

## Stuck at home on the internet: The future for older workers?



Most of us like to think there is progress in human affairs and that the outlawing of discrimination is an important marker of this progress, taking us closer to the day when old prejudices are cast aside and new forms of social relationship take their place. At the heart of this story of progress lies an ideal – that of a world in which we are blind to petty differences between one another and to the accidents of birth and fate that have separated us in the past.

For older workers in the UK, the passing of the 2010 Equality Act – coming in the wake of new regulations introduced four years earlier – was seen as a landmark in this path to progress. Huge changes followed the Act. Out went the idea of a mandatory retirement age. In came a wide range of protections aimed at cementing the standing of older workers within the labour market and changing attitudes towards them.

Fast-forward to 2020 and this progressive agenda, as it relates to older workers and the elderly more generally, is coming under challenge. On the grounds of age (and age alone), the government has encouraged millions of people not just to stay at home but to shun human contact altogether.

Crisis or no crisis, we see no immediate prospect of the legislation protecting older workers being watered down. But, at the same time, Covid-19 has brought the issues of age and work to a head in ways that the framers of the 2010 Act could not have imagined. Consider the following labour market statistics (drawn from the ONS and other sources):

- The UK workforce now contains 1.3million over-65s
- More than 500,000 workers are over 70
- On some pre-Covid-19 projections, over-65s will make up over half of *all* UK employment growth over the next 10 years and almost two-thirds of employment growth by 2060

But, set these figures against what is currently believed about the vulnerability of different age groups to Covid-19 infection:

- People in their 60s are nearly 12 times more likely to require hospital care than people in their 20s
- This figure rises to 16 times in relation to those in their 70s and 18 times to those in their 80s
- Even though these ratios flatten if we consider people in their 30s rather than their 20s, the numbers remain stark. People in their 60s are nearly 3.5 times more likely to require hospital care than those in their 30s. This rises to nearly 5 times in relation to those in their 70s and more than 5 times in relation to people in their 80s.

The actuarial calculations here are relatively straightforward for governments to make. Don't worry too much about those in their 20s and under: the priority is to stop them infecting those older than them. Worry more about people in their 30s (and 40s). Worry a lot more about people in their 60s and over.

What is the government to do? The very act of dividing society up by age, lumping people together, and seeking to justify treating them differently according to age will strike some as proof of how fragile the supposed victories in the name of age have turned out to be. Could we imagine government having a policy of telling men *as a group* that they need to confine themselves to barracks? Could we imagine a similar policy for members of BAME communities or the morbidly obese?

Of course, the idea that this shows that older people are still seen as fair game when it comes to being excluded from mainstream life comes up against an obvious challenge. The government is not *picking* on older people – in particular, the over-70s. Instead, it is following scientific evidence in order to *protect* older people, thereby keeping them safe and ensuring the healthcare system is not overwhelmed. As such, older people should not take the restrictions on them *personally*. It is simply evidence-based science in action. If the evidence for singling out people for special measures on the basis of their gender and ethnicity was as strong as it is for singling them out on the basis of their age then that is what would happen the argument runs. But the plain fact is that the evidence is not as strong.

Step back to happier times for a moment. The case for the legal changes relating to older workers was based partly on an appeal to rights and fairness and partly on cold economic logic. Having people work for longer, it was argued, not only brought health and social benefits to the workers themselves, it also guarded against the development of skill shortages in the wider economy and relieved some of the burden on the UK's welfare system. The idea that the labour market was a zero-sum game – that more space for older people in the workplace necessarily meant less space for younger workers – was vigorously challenged by supporters of the legislation. They pointed to evidence that the reverse was true: the legislation would end up increasing not reducing opportunities for younger people.

Return now to the present. It is entirely possible that the lifting of the lockdown restrictions will proceed at different speeds for younger and older workers. Younger workers who do not share a home with an older person may be the first to benefit. Older workers themselves will likely be at the back of the queue.

Even if the lockdown is lifted sector-by-sector – rather than age-group-by-age-group – we anticipate that older workers will, for the foreseeable future, be encouraged to stay away from the workplace as much as possible, in the name of safeguarding their health. Given the link between age and organisational seniority, this may create a new dynamic at the workplace: younger middle managers will become the day-to-day face of organisational leadership, with senior leaders becoming even more remote figures than before, present on-line while absent in person. In that absence, new cultures within the workplace may start to develop – in the form of new in-jokes, new ways of dressing and talking, and a privileging of newer forms of expression and cultural references over older ones – that are invisible to older workers, whether they are in leadership positions or not. The days of *I don't get it* may be replaced by the days of *I haven't even seen or heard it to begin with*.

But something much more significant may come out of all of this. As middle managers assume a higher profile within their organisation they will start to be seen as its driving force on the ground. They will (whether with the blessing of their bosses or not) assume a greater role in making its decisions and implementing them in ways of *their* choosing. More and more, the organisation will become *their* baby and its fortunes a function of *their* efforts. If things go well, it will be harder for senior leaders to run the place the way they did under the status quo ante. If things go badly, questions will be raised about whether the link between seniority in age and seniority in rank needs to be decisively broken to ensure that the organisation is never again left exposed in the way that it has been during the pandemic. Either way, the physical exile of senior leadership teams will represent a real test of precisely just how good they have been as leaders. For example:

- Did they delegate and empower?
- Have they groomed, coached, and prepared middle management to step into the breach?
- Do they truly command respect and followership even when not physically present?

All these developments may dovetail back to the legal protections on age discrimination in two important ways.

**First**, the workplace of the foreseeable future may need to be re-designed to ensure that the new ways-of-working that older employees have to live with (staying at home, being on-line) do not put them at a disadvantage in terms either of career progression or of the more general quality of their work experience. Employers will need to think long and hard about what reasonable adjustments need to be made to the workplace to reflect not just the personal needs of workers but in response to legally-mandated epidemiological instructions about who should and should not be present at the workplace and about the levels of health protection they require when they are there.

**Second**, and possibly more important, we expect there to be a re-opening of the wider debate about intergenerational justice we have written about elsewhere. We made the point earlier that the idea older workers block the path of younger workers was rejected by the architects of the equality legislation. Times change, however: the economic conditions in which the legislation came into being are almost unrecognisable from those of the post-Covid-19 world. With employment opportunities for young people likely to tumble in the wake of the impending economic downturn, how soon will it be before government and employers come under pressure to do give jobs and opportunities to younger workers precisely because they are *younger* and need to be helped to the front of the queue on grounds of their age alone?

If this pressure does come, it will strike older workers as being both irrational (it runs counter to the economic evidence used in defence of the law on age discrimination) and deeply unfair (confronting older workers with the quadruple whammy of being socially isolated, vulnerable to a deadly virus, deprived of the economic and other benefits of being in the workforce, and yet potentially still too young to claim their state pension).

The compact between generations is likely to come under pressure as never before. Older workers may yet turn out to be the main losers.

## **Who we are:**

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*We would be delighted to receive your comments on the article. Please direct these to:*

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