LEARNWORKS

WHO IS TRAINING THE OLDER WORKERS?

A Complete Training resource | Robin Hoyle

"Who is training the older workers?" is an article written by Robin Hoyle and first published in Training Journal in July 2013

Robin is the author of the book **Complete Training: from recruitment to retirement***,*

published by Kogan Page in May 2013.

Some of the material in this article comes from Complete Training.

Who is training the older workers?

Look around your workplace. Have you noticed it's looking a little older? Over 7.5 million UK workers are aged between 50 and 64 and officially classified as older workers. But they are merely young pups compared to the one million staff still on the UK payroll aged over 65. In the US, 20% of all those in jobs will be over 50 by the end of the decade.   Now look around your training rooms. Do the people on your training courses match this profile? If not, then you're not alone.

I was first intrigued by this issue when writing a training strategy for a major public sector organisation. I interviewed a cross section of workers asking their opinions about different training options, especially those involving technology. Those aged 45 and above were very interested in new online learning opportunities, whereas those aged below 26 were decidedly hostile to e-learning. One other fact stuck out like a wrinkled thumb. Those most interested in new approaches to training were enthusiastic because *no other training was available for them*. In an organisation which prided itself on providing coaching opportunities, not one of those in this age group had access to a coach.

I investigated further. Statistics on training spend showed the lion's share being spent on those aged under 35. Government policy is focused on the young unemployed. Designs for new training approaches focuses on millennials (those entering work for the first time in the 21st Century) and attempts to harness zeitgeist-y tools to pique their interest. The talk at conferences and online is about social media and gamification (shudder). Learning design is taking its faltering steps to embrace approaches designed to appeal to the young. But the fact that an increasing proportion – and increasingly important part – of the workforce are not young is nowhere on the radar.

Paradoxically, much of the focus on taking training down the age range is being driven by older heads in the L&D field. They have adopted the new and groovy and rejected traditional training approaches. Like your granny dancing to hip hop this unedifying scramble towards youth has had unintended consequences. A whole swathe of the workforce having little or no training designed for them, few opportunities to update beyond the most basic of tick box compliance programmes and no clear development because – as one survey in the West Midlands found –'there's no point training people who will leave soon'.

But this is simply wrong. Young workers move between jobs and companies much more frequently than their older colleagues. In one survey, average employment duration for under 25s was a mere 18 months. Organisations which have chosen to actively recruit older workers find staff who are more loyal and more reliable.

I have to admit a vested interest. I have entered that period in one's life generally known as being 'an older worker'. I am (just) over 50. As I enter this stage of employment I and many others face the prospect of working for a considerably longer period than was expected. In fact, I and others of my age will probably be working past 2030 – another 17 or 18 years.

To put that into context, let's look back 17 years. 1996 was two years before the founding of Google.   Email had only been widely available for three years and was limited to very few, mostly those working in technology. Hotmail had just been launched. Broadband? Downloading both your emails could take half the morning. No one texted. Most mobile phones lived in cars because they

were too big to carry around. Correspondence was still being committed to letterhead by the typing pool. I could go on, but you get the picture.

If the past is a different country, 1996 was an emerging market. Will 2030 be as different? There's no reason to believe it won't be and yet most organisations spend most of their training budget on those who will stay for a short amount of that time and ignore those who might be there for all of it.

The reasons are complicated. There's a sense that older workers know it all, a sentiment shared by some of those older workers themselves. Training programmes which assume complete ignorance amongst all those being trained rarely work for people who've been in the company for many years. In short, training older workers presents some different and real challenges and many in L&D have dodged that challenge.

It might be difficult but there are things which can be done to address the development needs of your grey haired colleagues. It's high time they were.

First we have to get away from the belief that one size fits all. The training of employees cannot be based on the idea that what works for a 21 year old will also work for a 61 year old. All employees are not the same.

Second, trainers and those organising training need to actively engage with older workers. Online learning with personalised routes through the modules works well for older workers – especially those activities which contextualise different changes and enable people to seek out different resources to support them with their own updating.

It's also important to tap into the rich seam of wisdom these older colleagues represent. Generating those resources with older workers captures their knowledge and, in many cases, a perspective which is often missing from many training materials. Engaging older workers in learning design projects is a learning experience for them and others.

One option is what I call *externships.* You may utilise internships for the young, but an externship – in which years of experience are used in a different department or even in a different organisation , perhaps augmenting your organisation's efforts in CSR, provides valuable options for widening the horizons of more experienced staff as well as building their skills and preparing them for change. In Japan, silver HR centres have almost a million members. Here, retired people volunteer in their communities and earn credits to study for additional qualifications focused on independence, autonomy and collaboration. Could a similar approach for those working much longer into old age provide a model for retaining and continuing to build on the skills of this significant human resource?

Finally, there is one area where older workers are still being developed. Leadership development tends to attract a more seasoned cohort. But not all of the 7 or 8 million workers in organisations aged 50 or older are going to be leaders. Adapting the approaches used on these executive programmes - personalisation, one to one coaching and group problem solving - might present a model which unlocks the skills and potential of these loyal, reliable staff. They're going to be around for a while yet. Get over it.

Robin Hoyle is a writer, trainer and consultant. For the past 27 years he has been training for organisations large and small throughout the world. He is the author of **Complete Training: from recruitment to retirement,** published by Kogan Page. www.complete-training.co.uk