**Mid-career job transitions**

Workplace active ageing is not just about extending working life but more importantly ensuring that as people age, they have access to work which is secure, sustainable and meets their needs in terms of balancing work with responsibilities and activities outside the workplace. Many older workers are happy working in the job which they have been doing for a long time and would like to continue on their existing career paths until retirement. For them, support in terms of training to keep their skills current, adjustments to working hours and health interventions can help them remain in work up to retirement age.

Other older workers may be looking for a career change after the age of fifty. They may be looking for a new challenge or want to pursue an interest which they have held for a long time. At the same time, many older workers are pursuing a job change out of necessity rather than choice. They may be in a job which were able to carry out when they were younger but has become too physically demanding or stressful as they age. They may also be at risk of being displaced in work through redundancy and need support in finding work which does not represent a significant drop in income or skills level.

Older workers make fewer job changes than younger ones. This may be because as people progress through their careers, they find work which suits them, makes good use of their skills and sparks their interests. However, many older workers who have an interest in a job change are reluctant to do so for a variety of reasons. First, older workers may be reluctant to enter the job market because they are unsure that they will be able to secure work which equivalent to what they do now. Older jobless people are out of work longer than younger ones. In the UK, almost half of all unemployed people have been out of work for over a year. Many end up in work which is far below their skills level or eventually count themselves as retired in order to avoid the stigma of being long-term unemployed.

Second, many older workers, while looking for a career change, may nevertheless want a job which can make some use of the skills, knowledge and experience which they have built up over their careers. They are not looking to start over in their careers but to take a new direction. This may require some training to enable them to transition to a new job. Finally, older job seekers often experience ageism and other forms of discrimination when seeking work and this can act as a deterrent to pursuing a new career. Employers rarely explicitly say they prefer young job applicants over older ones but may be reluctant to hire someone who acquired the qualifications a long time ago. While work experience is valued by employers, they tend to prefer experience in the same job or industry. Older workers seeking a new career may find themselves at a disadvantage when competing against either young job applicants or those with sector-based experience.

**How can social dialogue help?**

Older jobseekers find moving from one career to another because they usually lack support in making a successful job transition. It is often difficult for employers to see the ‘business case’ for supporting an employee into a new line of work if there is not an immediate benefit to the organisation. Older workers may also avoid talking about making a career change for fear of appearing less committed to their present job. However, a successful job transition can benefit to both the worker and their employer if managed well. Older job changers can help their former employers in building business partnerships with new organisations. Many also return to their old workplaces when demand for their skills peak and are willing to help out because they feel valued and supported by their former employers.

Some unions actively support members in exploring new careers. When the British unions representing steelworkers and clothes manufacturers merged in 2004, the new union was named the Community Union in part to reflect the support which the union provides members in the form of retraining to help them transition away from declining industries. In the UK, a pilot programme known as the Mid-Life Career Review was developed to support job changers aged 45-64 in making a successful career transition. Reviews were delivered by seventeen national partners including the Trades Union Congress affiliated Unionlearn programme. The programme offered counselling and support on employment, training, finance and managing health. Although mainly focussed on people who were either out of work or at risk of losing their jobs, it was also extended to older people who were looking for a change in direction of their work. The reviews led to one in three feeling motivated to find work and half learning about new career opportunities.

Why was unions’ involvement important to the programme? First, people who undertook reviews needed to be able to talk to advisors who were outside of their immediate workplaces so that they could talk fully and frankly about their aspirations without prejudicing their existing jobs. Second, union representatives were able provide guidance to participants on where to find help in making a successful transition. Third, union representatives were able to feed back to employers, government and other stakeholders the support which older job changers generally need as well as the barriers to successful job changes.

**Questions to consider**

* Do older workers in your workplace have opportunities to adjust their work in your organisation? How much scope is there for taking a ‘new direction’ in one’s career?
* What are the career aspirations of older employees? Do managers and union representatives discuss with older workers ‘where they see themselves in five years time’?
* Is there a business case for supporting older employees in taking a new direction? Can employees who are supported in pursuing a new interest be mobilised to support their existing organisation?