

Thirty-seven per cent of the current workforce will be eligible for retirement within the next 20 years



Age concern

The number of post-65-year-old workers in the UK could reach 50% within a decade and the bakery trade will have to find ways to accommodate them, says **Andrew Don**

The late Gert Bidder was still working for Burbidge's Bakery in Andover at the ripe old age of 96.

She had worked for the Hampshire business since 1936 and did not want to stop, although Steve Burbidge, managing director, explains her workload lessened the older she got and, in the end, she just washed the tea towels. *British Baker* has not been able to ascertain whether she was the oldest-known person working in a retail bakery, but it does seem highly likely.

Burbidge's is not alone in retaining workers who have long passed the default retirement age. Beaneys, of Strood, in Kent, had a former manageress who loved working so much, she continued to come in for a few hours to help out on a voluntarily basis "just for the fun of it" when she was 82.

But the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union reckons fewer than 5% of over-65s are employed in the sector overall, across manufacturing and retail.

Improve, the sector skills council for food and drink manufacturing and processing, says there are 101,000 people working in the manufacturing side of the bakery industry

and 37% of the current workforce will be eligible for retirement within the next 20 years. Its most recent Labour Market Information Profile shows fewer than 0.5% are older than 65.

Yet this looks set to change: the government is consulting on plans to abolish the default retirement age in October next year, which could see the number of post-65s in

employment soar. And the Department of Work and Pensions says more than 800,000 people will turn 65 in 2012, 150,000 more than the record level expected next year. Throw into the mix the Equality Act 2010, extending ageism protections, and an increasing state pension age, and you can see how the foundations have been put in place for a more mature workforce.

The benefits of post-65 employees

- No maternity leave
- More customer-friendly
- Appreciative of the job and work harder to keep it
- Can add up the price of two scones without using a calculator or writing it up on the back of a bag
- Less anxious about leaving promptly on Friday night
- More reliable
- They want to work
- Better at sales

Source: National Association of Master Bakers

Welcoming older workers

Burbidge welcomes the older workforce. He believes that if older people stay active, they will stay young and healthy and benefit employers, too. "I think people prefer to be served by someone who is more elderly, because there's a respect there." He acknowledges there is a need to be healthy in a retail bakery environment because "there is a lot of walking around", but adds: "People should not be farmed off at 65."

Beaneys has one female member of staff who is 66. Owner Chris Beaney says he is happy for her to carry on working. He has had drivers working the odd day for him beyond 65 and he has heard, anecdotally through the trade, of some bakers working



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into their 70s. "Most of our shop staff are mature women who work two or three mornings and, in the bakery, we've got two or three men coming up to 65 and we have to make a decision what to do about that in the next couple of years.

He adds: "Older people have a way of working that sometimes youngsters need time to grow into."

Double-edged sword

Beaney says that it is important to retain some older people, because their good practices rub off on other workers. However, he does have worries because he says the older people get, the slower they become and he is concerned that fewer opportunities might exist for younger people as a result.

Age UK denies this. Michelle Mitchell, charity director, says: "There is not a shred of evidence that younger workers will suffer because of this change in policy." She says demographic changes over the next 10 years will result in fewer young people entering the workforce and chasing promotions, and many employees reaching their 60s choose to change jobs, downsize or go part-time, leaving plenty of openings for their younger counterparts.

But Beaney has known many bakers who have kept staff for 20 years. "They get to 65 together and they then find they are not so

capable and there is no one to run the business. I have known some close down, because they do not have a production line of young people coming in."

Gill Brooks-Lonican, the 66-year-old chief executive of the National Association of Master Bakers, says: "The problem that will occur now is, yes you can be 68 or 72 and really fit and active, but people do deteriorate and get slower and the rest of the staff start to take exception if they have to carry them.

"Employers will feel trapped into keeping older workers. It is very difficult to say, 'I will get rid of them by going down the capability route'. People don't want to do

Forced retirement

Figures published by the Department for Business Innovation & Skills show the benefits of scrapping forced retirement far outweigh the costs for employers.

In the first year after the default age is scrapped, employers are set to gain £45m, making savings on administrative and policy costs and a cut to retirement red tape, against estimated costs of £38.2m. While these are one-off costs, the savings will continue far into the future, rising to £71m annually after a decade.

Four out of five requests to continue working past retirement age are accepted.

that to someone they have employed for 30 years or more."

The Age Employment Network (TAEN), which works to promote an effective labour market that serves the needs of people in mid- and later life, as well as employers and the economy, says 13% of the total UK workforce currently works beyond 65. Chris Ball, chief executive, believes this will be 50% in the next 10-15 years.

He says that even if there are some aspects of the job older workers cannot do, there will be elements that they can do and employers must make adjustments to accommodate. "We need the skills, knowledge and ability of older people. Cutting people off at the knees when they reach 65 is daft. If there is a genuine fear about health and safety issues, the employer should make risk assessments and, if someone is not up to doing the job, then they shouldn't do it."

Ball says the safety of machinery should not depend on the acrobatic skills of the employee to get out of the way. "Employers must do all the things they would normally do to make sure they are properly trained for the job and properly protected and, if there is a hazard, you either remove or isolate it. If there is an individual who will not be suitable for a particular type of job, you don't employ them for that job." Ball believes younger workers who are naïve and not trained are more of a risk. BB