



Brains Trust Session – Remaining Q&As

From the ‘How Can ESF Help Older Workers through the Recession?’ conference in Birmingham in November 2009. These are questions the panel did not have time to answer on the day. The answers below are supplied by TAEN and European Social Fund Division.

To see other conference outputs please go to <http://taen.org.uk/esf/events/conference/3>

1) How do we identify, and establish links with, 50+ clients.

While it is essential to map and network with older people's groups to help with current delivery and to inform the way that future provision should be structured, it is also important to look beyond these groups.

Many individuals in the 50+ age group do not necessarily think of themselves as being ‘older’ and are therefore unlikely to identify with the provision offered by some of the recognised ‘older peoples’ organisations such as Age Concern/Help the Aged. So it is necessary to use additional methods of engagement which reach out beyond institutional activities targeted at older people. Examples include leafleting and / or putting posters up in places that over-50s may visit and use (e.g. libraries; GPs surgeries; churches and other faith groups; community centres and halls; fitness centres; sports and gardening clubs; swimming pools; supermarkets; discount centres; pubs; bingo halls etc).

2) ESF should be focused on the most disadvantaged. How do we identify/refer the most disadvantaged, some of which will be 50+?

For those who are registered with Jobcentre Plus, referral arrangements should be discussed and agreed with your local Jobcentre Plus District office(s). However, not all disadvantaged people in this age group are necessarily claiming out-of-work benefits and therefore may be falling between the gaps in terms of knowledge of the provision and support that is available.

Networking and putting in place signposting arrangements with other groups and organisations who offer support to people in this position and setting up the sort of outreach activities mentioned in the answer above, should all form part of your engagement strategy.

Sometimes in the case of the most disadvantaged people, the situation can be complicated by the fact that they may be living in an area of high worklessness or that they themselves have given up hope of trying to get back into work. Therefore, it is important to reach out to such people and help raise their motivation to seek change, improve their self confidence and increase their employability before starting direct job search or specific training.

3) Has any organisation worked with key bingo operations (like Gala) as a way of doing dissemination and outreach to the 50+ age group?

We're not sure whether anyone has actually done this but it seems like such an obvious idea that we would be surprised if it hadn't been tried previously. This really links back to the earlier Q&A on how to reach people in the 50+ age group who need help and would benefit from local ESF projects but who don't seem to be able to find their way to the provision that is available to them. Word-of-mouth is one of the most powerful ways to get news about your project across but of course it takes time to build up – so anything you can do to help stimulate it is worth

trying. So in addition to trying to reach prospective participants by the routes mentioned earlier, enlisting the assistance of local newspapers, radio and television stations to help spread the word is invaluable.

4) The isolation of unemployment is very debilitating for all groups, especially over-50s. What other things could be used to help, voluntary work?

This question is closely aligned to those above. For those who were in continuous employment for many decades, sudden unemployment and unexpected difficulties with getting back into work certainly can be a totally new and debilitating experience. Many feel embarrassed and might limit their social contacts, which doesn't help. In addition, divorce or family breakdown may mean individuals are living relatively lonely lives anyway, so the isolation of unemployment can be particularly acute for them.

Volunteering and any other employment-related activities, even if unpaid, can be extremely useful. People of this group have a lot of life and work experience, so volunteering in a completely different area to the one in which they used to work, may further develop their skills, give them a new sense of purpose, increase their motivation and enlarge their social circle. Sometimes it can lead on to paid employment, although this isn't guaranteed.

5) Many over-50s do not have the skills or resources that the younger employable generation have regarding the use of computer/internet facilities. Where then, does the law stand regarding employers who insist that applicants must use on-line facilities to apply for jobs? Is there possible discrimination here? (Don Graham, The Jericho Foundation)

As older jobseekers are more likely to lack IT skills than their younger counterparts, it is possible that employers who insist on job-seekers using online facilities to apply for jobs are potentially opening themselves up to charges of indirect age discrimination.

To the best of our knowledge no such tribunal case has succeeded to date but it is a moot point. The employer would have to prove and convince the Tribunal that such a policy was a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate business aim.

We are aware of cases where employers who do only accept on-line applications now offer in-store or local help to non-IT literate jobseekers to apply for jobs.

In a similar vein, employers who insist on a particular qualification which has only been available in recent years may potentially find themselves open to claims of indirect age discrimination.

6) I have been in continuous employment for 44 years, I have been made redundant at roughly 2 years intervals six times since the age of 58. Do you think that over-50s are being used as “adjustable spanner”?

There is strong evidence that in the past over-50s were deliberately selected for redundancy to a greater degree than other age groups. Generous redundancy packages often helped cushion the blow and persuaded older workers to prematurely retire. However in recent years, such packages have become less affordable for employers and so are no longer as common as before. Also, thanks to the age discrimination legislation introduced in 2006, use of redundancy selection criteria such as LIFO (Last in, first out) and FIFO (First in, first out) - the latter affecting older employees in particular) have become potentially unlawful - which has resulted in selection for redundancy becoming less overtly age biased.

In your own case we can only assume that you have been exceedingly unlucky in having experienced so many redundancies in such a short period. It may be that in some instances your employment was curtailed so that your then employer could avoid making any statutory

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redundancy payment to you - as you would have failed to complete the 2 years service that would have made you eligible to receive such a payment.

- 7) From discussing engagement with employers, and qualifications of the over-50s, we feel that reviewing/changing the inflexible recruitment process may be a way to challenge the current process/thinking in recruitment and make allowances for experience, knowledge and skills rather than just a qualification in order to be shortlisted.**

Since TAEN – The Age and Employment Network was founded in 1998, we have been advocating and promoting this approach – but as you realise there is still a long way to go. Formal qualifications have been increasingly, but erroneously, used as a ‘proxy’ for the possession of skills and knowledge. The Leitch report recognised this as a problem, as does the UK Commission on Employment and Skills (UKCES) which is now advocating the development of a more flexible approach to the acquisition of skills in future.

There are some enlightened employers such as British Gas (whose Carole Willsher spoke at the conference) and other members of the Employers Forum on Age who recognise the issue.

But the qualifications themselves are only part of the problem – unfortunately it seems that the emphasis on qualifications, rather than skills and experience and preparedness to do the job, can mask covert age discrimination against older job applicants and workers on the part of some employers and intermediary bodies.

- 8) Since there are many more 50+ people than retired Ghurkhas, could we not have a Joanna Lumley style 50+ champion? This is a serious suggestion.**

Yes – and it is a good one. Joan Bakewell is active in the role of an ‘older peoples’ champion’ and has spoken up on age-related employment matters, although much of her activity is focused on people who are now in retirement and described as no longer being economically active.

There may well be a role for a specific older person’s employment champion and it is certainly one that we would advocate.

- 9) Chris Ball made reference to making our labour markets more ‘fit for demographic purpose’. Could he expand on this. Is he talking about increasing the birth rate or some LM intervention - if latter what would that be?**

In talking about this, Chris meant that given the ageing of the population; the continuing increase in life expectancy; labour supply and skill shortages confronting employers in the medium and longer-term; the collapse of occupational pension scheme provision and the greater number of years that most people can expect to spend in ‘retirement’ – labour market policy in the UK at both individual enterprise and national level has been slow to adapt to age-based challenges confronting employers.

Extending working lives and raising state pension age in order to offset the cost and impact of population ageing, can only be successful if it becomes increasingly possible for older individuals to have the sort of labour market mobility enjoyed by so-called ‘prime age’ adults (i.e. 30 to 45 year olds)

Whilst in the years immediately before the current recession we saw an increasing number of organisations being more inclined to retain older employees (at least until they reached the age of 65), there is very little evidence that most employers have been willing to recruit people once they reached their early fifties, let alone their later fifties or sixties.

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In order to make longer worker lives a reality, TAEN advocates that proactive 'age management' policies need to be understood and adopted at government, enterprise and individual level. Such policies adopt a life-course approach, aimed at maintaining the employability, motivation and productivity of employees by taking into account and implementing changes connected with their ageing in order to prevent them from prematurely falling out of the workforce. Such interventions include training, health and well-being support, job and workplace design and flexible employment options.

10) Are economic development teams with Local Authorities able to bid for ESF?

There are no plans to increase the current number of Co-financing Organisations (CFOs). However, there is nothing to stop local authorities applying to another CFO to provide an ESF project as a sub-contractor - as part of the usual competitive procurement process. The project would of course need to meet the broad specification set out by the CFO. As a public sector body they would need to confirm that their activity is additional to the activities that they are already receiving public funding for and that they are not substituting ESF monies for already planned and funded activities.

11) What is the reason for the 19% target?

The target of 19% was set by DWP labour market analysts and was largely based upon Labour Force Survey (LFS) population data available at the start of the programme.

12) Should there be a wider range of ESF targets - ? Progression targets – but which link to new targets for providers.

Increasing the number of targets would mean increasing the number of MI indicators gathered which, in turn, would add an additional bureaucratic burden onto projects – who are already required to provide an extensive array of information and data. It is probably better for individual projects to consider the use of non-prescriptive soft outcomes and distance-travelled assessments which fit in with their own systems and which can be used to motivate individual participants (guidance on this is available on the national ESF website). In addition, it is worth remembering that age is just one of a wide range of disadvantages an individual can have in the labour market and indicators and targets are assessed across this spectrum of characteristics. The ESF participant cohort surveys will be used to obtain a longer term view of the impact that ESF has made on individuals - including older people aged 50+ progression.