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The working lives of older hotel workers: is there evidence of psychological disengagement in the work-to-retirement transition zone?

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1. Introduction

It is well known that the hospitality industry faces recruitment problems, with high levels of labour turnover (Poulston, 2008). Given population ageing, it is important that the industry recruits and retains older workers. Older workers are likely to become increasingly important to the hospitality industry as the number of older workers in employment in the UK has almost doubled since 1993 (ONS, 2012). The Hospitality Industry relies heavily on older workers. In the Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants sector of the UK economy, 34% of the labour force is aged 50+, a higher percentage than any other industrial sector except for Public Administration, Education & Health (DWP, 2013). Therefore, given the reliance on older workers, it is important that the Hospitality Industry understands the nature of older worker employment and the management of the work-to-retirement transition, an issue made even more pertinent since the abolition of the Statutory Retirement Age in 2011. Although Age Discrimination legislation was introduced in the UK in 2006, a survey of hospitality businesses by Martin and Gardiner (2007) established that ageism was considered a problem.

In the UK, about two thirds of older workers are employed on a part-time basis (ONS, 2012). Older women are less likely to be in work than older men. The employment rate for men aged 50-54 is 83% compared to 77% for women whilst the

employment rate for men aged 55-59 is 77% compared to 68% for women (DWP, 2013). Considerable regional variations exist in terms of older workers employed in the UK, ranging from 14.1% for the South East of England to 8.2% for North East England (ONS, 2012).

A commonly-held stereotype of older workers is that they are less interested in work as they approach retirement. This exploratory study examines the working lives of “older” hotel workers aged fifty and above to examine if there is evidence to suggest that these workers experience disengagement as they approach retirement. The disengagement theory of ageing was used as a lens to analyse the data gathered to assess the evidence for disengagement from work. It is the intention of this paper to examine disengagement by using Pech and Slade’s 2006 model regarding potential sources of employee disengagement. According to Pech and Slade (2006), potential sources and causes of employee disengagement include the external environment, psychological, organisational and other.

2. Retirement

According to Sargeant (2007, p.105), retirement relates to an employee leaving a particular workforce. Retirement may represent an abrupt change in a person’s life (Costa, 2008, p.6), leading to a radical break for the individual where “he is entirely cut off from his past and he has to adapt himself to a new status” (de Beauvoir, 1972, p.262). Curnow and McLean-Fox (1994) state that retirement is akin to bereavement where the individual experiences deep, personal and real loss. However, it is important to consider whether retirement is undertaken on a voluntary basis by the individual as this may be “better” for the person than when the decision is forced upon the individual (Brink, 1979).

Attitudes to retirement in the UK have, for over a hundred years, been closely related to the demand for labour and changes in employment (McGoldrick and Cooper, 1988). There are, according to Sargeant (2010, p. 247-248) two explanations for the growth in the use of retirement: increasing availability of pensions for older people and a decrease in demand for older employees. The 2010 report “Pathways to retirement: The influence of employer policy and practice on employment decisions” by Gareth Morrell and Rosalind Tennant, recognises a number of different retirement

ages, namely the Compulsory Retirement Age (the age at which an employee has to retire), the Default Retirement Age (usually at the age of 65, unless the employer can justify a lower age) and the Normal Retirement Age (the age at which it may be normal for a person to retire). In 2011, the UK Government announced changes to the retirement legislation making it unlawful for companies to compulsorily retire employees (BBC News, 2011).

A survey by the CIPD in July 2010 on the ageing workforce revealed that 42% of employees plan on working beyond the state retirement age with the main reasons being financial (72%), wanting to continue using skills and experience (47%), social interaction (41%) and self-esteem (34%). This survey also uncovered the measures that would encourage the employee to work past the state retirement age. The top four answers were more money (43%), flexible working arrangements (28%), more varied, interesting work (21%) and a deferred, larger state pension (16%).

From a societal perspective, there are advantages of people staying in work, such as increased tax revenue for the government (Robinson, Gosling and Lewis, 2005, p. 2). Phased retirement means that an employee remains with the employer whilst gradually reducing work-hours and effort (Hutchens and Grace-Martin, 2006, p.525; Hill, 2010, p. 29). There are undoubtedly many employees who would like to change their working patterns before they retire, thereby facilitating a gradual transition to retirement (Curnow and McLean Fox, 1994). The benefits of phased retirement to individuals are well documented. These include lower levels of stress, having more free time and the ability to facilitate transition into retirement (Leslie, 2005). Indeed, as de Beauvoir (1972: 262) points out, "A gradual retirement would certainly be less hurtful than the "sudden chop"". However, it seems that phased retirement is the exception rather than the rule with relatively few people making the phased transition from work to retirement (Romans, 2007)

3. Employee Disengagement

Whilst disengagement has been examined in other industries (for example, education and transportation), a review of research on employee disengagement reveals that no specific research examining employee disengagement in the

hospitality industry exists, although there is a considerable body of knowledge that focuses on employee commitment in the hospitality industry (for example Silva, 2006; He and Li and Keung, 2011; Lun and Huang, 2007; Bashir and Nasir, 2013).

Literature on disengagement in relation to ageing is diverse (Niessen, Binnewies & Rank, 2010). Disengagement theory may relate to disengagement from society (e.g. Tavel, 2008), one's career (e.g. Super, 1957) or from employment (e.g. Hewitt, 2009). This paper focuses on disengagement from career and employment, rather than from society. According to Hochschild (1975), ageing has to do with the individual's passage through psycho-biological stages whereas disengagement has to do with individual changes in social position (p. 562-563).

Disengagement theory arose from the pessimistic gerontological assumption that individuals would need to adjust from a life centred around work to a socially-impoverished future (Blaikie, 1999: 61). Retirement from work would therefore result in a disengagement from society, leading to isolation, illness and unhappiness (Cumming and Henry, 1961, in Mein, Higgs, Ferrie and Stansfield, 1998: 536). According to Cumming, Dean, Newell and McCaffrey (1960), disengagement would begin during the sixth decade of a person's life when a shift would take place to reflect withdrawal of psychic energy on a single goal and the start of anticipated socialisation to the new aged state. The theory is built on the assumption that some people want to isolate themselves socially, thereby reducing social contacts (Tavel, 2008).

There has been much criticism of disengagement theory. For example, Hochschild (1975) states that the theory, as proposed by Cumming and Henry in 1961, suffers from three problems: the theory is unfalsifiable; the theory is not a unitary process and the theory ignores the meanings attached to what actors do. Similarly, Bond, Briggs and Coleman (1990) criticise disengagement theory because it implies that disengagement is desirable and therefore supports a policy of unconcern for older people; some older people remain engaged throughout their lives and there are methodological shortcomings in how the data was presented in Cumming and Henry's (1961) *Growing Old*.

Despite these shortcomings, some authors have suggested that disengagement theory is a useful tool for examining older peoples' lives. For example, Crawford

(1971) has stated that disengagement is a viable and useful concept, grounded in reality in the way in which ageing people see their lives. Moreover, disengagement theory has been used in contemporary research. For example, Desmette and Gaillard (2008), on examining the effects of age-related social identity on attitudes towards retirement and work, found that the decline of older workers' interest in their job may be understood as coping by devaluing the domain where they are stigmatized. (p. 171). Furthermore, Ng and Feldman (2007), in their study of organizational and occupational embeddedness across career stages, found that older individuals in the disengagement stage may want to spend more time with children or grandchildren, traveling, in leisure pursuits, or simply relaxing. (p. 344). Research undertaken by Damman, Henkens, and Kalmijn (2013) on disengagement in late career found that older workers can be expected to vary in their levels of late-career work disengagement, according to their opportunity structure in the preretirement period and the associated perceived costs and returns of work activities and investments (p. 456). Moreover, work disengagement can be expected to be related to career experiences like position changes, promotions, and employer changes, because these experiences affect the (perceived) opportunity structure in preretirement years. (p. 457)

Research conducted by McEvoy and Blahna (2001) on older employees in transportation departments in the USA, based on interviews with 48 employees, identified three themes of older worker disengagement: lack of respect from, and disagreements with, upper management; changed educational requirements and lack of recognition of older workers' skills (p.48). McEvoy and Blahna (2001, p. 50) state that, in order to ensure the continued commitment of older workers, the organisation will need to provide challenging work environments; give older workers greater autonomy; provide equal access to training; recognise an older person's wisdom, skills and experience; provide mentoring opportunities; ensure that older workers are effectively supervised and ensure a working environment that is both fun and stimulating.

4. Research Methodology

In order to address the research question, a qualitative design approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nineteen older hotel

workers in the UK. A semi structured interview approach was used to collect data. A non-probability sampling method was adopted whereby individuals were selected based on the willingness of the Human Resource Manager to cooperate with the researcher and to allow the researcher to interview older workers in the hotel. Nineteen semi-structured interviews with hotel employees were held in five hotels in the UK. These hotels were located in Belfast, Bristol, Cambridge and Bournemouth (2). The smallest hotel had 42 rooms and was an independent room whilst the biggest hotel had 161 rooms and was part of a hotel chain. Two of the other hotels were part of a consortium and the fifth was part of a hotel chain (a different chain to the 161 room hotel).

Where possible, interviews were recorded and transcripts produced. Where, in a small number of cases, the employee did not wish to be recorded, detailed notes were taken. Interviewees were asked a range of questions relating to their work including their job, their views on being an “older” worker, training, promotion, retirement and ageism. The term “disengagement” was not used in any of the questions. Of the nineteen people interviewed, three held a management position in the hotel.

The transcripts were analysed using a three stage “matrix” approach as recommended for qualitative data analysis by Nadin and Cassell (2004). Stage 1 used the data matrix to structure the rich transcript source data. In Stage 2, matrices were used to condense the data around the key analytic themes. In Stage 3, analysis was conducted on a between-case basis to explore the range and diversity of meanings of engagement and disengagement according to different criteria such as gender and complexity of job role.

5. Findings

5. 1. Evidence of disengagement in relation to the external environment

Pech and Slade (2006) state that there are two factors that affect disengagement in relation to the external environment: instability and insecurity. An analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that none of the interviewees mentioned either of these two factors.

5. 2. Evidence of psychological disengagement

There was little to suggest that work was not meaningful. One older worker had worked in the same hotel for 37 years and was still enjoying her job. Another employee stated that he would rather keep on working than retire. A male older hotel worker commented that:

“What I like about working here is that you see the customers. They always remember you when they come back again. Basically working with people. Work is part of my social life”.

This demonstrates the importance of social contact in a work setting and the importance of serving customers. There was little evidence of older workers not feeling valued or trusted and a strong sense that employees identified with the hotel. For example, according to a male worker:

“Work keeps you in touch with things. It’s an identity. Whenever I’ve been out of work I lose my identity”.

Furthermore, older hotel workers did not feel they were treated inequitably because of their age. As one female worker commented:

“Age doesn’t matter at all. There are the same opportunities at any age. All the staff have a PDP. This is worked out with their line manager. You have the opportunity to do any training you want.”

The majority of older workers were interested in being trained and this can be viewed as a form of continued engagement. A female worker commented that:

“If we put in a new computer system we get fully trained. I’m interested in training. Being at work you learn something new every day”.

Whilst many older hotel workers commented that they worked long or unsociable hours, there was no evidence of workers feeling undue stress or anxiety. There was, however, evidence to suggest that older hotel workers may reduce their working hours. This can be viewed as a form of psychological disengagement. For example, a male worker stated:

“If you’re fit enough, they’ll keep you working. I do 3 days. I think they’ll cut me down to 2 days. I’ll be happy with that”

5. 3. Evidence of organisational disengagement

The majority of older workers seemed content with their job and place of work. Rather than the organisation disengaging from its workers, according to the older workers in the sample, managers continued to engage with older staff, recognising their skills, experience and knowledge. However, a male employee thought that some employers didn’t look at anyone over 26 years of age. None of the older workers mentioned poor working conditions, poor management or leadership, poor resourcing, acceptance and tolerance of low outputs or the work being too complex.

5. 4. Evidence of other disengagement

The key area of other disengagement was retirement. For some, retirement was a release from work. For example, a female employee stated:

“I can’t wait (to retire). If I had enough money I’d do it now”

Another female worker said that:

“I am tired and I would love to stop work. Much as I love the job, I’d like to retire. But there are financial constraints”

However, for many more older workers, retirement was viewed negatively, as the following comments demonstrate:

“It’s not good to give up work completely, especially for men. It’s ok if you want to play golf all day”
(Male)

“I’m terrified of it (retirement). I’m going to work till I drop. I’m going to do lots of activities. The thought of cavernous days ahead of me plumping up cushions is terrible. Work is what I am”.
(Female)

“At the moment I don’t want to retire. I will retire after I’m 62. I’ll probably work till I’m 65. Because there’s lots of things about work I like”.
(Female)

6. Conclusion

The results of this research suggest that there is little evidence to suggest that older hotel workers disengage with work as they approach retirement. To the contrary, older hotel workers continue engaging with the world of work and many view retirement not as a release from work but as a stage of uncertainty and anxiety. Disengagement theory, therefore, has little explanatory power in explaining the commitment of older hotel workers to employment as they approach retirement. However, as this is an exploratory study, more research would need to be undertaken to give a fuller picture of older worker disengagement in the hospitality industry. A more complete understanding would be achieved by interviewing a greater number of older hotel workers, not just in the UK but elsewhere, or applying a quantitative research methodology similar to the one used by Damman, Henkens and Kalmijn (2013).

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