needed throughout working life but that people definitely needed help to ensure that they were in a better position to take good decisions which would in due course have an impact on the degree to which active ageing could be achieved.

There was some discussion about the kinds of tools which reps and employers could use in promoting a more collaborative approach to active ageing. Reps felt that it was important that employers went out of their way to ensure that staff knew they would be invested in by their employer and that they were not going to be left to struggle with outdated skills etc. There was support for the idea that facts, research and information about age and employment in various formats would be useful and would support reps in the work they were doing with both employers and members. Examples of good practice from other employers, surveys of examples of good policies and perhaps some kind of benchmarking by the union of good age friendly policies, could all make a difference. Suggestions included making sure the union organisation was geared up to support action and campaigning around age issues with a National Officer having designated responsibility for older workers issues and support at other levels in the union (Region and company level for example) with appropriate training courses and lead reps all being considered as part of an approach that would help Unite to put the issues facing older workers and intergenerational equity across the workforce, more forcefully to employers but to show willingness to work in partnership with them. A particular example of the latter was the approach that could be adopted to career reviews and guidance with an awareness by reps, which they felt could be supported by learning reps and other mechanisms within the union’s learning activities. There was also awareness that employment conditions could be threatened by the pressures on individuals coming from a combination of sources and that it was important that the union was available defend employment rights on one hand but also to support people and help them take good decisions when they were at a cross roads in their working lives.

Chris Ball

8th December 2017