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Managing an Ageing Workforce

What Do We Mean By Ageing Workforce?

Due to medical advances lengthening the average lifespan, the abolishment of the compulsory retirement age, and the Government increasing the age at which retirees can claim their statutory pension, people are staying in work for longer. In many cases this causes no problems and is actually a welcome due to the vast amount of skills and life experience an older employee can have, but there can be some difficulties which may arise when managing an ageing workforce.

The Difficulties of an Ageing Workforce

The most obvious difficulty an employer is likely to encounter is the accidental discrimination of an ageing employee. Age is one of the nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and employees can therefore raise a claim against an employer if they feel they have been ill-treated because of their age. When discriminating against age first became unlawful in 2006 many employers made mistakes that got them into trouble, and unfortunately this is still the case now nearly ten years later. Something as simple as asking an employee to include their age on a job application, or using age specific descriptions such as “dynamic” or “lively” in a person specification that may deter an older candidate, can be considered discrimination against older job seekers. Not considering an older employee for a promotion can also be considered discrimination, now that there is no upper limit for age in the workplace there is no reason why an older employee cannot be considered alongside a younger employee.

Another difficulty of an ageing workforce is that unfortunately for some, as people age they can become less competent in their role. Situations such as these can be difficult and sensitive to manage, but if someone is truly no longer capable of fulfilling their role then this must be managed in the same way as it would be managed for any other employee, otherwise it may be the Company that begins to pay the price.

Finally, a third difficulty of managing an ageing workforce can be the vulnerability of the elderly. Sometimes as people age they become more vulnerable and a workplace that was once very safe for them may no longer be adequate. Employers have a duty of care towards all employees and are therefore required to ensure their safety, which means in some cases risk assessments will need to be conducted with the age of the employees in mind.

Avoiding These Difficulties

In an attempt to avoid the possible problems of an ageing workforce, it is recommended that managers review their policies and procedures to ensure any outdated statements are removed e.g. references to a compulsory retirement age. Particular attention should be paid to the Company's recruitment procedures (both external and internal) as this is where most age discrimination occurs. Too many employers fall into the trap of believing that people of a certain age don't want to further their career or start a new one, but by assuming this you are in fact limiting what is possible for people of an older age. Some people do want to start a new career when they're older, it can be interesting and exciting. Likewise, some people feel that they

deserve a promotion when they're older because they have more life experience, and may not appreciate being told that they do not automatically deserve promotion by default. By ensuring your recruitment procedures are open minded, equal and avoid age specific terms, there will be less possibility for a claim of age discrimination.

The Benefits of an Ageing Workforce

An ageing workforce can also be very beneficial. Recent reports have suggested that many people overlook the benefits of employing older workers, and that their companies suffer because of it. Older workers not only have a lot of workplace experience, but they also have a large amount of valuable life experience and may, in some cases, have a better work ethic. This is especially valuable when it comes to a sales role, as many people believe older employees have better communication skills. Certainly B&Q believe this as they make a deliberate effort to employ older workers in customer focused roles. Older employees can also be a brilliant asset when it comes to training younger employees. Who better to train younger employees than colleagues who were once in their position? By setting up coaching and mentoring schemes a company can really make the most of its ageing workforce.

How Can We Help?

If you have any queries relating to any of the subjects raised within this newsletter then please do not hesitate to contact us at hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk

For clarification of any of the above updates or for advice and guidance on any HR and/or Health and Safety Concerns contact us by emailing hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk or by calling 02476 664092.

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