Older people and the construction site

Alistair Gibb – Loughborough University
Ageing in Construction Workers

Alistair Gibb, Joanna Leaviss, Phil Bust
Department of Civil and Building Engineering
Loughborough University

www.totaldrivel.com
www.jeffsweather.com
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
What we know about ageing

Construction Industry Age Profile (All Workers),

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics, 9 07
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
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)
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
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?

Summary
What contractors can do

- 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 do

- 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
Summary

- 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.
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.
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](http://www.workinglate.org.uk)
  - £1.5M Research Council collaboration with Cambridge & Sheffield
‘Ageing’ Suit

I still can’t get my head around what it feels like to have arthritis, I’ve just got a better idea.

I usually take the mick out of my dad because he’ll say he can’t do things because of his back. When he’s off work I say he’s just being lazy. Wearing the suit has changed how I think. I might not tell my dad that, but I’ll feel different in my head.

I think the suit’s a good idea. I still can’t get my head around what it feels like to have arthritis, I’ve just got a better idea. It’s like a man trying to understand what it’s like to be pregnant.

Chris Murray is Ewan’s dad.

‘I think the suit’s a good thing. Teenagers can be wrapped up in their own world so it’s good if Ewan can get an idea of what it feels like for me. I’ve been a bricklayer for most of my working life which is hard on the lower back.

Wearing the suit might change Ewan’s attitude. I don’t think he understands that picking the kids up from school, cooking tea or even walking a few yards is hard sometimes. Anything that helps people’s understanding is a good thing.’
Older people and the construction site
Alistair Gibb – Loughborough University