# Learning and development

## Identified Barrier: Older workers’ outdated skills and resistance to retraining.

In most workplaces, having good skills is crucial to not only career progression, but even staying in work. As technology advances and the labour market changes, the pressure grows on older workers to keep skills up to date through training, on the job learning, mentoring and job rotation. Although older workers can benefit from training, they are less likely to take part than younger colleagues. This can put them at a significant disadvantage when seeking a job change or promotion.

What does the data say about older workers and training? According to the Labour Force Survey, 23% of people over 50 took part in some job-related training over the past three months, compared with 31% of employees under 30 and 27% of middle-aged workers. There are three reasons which can explain the difference.

First, employers are generally less likely to offer training to older workers than to younger ones. Decisions to focus training resources on younger people is rarely described in ageist terms, but may be framed as a way to support ‘future generations’ of workers. Employers sometimes assume that investing in older workers’ training is not as good an investment as providing training for younger staff. However, this may not necessarily be the case. Older workers, on average, stay in their jobs longer than younger ones, so employers have a longer period of time to see a return on the initial cost of training older staff. Further, many older workers are looking for training which builds on rather than replaces their existing skills sets. In many cases, refresher training can pay dividends in terms of improving the productivity of experienced staff.

Second, older workers may not have the accreditation to take on new roles which bring opportunities to train. Older workers are less likely to have formal qualifications than younger ones which might hold them back in terms of taking training and career development generally. Access to higher education has increased over the past half century. Today, XX% of 25 year olds have at least an undergraduate degree, as opposed to XX% of people over 50. While the increased access to higher education is a good thing, rising standards for qualification mean that some older workers may feel passed over for new career and learning opportunities in favour of younger colleagues. Skills attained through work experience can be difficult for employers to quantify and they may use qualifications as a proxy for being able to do a job or take on a new challenge.

Finally, older workers themselves may be reluctant to ask for training, especially if they expect to be turned down by their employer. Asking for training can sometimes be interpreted as sending a signal to the employer that the employee is presently unable to carry out their work responsibilities. It’s not hard to imagine a manager asking an older employee, “Why do you need training on a job which you have been doing for the past two decades?” Of course, there are many reasons why: technology changes, the scope of the job may be different than it was twenty years ago, and/or everyone can benefit from refresher learning. Nevertheless, older workers may be reluctant to ask for training because they are afraid of having a skills need identified by their manager. This fear can be most acutely felt by older workers whose performance has been declining and are therefore at most risk of dismissal. Some training could help them improve their productivity but they don’t want to ask for it because they don’t want their manager to know that they have a skills need.

## A possible solution: Implementing an inclusive approach to learning

The key to making the most of training resources with employees of all ages is to have an inclusive approach to learning and development. Where all employees participate in appraisals and are given opportunities to learn, training is less likely to be perceived negatively. Further, employers which have strategies for a ‘talent pipeline’ so that employees can experience a range of jobs through their careers are more likely to have the flexibility to redeploy workers to where their skills are most needed. Social partnership can foster a culture of learning inclusivity in which managers see the value of supporting the skills development of employees of all ages and employees feel empowered to ask for training which can help them stay productive and employable.

Trade unions across Europe have taken initiatives to support a learning culture. One important initiative is the Unionlearn programme led by the UK Trades Union Congress. Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are trained to provide advice and support to managers at the workplace level of the training needs of staff. They do so by talking with staff- both union and non-union people about their skills, career plans and training needs. They have tools available to help them discuss with workers where they see themselves both in the short-term (e.g. are you happy with your current job? Would you like to see a change your work routine) and longer term (e.g. where do you see yourself in five years?). They then support a learning environment in two ways: First, by guiding employees to support services which they can use to realise their short and long term career goals; and second by advising employers on the training needs and wants in the workforce. As such, ULRs play an important role in opening up conversations on workforce learning needs:

1. By giving employees a ‘safe space’ in which to talk about their own training needs.
2. By helping employers target their training to those who could benefit from it the most rather than simply those who ask for it.
3. By encouraging staff to think about their career goals, especially those who had been in post for a long time.
4. By fostering a talent pipeline environment in which training is a benefit rather than a punishment.

Social partners across Europe can learn from the Unionlearn programme. Tools which are used are available from the [TUC website](https://www.tuc.org.uk/).

## Questions to consider

1. Does your firm foster a learning positive environment?
2. Who usually asks for training in your workplace? Are opportunities taken up by most employees or only a small group?
3. Is training seen by staff as an opportunity or a punishment for poor performance?
4. (For union reps) How well do you understand the learning needs and career aspirations of employees in your workplace?
5. Can work be done in a social partnership way to facilitate dialogue with employees on learning needs?