

Employment Agency

By Stuart White
Printed in the Weekend Post

We may be thousands of kilometres away but there's no getting away from the European currency crisis. As Greece's debt reaches critical mass and Italy's also looks headed for meltdown, EU leaders have been holding summit after summit, seeking solutions, all of which are by necessity fairly unpalatable to the ordinary man in the street.

One such suggestion is the compulsory raising of the state pension age, forcing people to work longer before retirement. In the UK, for example, the government looks set for all-out war with the powerful TUC (Trades Union Congress) over the issue, and in Italy it's a bone of contention within the country's very shaky coalition government.

The fiscal thinking behind the move is irrefutable. It's a fact that with improvements in medical care and increasing affluence, life expectancy has risen considerably and that has placed an increasingly heavy burden on national economies. Also, as people enjoy better health in their latter years, what's to stop them working longer?

Well, nothing, of course but there are provisos. Firstly, a lot of them don't want to. They see early retirement as a right, not a privilege and they want what they think is due. And then there are those employers who don't actually want an older workforce. In business, as in life, 'the old' are often discarded and put out to pasture in the proverbial field for no better reason than how long they've been around.

For years the 60/65 barrier has been the absolute limit for working but isn't that just the epitome of narrow-minded thinking and pigeonholing people? It supposes that when you get there you are no longer useful or productive. Even the word retirement implies it all - time for bed! You're tired out. You need to rest. But how can it be a hard and fast rule? I know people half that age who run out of steam and just as many who never get started. I also know plenty of older people who are totally indefatigable.

To employers who argue that they don't want someone who will only stay for a few years, I am tempted to retort 'then don't employ someone young'. Chances are your older employee is likely to stay a lot longer. As for when the employer describes itself as recruiting for a young, dynamic team that means they have already accepted as true all those myths and have pre-decided that they don't want an 'oldster' around.

Consider this. In January 2005 a bill was introduced in the US House of Representatives allowing for the retirement age of aeroplane pilots to rise from 60 to 65. It was a contentious piece of legislation but backed up by considerable research which challenged the widely held assumption that after age 60 there is a general decline in cognitive functioning and reaction times. A report published in Aviation, Space and Environmental Medicine in March 2002 reached the conclusion that "There appears to be no medical, scientific, or safety justification for the age 60 rule. It represents age discrimination." Similarly the Hilton Study found "no hint of an increased incident rate for pilots as they neared their 60th birthday."

But aren't we all guilty of ageism in one form or another? Regardless of research examine your own reaction to flying with an airline that has a pilot of 60 as opposed to one that has a pilot of 35? Would you feel more at ease with the young pilot with his quick reflexes and high energy level or would you feel more secure in the experienced hands of the older jockey? I'm betting you'd probably be more concerned that the old geezer may just fall asleep at the joystick? Understandable, but ageist! This is discrimination rearing its ugly head again.

Many countries have very stringent discrimination and protection laws so that a resume will normally not contain any reference to gender, age, nationality and even how many children you have. It is even illegal for the interviewer to ask. It's different here. In a small country like Botswana, people know you or of you. At worst they can trace people who know you. So you stop being judged by your experience and successes but more on how you are perceived. There are even some who feel that discriminating against older people in the work place may not be a social issue - that there is some justification for retiring older people to make way for youth and keep them off the streets. This may be well-intentioned but it is still discrimination.

So there's the curious dilemma. On the one hand those who want to keep on working but aren't permitted, on the other those who can't wait to leave but are forced to stay. But there's no denying the 'OLD' in 'gOLDen handshake' and the PAST in 'put out to PASTure'. So if you don't feel either old or past it, can you really be ready to retire just yet?

STUART WHITE is the Managing Director of HRMC and he can be reached at the below contacts

Managing Director
HRMC
Phone: 395 1640
<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

Executive Recruitment | Strategic Planning | Organisational Transformation | HR Outsourcing
Management Assessment and Development | Training and Executive Coaching | Psychometric Testing

HRMC
Management Consultants

www.hrmc.co.bw