


What we know about ageing


- Normal physical ageing results in decline in physiological fitness:
 - Heavy physical workloads exacerbate physical decline
 - Other risk factors produce ill-health/injury



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What we were trying to do


- understand needs and abilities of older construction workers
- explore how the working environment may be improved to accommodate older workers
- explore possible interventions to ease the physical workload for older workers



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What we did

- 6 month exploratory study
- qualitative methodology
- semi-structured interviews and small focus groups
- broad perspective
- participants from many areas of construction industry (N=55)



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What we found

- Things perceived to create a hostile environment for older construction workers
- wide ranging
- micro and macro levels



- Client demands*
- employment policy*
- design considerations*
- Specific work practices*
- personal responsibility for safe work practice*
- availability of tools & equipment*

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Why older workers are valued

Management and workers see value in retaining older workers

- skills, experience and knowledge
- work ethic
- workmanship
- younger people not entering construction



Why older workers aren't wanted

- Nature of industry makes environment hostile for older workers
- Lack of fitness
 - older workers perceived to be slower and unable to keep up pace of work set by younger workers
- Safety behaviours
 - older workers perceived to have more relaxed attitude to H&S
- Change
 - older workers perceived to be resistant to change
- Cost
 - older workers perceived to be more expensive because of lack of pace



What workers think (micro level)

- Accept ill-health and early retirement as part of the job
- Consider H&S regs and rules 'over-the-top'
 - preventing workers doing their job properly
 - reducing what they can earn
- Can't see any way out
 - *'Nothing can make the job easier'*



Barriers to interventions (micro level)

- Personal responsibility
 - reluctance to wear PPE or use equipment
- Financial pressures
 - responsibility for tools and equipment often blurred



Price-driven projects (macro level)

- Tight profit margins
 - difficult to make allowances for 'slower' older workers
 - 'slower' workers cost more
- Some thought clients should help bear cost of older workers



Direct vs. indirect labour (macro level)

- Direct vs. indirect labour
 - directly employed better 'looked after' than 'subbies'
 - Sick pay (although minimum) provided if direct labour
 - Self-employed don't get sick pay
- Subcontractors perceived to be selected for work on basis of how fit they are



Pay structure (macro level)

- Piece work / bonus payments
 - appeals to younger, fitter workers
 - older workers prefer day rates as focus becomes quality over speed
- Employment flexibility
 - older workers want to stay in the industry
 - but want to work flexibly (part-time or day rates)
 - many take on small private jobs themselves



So what?



What contractors can do₁

- More direct labour
- Pay by 'day rate'
- Reorganise how work is carried out
- More general labourers
- Use 'loading out' gangs
- Partnering with subcontractors



What contractors can do₂

- Shorter working hours
- Flexible working patterns
- Self-selection
- Work rotation
- Improve sick pay
- Provide 'employers' medical care
 - e.g. osteopaths



What materials & equipment suppliers can do

- 'Offsite' products
- Lighter blocks
- Lighter kerbs
- Pre-mix mortar
- Low-vibration tools
- Power hand tools
- Block splitters
- Ladder assists
- Access equipment
- Fall arrest equipment
- Vacuum lifters
- Mechanical handlers
- Electrical hoists
- Scissor-lifts
- MEWPS
- Conveyor belts
- Forklifts
- Mini diggers



Summary₁

- Older workers valued by industry
- Often a trade-off between skills / experience and physical fitness
- It is unclear how the financial cost from losing a worker to illness is met; particularly if self-employed
- Injury and ill-health go hand in hand with the job
- Nevertheless..... older workers want to stay in the industry.



Summary₂

- Direct employment is better than self-employment
 - associated with a more favourable working environment for older workers
 - especially re impacts on ill-health and early retirement
- Workers who fill the gaps created by older workers often have poorer skills
- In a competitive industry where cheap labour is readily available, there may be little incentive for firms to bear the costs of making the workplace less hostile for the older worker.



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What we are doing now

- £148k Research Council grant to develop 'older construction worker simulation devices'
- Based on car designers' 'Third Age Suit'
- Features to include:
 - musculoskeletal impairments, HAVS, dermatitis, noise induced hearing loss/tinnitus
- Intervention tool for H&S training
- Aid for tools & equipment designers
- Working Late Network – www.workinglate.org.uk



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