

Post-retirement age workers and health and safety

How does working over age 60 affect
safety on the job?

Summary report 2016

IOSH, the Chartered body for safety and health professionals, is committed to evidence-based practice in workplace safety and health. We maintain a Research for Public Benefit Fund to support research and inspire innovation as part of our work as a thought leader in safety and health.

All recipients of funding from our Research for Public Benefit Fund are asked to compile a comprehensive research report of their findings, which is subject to peer review.

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In this document, you'll find a summary of the independent study we commissioned from Brunel University.



What's the problem?

The national infrastructure of some countries will face increasing challenges from a population that is ageing. With changes in legislation in 2011, people in the UK will have to work longer before they can receive the state pension.

So far, research on the health and safety risks of workers over 60 has been limited. Studies on the perceptions of safety have tended to define 'older' workers as 50-plus, rather than people over retirement age. When people over 60 have been included in research, the focus has been either on motivations for working or on accident rates and days lost from injury. Generally, these studies have featured managers' and employers' – not employees' – perceptions and experiences of health and safety in the workplace.

We commissioned Dr Alexandra Farrow and Dr Frances Reynolds from Brunel University to explore post-retirement age workers' own perceptions of safety and risk-taking behaviour at work, and their suggestions for improving safety.

The research project had three objectives:

- to carry out a systematic review of evidence available in 2009 concerning safety practices and risks for workers aged over 60
- to conduct a qualitative interview study of workers over age 60 in 2010
- to conduct an online survey of workers in all age groups, comparing experiences and attitudes on safety at work in 2011.

What did our researchers do?

The literature review addressed the specific question, 'What are the health and safety risks associated with post-retirement age working?' Using several databases, the authors looked for relevant health and safety research in which participants aged over 60 formed substantial sections of the sample. The search criteria excluded policy documents, management perceptions of older workers' benefits and liabilities, and articles about health after retirement.

The authors then conducted face-to-face interviews with 40 people aged 60–91 to explore their perceptions of workplace hazards and discomforts. Each person was asked about their experience of safety risks and incidents and safety practices at work.

The third phase of the project was an online survey. Some themes emerging from the face-to-face interviews were used to design the final survey questionnaire. Respondents were asked about their employers' preferred retirement age (if any) and to say whether they had retired at the state pension age and then returned to work. Further questions explored safety cultures and attitudes to workplace safety.

What did the researchers find out?

The literature review included reports that while workers aged over 60 had fewer accidents and injuries than younger workers, they were more likely to have serious health outcomes when accidents did occur. The reports did not usually include detailed information on how illness such as stroke or medication contributed to accidents. However, age-related hearing loss was found to be a possible critical safety factor.

Post-retirement age workers may face different workplace risks, relating to specific job tasks. While older people as a whole tend to show cognitive decline with advancing years, there was little evidence that these changes affect job performance or safety for workers aged over 60. This was less clear for driving safety, however.

Education and experience seem to have important protective effects. Workers aged over 60 seem able to apply protective or compensatory strategies which help to maintain safe working practices – for example, when driving. Work patterns such as shift work or overtime do not appear to be related to older workers' safety.

Overall, the literature review confirmed that relatively little is known about people who work beyond 60 and into their later years. Research studies conducted over a period of time could help to identify factors which enable workers to remain in work safely into their late 60s and beyond.

The face-to-face interview study of 40 workers identified few hazards and no accidents since participants' reported retirement age. Issues reported included the physical demands of work, tiredness, driving and interpersonal difficulties such as excessive demands and client/customer complaints. Most of the work-related hazards identified, such as prolonged sitting at computers, lifting heavy items and driving, were seen to affect workers of all ages similarly.

Interviewees adopted coping strategies such as part-time working, altering work roles, limiting driving, applying work-related expertise, assertiveness, using authority or status and (if employed in larger organisations) getting support from company or organisational policies and practices. Participants emphasised individual responsibility for managing workplace hazards.

As well as financial need, most participants had a range of motives for continuing in work beyond retirement age. Almost all felt there were benefits to their health and vitality from the physical activity involved in working, particularly from maintaining routines and obligations. In addition, they felt that their psychological well-being increased by maintaining professional identities, meeting challenges, continuing personal development and social affirmation at work. The prevalence of part-time work, which enabled leisure and physical activities to be incorporated into daily life, may also have been beneficial for health, and potentially for safety.

The interviewees were highly motivated people whose accounts challenge any lingering negative stereotypes of post-retirement-age workers. Their ability to exercise 'choice' in remaining at work at these ages may have added to their positivity.

The anonymous online survey had 267 respondents (71.2 per cent males and 28.8 per cent females). Nearly half (48.5 per cent) were aged 21–50, 30.3 per cent were 51–60, and 21.0 per cent over 60. The oldest group was predominantly male (89 per cent). Workers aged over 60 were more likely (34.5 per cent) than their younger counterparts (8.7 per cent) to be working part-time.

Overall, the study found that workers aged over 60 reported good health and vitality, and shared with younger workers positive safety attitudes and coping strategies for hazards at work. In terms of exposure to hazards, the over-60 workers reported less computer usage, less stress from e-mails and less daily driving.

The following table shows characteristics that differed significantly for workers aged under 60 and over 60. Some of these differences may explain the apparent 'safeness' of the over-60 worker in this survey.

Summary table of results comparing age groups	Characteristic	Age up to 60 (%)	Age 61 and over (%)	Total (%)
Gender				
	Men	66.2	89.3	71.2
	Women	33.8	10.7	28.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100
Weekly working hours				
	Up to 20 hours	5.2	27.3	10.2
	21–40 hours	52.4	43.6	50.4
	>40 hours	42.4	29.1	39.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Does organisation have preferred retirement age?				
	Yes	44.2	35.7	42.4
	No	29.6	53.6	34.7
	Not known	26.2	10.7	22.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Use of pc over last 6 months				
	Never or 1–3 hours/day	15.0	28.6	17.9
	4–6 hours/day	45.6	46.4	45.8
	More than 6 hours/day	39.3	25.0	36.3
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Ever had eye strain after using a pc in your job?				
	Yes	46.8	28.6	42.9
	No	53.2	71.4	55.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Ever felt excess pressure from a need to respond to emails in present job?				
	Yes	66.0	44.4	61.5
	No	34.0	55.6	38.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
If YES to regular driving in job, how often, on average?				
	Each day	24.3	19.4	23.1
	1–3 times/week	47.6	71.0	53.0
	Less than once a week	28.2	9.7	23.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
If job tasks have changed in the last 6 months, was stress an issue?				
	Yes	60.3	37.5	55.2
	No	39.7	62.5	44.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
In the last 6 months, have you ever thought your safety at work was improved by more awareness of the hazards?				
	Yes	81.4	65.5	78.0
	No	18.6	34.5	22.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
In the last 6 months, have you ever thought your safety at work was improved by being more assertive?				
	Yes	72.0	48.1	67.1
	No	28.0	51.9	32.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
In the last 6 months, have you ever thought your safety at work was increased by using your authority?				
	Yes	81.6	67.9	78.7
	No	18.4	32.1	21.3
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

What does the research mean?

Overall, the evidence collated here from review of the literature and empirical research suggests that workers aged over 60 are able to cope well with their work and its safety aspects, although more detailed research is required.

The study found that, for all age groups, there is a lower acceptance of risky practices when there are positive views about management commitment to safety. Strong personal commitment and knowledge regarding safety are also associated with lower acceptance of risky practices.

As in the wider research literature on older workers, this study revealed few age differences in reported hazards and safety attitudes.

On the whole, workers over 60 reported fewer problems than their younger counterparts regarding working with computers, eye-strain or stress at work. Among older workers, there was no evidence for increased accidents or greater exposure to physical hazards. On the contrary, this group reported significantly greater vitality.

This may represent the 'opting in' process: those who are healthier and more committed to work tend to stay beyond 60.

The oldest workers did not report greater safety consciousness. In fact they were less likely to say that their safety at work was improved by being more aware of hazards, more assertive or more able to use authority or status. However, the reasons for these age group differences are unclear. There may have been some modesty about their level of expertise, or a lack of familiarity with job or work contexts. The degree to which they could be assertive or authoritative could also vary.

Don't forget...

Difficulties in recruiting participants, and a smaller sample than originally envisaged, mean that the findings regarding perceptions of risk and attitudes to safety cannot be generalised with confidence to the wider UK workforce. In addition, women were under-represented in the older age group of the sample, partly because they are entitled to the state pension earlier than men, and partly because more men work beyond 60. Manufacturing workers were also under-represented, so only small numbers came into contact with physical hazards such as heavy loads, flames and sharp objects during their work. There may be bias in the results towards safety-interested participants and those in safety roles because of the sample eventually recruited.

Nonetheless, the reasons for working beyond default, or company, retirement age resonated with those found in previous literature. As with all cross-sectional surveys, this 'snapshot' can only point to factors worth researching in a longitudinal study of a group of older workers.

What's next?

This project is part of a research series commissioned by IOSH to look at a diverse working population, focusing on 'age' as a particular subgroup.

A second report in the series, 'The health, safety and health promotion needs of older workers: an evidence-based review and guidance', can be found at

[iosh.com/research](https://www.iosh.com/research).

Our summary gives you all the major findings of the independent project report by Brunel University. If you want to read about the study in more depth, you can download the full report at [iosh.com/research](https://www.iosh.com/research).

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IOSH
The Grange
Highfield Drive
Wigston
Leicestershire
LE18 1NN
UK
+44 (0)116 350 0700
www.iosh.com

 twitter.com/IOSH_tweets
 facebook.com/IOSHofficial
 linkedin.com/company/iosh
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 instagram.com/ioshofficial
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