

Case study - working without a fixed retirement age

Queen Alexandra College

Case summary

- Project:** Operating without a fixed retirement age – maintaining and developing specialist skills and expertise that are not forthcoming in new recruits.
- Profile:** Queen Alexandra College caters for people aged sixteen years and over who have visual impairments and other disabilities. It has around 200 employees, aged between 21 and 73. Approximately 10 per cent of all staff are over 65. The high staff retention rate helps to maintain the capacity to meet the specialist skills needs of the organisation.
- Approach:** Maintaining the specialist skills' requirements of a national Independent Specialist College; flexibility in working patterns and retirement options; drawing on older workers' knowledge and skills to meet the shortfall in the combination of skills required to support learners with autistic spectrum disorder, visual impairments and other disabilities where such attributes are not present in new recruits.
- Impact:** Retaining established specialists' knowledge and skills through shadowing and informal mentoring; older workers helping to grow specialist skills in-house; recognising and valuing the role of older workers in building staff capacity.

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Queen Alexandra College works without a fixed retirement age because this approach helps to accommodate the flexibility required of staff in a specialist college. Working flexibly without a fixed retirement age enables the college to cover unusual working patterns and the extended hours necessary to meet learners' needs. The high staff retention rate helps to maintain the capacity and working knowledge required to meet the specialist skills' needs of the organisation. It also serves to perpetuate a high age profile in the workforce, requiring effective processes for managing an ageing workforce beyond the state pension age.

The informal policy of not having a fixed retirement age developed as a mutual understanding whereby older workers who wanted to continue working approached the college and would be granted one-year extensions to their contracts. That process has now been discarded and all employment is now on an ongoing basis.

Recruitment

In recruitment, the college emphasises its age-neutral stance by communicating to potential employees that appropriate skills, knowledge and ability to meet learners' specific needs and business objectives are the most important attributes being sought. This results in workers aged over 50 being among those recruited.

In the workplace, the college also works to accommodate older workers' changing work preferences by providing flexible working options and offering a range of working patterns that meet the needs of the organisation and those of older staff who want to continue working, including those who choose to phase their retirement over a defined time period. Such arrangements are of mutual benefit as they are congruent with the colleges' time-flexible operations.

Flexible working as a necessity

A high proportion of the college's staff are part-time workers, therefore flexible working arrangements ensure that capacity is maintained. Older staff in particular welcome the range of options available to them. They are able to consider such arrangements as part-time working, flexible hours and reduced hours. They are also able to negotiate their timetable, as long as enough notice is given to enable the college to accommodate the specific needs of individual learners in a highly person-centred environment.

Queen Alexandra College attributes the ongoing success of these arrangements to its disability focus which requires great flexibility to accommodate learners, staff and organisational needs. The HR Director comments that working without a fixed retirement age "just happens", without being set out in a formal policy, as it is the way the college works effectively.

Older workers' role in staff and organisational development

Older workers in the college also play a vital role in skills' development by helping the college to 'grow its own' specialist skills and knowledge base. They do this by mentoring and coaching other staff on the job, in addition to carrying out their own substantial job roles.

Older workers tend to remain in the college and add significant benefit to the organisation and its learners. This is because just under 50 per cent of learners in the college have visual impairments, requiring specialist skills such as Braille and disability teaching approaches that improve with working in this environment for a significant amount of time. The college is finding that replacing such skills can be difficult, as the combination of skills required to support learners with autistic spectrum disorder and visual impairments are not often found in new recruits. Therefore existing staff who have these specialist skills tend to continue working to provide consistency in the service and help the college to retain these scarce skills by coaching other staff.

Retaining older workers' expertise

Before the formal removal of the retirement age, older workers would give the college two academic terms' notice of their intention to retire. That allowed the college the time to put training initiatives in place to replace any loss of skills due to workers retiring. Some of the initiatives included mentoring and shadowing activities. Over time, the college has experienced difficulty in acquiring new staff with speech and language therapy skills and has been 'growing its own' formally through providing Certificate of Education qualifications, and supplementing this by using older workers to mentor and coach other staff in the workplace to ensure continuity of capacity and the service.

The HR Director acknowledges the role of leadership in instilling an inclusive workplace ethos. Non-executive directors and governors with a range of disabilities are able to embrace difference and understand and guide the way the college operates.

Queen Alexandra College identifies the benefits of retaining older staff in terms of their ability and willingness to use their knowledge and experience to mentor and train younger staff in specialist areas where the college experiences recruitment difficulties and skill shortages and to work flexibly to cover unusual and extended hours as necessary.