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Getting on in the BBC: a case study of older workers

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ABSTRACT

National (and international) trends in the employment of older workers show a decline in the economic participation of older people, and especially older men, since the 1970s, and general evidence of age discrimination in the workplace. This case study of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) examines statistical patterns in the fortunes of staff aged 50 years and over in a company with good reason to buck the trends. The BBC is a large, publicly-funded, equal opportunities employer endeavouring to reflect a diverse nation in its staff composition. The research is in two parts. First, we carried out a comparison at five-year intervals of the age profile of the Corporation and observed trends in official retirement at age 60 and the employment of staff working beyond retirement age, from 1978 to 1993. Secondly, an age-related analysis of departures, recruitment and part-time working was undertaken for a 12-month period, from 1992 to 1993.

The research revealed the increasing marginalisation of older workers at the BBC. This accelerated during a period of substantial contraction in the latter part of the 15-year study period and led to an age profile far younger than in other public sectors such as Local Government. Pressures to become 'lean and efficient' appeared to have been at the expense of older workers, who were unprotected in the workplace.

KEY WORDS – Older workers, age discrimination, early retirement, redundancy, recruitment, public service broadcasting, media.

Introduction

Older workers have withdrawn from the labour force in the UK at progressively younger ages since the 1970s. Studies have shown them to be disadvantaged, implicitly in the recruitment, redundancy and early retirement process, as well as explicitly in the form of enforced retirement ages. Meanwhile, there has been a growth in part-time working which would appear to suit the older population.

Research on older workers has tended to concentrate, first, on macro

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labour force data documenting shifts in older worker employment over time and, secondly, on their position in specific sectors, or unnamed companies, at one point in time. There is a paucity of case study material which examines older people working for a particular employer over a decade or more. This study charts the participation of staff aged 50 years and over in a large UK public sector company, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), during a 15-year period of expansion followed by contraction.

From the 1970s on, many large companies in the UK were targeting older staff for early exit in their attempts to 'slim down' their workforce. The BBC – one of the world's most powerful public service broadcasters – had good reason to be the exception. First, it is publicly funded by a universal licence fee and so directly accountable to its audiences. Second, as the largest programme-maker in the UK, it is committed to informative, entertaining and educational output that is of interest and relevance to all age groups. Third, it has a stated mission to employ a diverse workforce to reflect a diverse (and ageing) nation. And, finally, it is an equal opportunities employer which has begun to address age equality in the workplace.

The central research question of this study is whether this large and influential organisation had retained a balanced workforce, in terms of age, during the 15-year period. The BBC was a semi-unionised organisation with a high proportion of long-serving staff and a secure pension fund. Had the company followed national trends in targeting older staff for early exit during a time of substantial contraction? Or had it kept faith with its commitment to reflect in its workforce the nation it served? The study also examined several subsidiary questions on recruitment, redundancy and part-time working among older people over a fixed 12-month period.

The study and its methodology

Definitions

Older workers are defined for the purposes of this study as people in employment aged 50 years and over, 50 being the threshold for early retirement at the BBC. Age discrimination in the workplace is defined as any restriction on a person's ability to work due to age, whether direct, such as a specific and enforced retirement age, or indirect, 'measures which are not directly age-specific, but which have a disproportionately negative impact on older workers, compared with other age groups' (Drury 1993: 13). Redundancy is defined in law as

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the cessation of employment due to the need for fewer people to do work of a particular kind, or the end or reduction of a job or business for which a person has been employed. Early retirement is defined as retirement before the statutory age of 65 for men and 60 for women.

Methodology

Literature. After examining national and some international literature, a detailed review took place of information available at the BBC. The debate over the renewal of the BBC's Charter in the early 1990s had led to a raft of published discussion documents about the future of the Corporation, not only from policy and media experts outside the BBC but also from working groups within it. The Corporation's Annual Reports and Accounts were available for the relevant years of this study, and included references to employment policy and practice. In addition, a number of in-house magazines had touched on the subject of age equality, including *Ariel*, the BBC's weekly Corporation-wide publication, and *EqualiTV*, an occasional staff newsletter on workplace equality issues within BBC Television.

Human resources data. Data for the quantitative study came from Central Office Post and Personnel Records (COPPER), the BBC's personnel database containing details of permanent and fixed-term contract staff, full- and part-time. The database covers the whole of the BBC, with the exception of BBC Enterprises, the commercial arm of the BBC which, as a separate company, keeps its own records. The study thus included BBC Television and Radio; the National Regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the Open University Production Centre; and the World Service.

There are two parts to the study. The first involves a historical analysis of three sets of data: company employee age profiles; retirements at the BBC's official age of 60; and the employment of staff beyond this retirement age. Five-year intervals, over a 15-year period, were taken as benchmarks for comparison 1978, 1983, 1988 and 1993. This period was regarded as sufficient to allow revealing comparisons whilst remaining a realistic and practical goal for the purposes of the research. The second part of the study, covering a 12-month period from 1992 to 1993, concentrated on age-related patterns of departures, arrivals and part-time working.

This complementary and over-lapping research, which took place in 1994/95, provides a unique insight into the position of older workers in a major UK institution. However, the study is not without its

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limitations. Firstly, no information was available on people working for the BBC on a freelance, casual or sub-contracting basis. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some experienced producers and technicians had taken redundancy or early retirement, and then returned to the BBC as independent programme-makers, advisers or consultants. No recording system was in place to track this flow of talent and expertise at the time of data collection. This was a serious gap in a study of older workers, especially in an industry with a high proportion of freelancers (Woolf and Holly 1994). Secondly, no historical information was available on the recruitment of older workers or their reasons for leaving the Corporation. In an organisation as large and complex as the BBC, it is unlikely that the 12 months to October 1993, the period for which data was available, was representative of earlier years. It is regrettable that the study could not chart trends in redundancy or early retirement. The lack of such age-specific data is significant in itself and indicative, it could be argued, of the status of age in the human resource equation. The BBC's collation of personnel information, whilst increasingly sophisticated, tends to adhere to the conventional priorities of monitoring gender, race and disability.

Background: trends in economic participation

This section will examine briefly trends in the economic participation of older workers and, more specifically, patterns in early exit, recruitment and part-time working. This will provide a backdrop to the study of the BBC.

Older workers, and particularly older men, have been increasingly inactive in the labour market in Great Britain. Their departure from paid work since the 1970s, at progressively younger ages (Bone *et al.* 1992), has rendered the statutory retirement age of 65 years virtually obsolete (Varlaam and Bevan 1987; Kohli *et al.* 1991; Trinder *et al.* 1992; Institute of Personnel Management 1993). An analysis at five-year intervals of Labour Force Survey data in Great Britain, to match those years selected for this case study, shows an overall decline in all male economic activity between 1978 and 1993, but especially among those aged 55 to 64. Rates among women of all ages, meanwhile, although lower overall, grew steadily from the 1970s, particularly among females aged 25 to 34. These trends were true not only for Great Britain but also for other industrialised countries such as Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1994; Moore *et al.* 1994).

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Economic activity rates are of limited use in a case study of company employees such as this, since figures include the self-employed, those on Government employment and training programmes and unemployed people available for work. It is arguable whether employment rates provide a more accurate national picture, since they also include the self-employed and those on Government schemes. Moreover they are more sensitive to fluctuations in the economy from which the BBC is protected, in the short-term, by its Licence Fee funding. Nevertheless, published rates taken from Labour Force Surveys in Great Britain provide equally conclusive evidence of rising female employment, particularly in the 25 to 59 age groups, and declining employment for men aged 50 to 64 (Trinder *et al.* 1992: 5; Department of Employment 1995).

The push and pull of early exit

This premature withdrawal of older men from the labour force has been brought about by a combination of governmental, organisational and individual factors.

Influences of the state. The Redundancy Payments Act (1965), introduced to ease workers out of declining industries, had resulted, by the 1970s, in the targeting of older workers for early exit, especially in large firms, where voluntary rather than compulsory severance was the norm (Daniel 1985; Trinder 1989). This was due in part to their prevalence in shrinking industries, but in the main to financial inducements which rewarded length of service and thus age (Jolly 1980; Trinder 1989; Laczko and Phillipson 1990; Harris 1991).

The lack of age discrimination legislation in the UK has been cited by some authors as having left older workers exposed and unprotected (e.g. Laczko and Phillipson 1990). Others believe such legislation has had a limited influence in other countries and would be an unsuitable vehicle for extending the working life of older people here (Drury 1993; Moore *et al.* 1994). A strong argument has been made by Worsley (1995; 1996) however, for the deterrent effect of an age equality statute. Its very existence may not only raise awareness but may make a positive statement about society's expectations.

Influences within the organisation. Traditionally, early retirement was reserved largely for older workers in declining health (Trinder 1989; Laczko and Phillipson 1991; Bone *et al.* 1992). A number of studies in the 1980s and early 1990s found that it had evolved into a flexible and

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uncontentious management device to 'downsize', restructure and reorganise (Atkinson 1985; Varlaam and Bevan 1987; Casey 1992; Itzin and Phillipson 1993). A 1990 postal survey of private companies found that early retirement was more likely to take place in larger organisations, where personnel policies were more advanced and the staff more unionised (Thompson 1991).

Influences of the individual. The degree to which older workers have been willing players in this exodus from secure employment is uncertain. Departing from an organisation in the throes of fundamental change may come as a welcome relief to long-serving staff (McGoldrick and Cooper 1988; Itzin and Phillipson 1993), or as an anticipated right (Thompson 1991). More than 70% of men in McGoldrick and Cooper's study of early retirement said they had gladly left ahead of the normal departure age. They also found evidence, however, of subtle pressures being exerted on these so-called volunteers by management, unions and colleagues.

Since the 1950s there has been a rise in membership of occupational pension schemes (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1994), especially in large companies and for men with long and continuous service. This has made early exit more feasible financially (Atkinson 1985; Bone *et al*. 1992; Trinder *et al*. 1992; Incomes Data Services 1993).

Recruitment

A number of studies have found evidence of widespread age discrimination in recruitment (Jolly *et al*. 1980; Gallup 1990; Institute of Personnel Management 1993; Equal Opportunities Commission 1993; Taylor and Walker 1993; Arrowsmith and McGoldrick 1994). The Eurobarometer Survey found that eight out of ten people in the UK thought people aged 50 and over suffered discrimination in recruitment (Walker 1993). The figure for the European Union was almost the same.

An extensive study of mature and older workers in local government undertaken by Itzin and Phillipson (1993) concluded that there were substantial barriers to the employment of older workers. Their findings are of particular relevance to the BBC, sharing as it does a position in the public sector and a notable track record in equal opportunity initiatives. To a limited extent, their recent histories have run in tandem: local authorities implemented substantial staff cuts between 1979 and 1992 under a climate of financial constraint, privatisation of

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services and the introduction of the internal market. This study also included a survey of attitudes to older workers, completed by line managers. This found that age was a consideration in the selection of candidates for jobs. Even those local authorities noted for good practice in the employment of older workers gave age a low priority. Case studies of eleven such authorities found age at the bottom of a 'hierarchy of oppressions' after gender, race and disability (Itzin and Phillipson 1993: 15).

In another study, younger personnel managers saw older workers in a less favourable light, implying a vicious circle of discrimination: the younger the age profile of a company, the greater the degree of discrimination against older staff (Institute of Personnel Management 1993).

Other studies highlight a 'double bind' effect towards older workers: they are lauded for their loyalty, productivity and reliability, yet they are also seen as cautious, inflexible and uninterested in technological change (Trinder *et al.* 1992; Taylor and Walker 1994). This is despite the fact that ageism in the workplace is officially condemned (Institute of Personnel Management 1991; Department of Employment 1994*a*).

Part-time working

A number of reports and articles have highlighted the popularity of part-time work among older people, and its use in attracting and retaining them as members of staff (IPM/KPMG 1990; Thompson 1991; Dibden and Hibbett 1993; Walker 1993; Fyock 1994; Department of Employment 1994*a*). Part-time working has risen in the British workforce as a whole since the 1970s (Department of Employment 1994*b*; Watson 1994). It has also grown among older workers (Department of Employment 1992; Trinder *et al.* 1992; Taylor and Walker 1995; Lange and Atkinson 1995). Rates of part-time working were high for women of all ages and, over the age of 50, they are more likely to be part-time than full-time. Part-time working is rare for most men of working age. However, rates increase sharply at 65 years (Department of Employment 1993: LFS1; Tillsley 1995).

The BBC in profile

How, then, did these national and international trends of the last 20 years apply to an organisation like the BBC? Financed by a universal, flat-rate Licence Fee paid by viewers, the BBC received in 1992 an

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income of more than £1,800 million (including World Service). Its services included two national television channels; five national radio stations; 39 local radio stations; a world-wide radio network; expanding interests in world-wide television; and a growing market share in magazine, video and audio publishing (BBC 1993*a*).

During the 15-year study period, the BBC initially expanded its workforce and then contracted rapidly by several thousand staff in the final years. This was the result of a number of inter-related factors: a changing broadcasting environment; a squeeze on income; and a Conservative administration promoting privatisation, competition and the free market.

Contraction

The BBC's position had been relatively secure until the mid-1980s (Oliver 1993). Its Licence Fee income had been rising annually as more viewers switched from the cheaper black and white to the more costly colour licences. Its audience share in radio and television was large and relatively stable. But the broadcasting world was changing. Channel Four had produced a viable independent production sector which was leaner and, in many instances, equally innovative. Independent radio stations were proliferating, and satellite and cable operations were promising to offer a wide range of competitive services to challenge the existing terrestrial set-up (Graham and Davies 1990; Maddox and Collins 1990; Boulton 1991; Green 1991; Hopson 1992).

The Broadcasting Act (1990) forced the BBC to commission a quarter of its non-news programmes from the independent production sector, starting on January 1st, 1993. This led to a substantial dismantling of in-house facilities and an extension in the use of flexible short-term and freelance contracts (Oliver 1993). Coupled with growing competition and legislative change came a flattening income, due to Government restrictions on Licence Fee increases. In a new political climate, the BBC was accused of inefficiency, over-manning and wastefulness. Its position alongside ITV companies in particular (the 'fat cats' of industry) and the public sector generally ('unaccountable' and 'out of control'), exposed the BBC to growing debate over its Licence Fee funding, internal structures and core purpose (Milne 1988; Milligan 1991; Cain 1992; Congdon *et al.* 1992; Department of National Heritage 1992; Barnett and Curry 1994; Horrie and Clarke 1994).

Transparent demonstrations of efficiency were particularly important to the BBC in the run-up to the renewal of its Royal Charter

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in 1996, a process which began within the organisation as early as 1991 (Ariel 1991). The BBC's solution to growing financial pressures was the introduction in April 1993 of the internal market, termed 'Producer Choice'. The effect of this, and of earlier one-off cost-cutting initiatives, 'Priorities for the Future' in 1985 and 'Funding the Future' in 1989, was the departure of growing numbers of staff through redundancies and early retirements.

Equal opportunities

In addition to, and in many ways in conflict with, these economic and governmental pressures were personnel considerations. The BBC was committed to being an equal opportunities employer. Its policies for promoting women within the organisation included the setting of gender ratio targets for senior managers; for ethnic minorities, the creation of a multi-cultural programmes department; and for disabled people, the setting up of a disability programmes unit. The driving force behind these equal opportunity initiatives was not a shortage of recruits. Rather, it was a response to growing legal and social obligations, following a number of industrial tribunal test cases, and to a realisation that staff composition affected creative output. The more diverse its workforce, the more its radio and television channels could cater to the requirements of the nation. The BBC published its aim as:

> The BBC has a firm commitment to achieving equality of opportunity for all by reflecting the nation it serves in the composition of its workforce, by the year 2000. (BBC 1993*b*: 3.9)

The wider notion of accountability, of the BBC mirroring a diverse nation, was endorsed by the BBC's Director-General, John Birt. In his 1993 address for the Royal Television Society's Fleming Memorial Lecture, he said:

> During my time as director-general I will fight for…a BBC which serves, represents and understand the needs of the whole nation. (Ariel 1993: S8)

The BBC acknowledged that this was an ageing nation where older viewers and listeners were heavy users of television and radio services (Hemming 1988; Owen 1989). In its opening contribution to the Charter renewal debate, embodied in the policy document 'Extending Choice', the Corporation placed broadcasting firmly at the heart of British society. It saw its duty as one of reflecting forces as diverse as 'the progressive ageing of the population and the increasing proportion of people who are retired or semi-retired.' (BBC 1992: 9). In that same policy document, the BBC stated:

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The structure and composition of the broadcasting industry, the purpose and motivation of the broadcasters, and the programmes and services that they offer are vital factors in reflecting and shaping that society. (*Ibid*: 9)

The following year, in its response to the Government's Green Paper on the Corporation's own future, the BBC went further in its commitment to serve its Licence Fee paying public. Principal objectives included:

…to provide radio and television services that are created solely with the needs of the viewer and listener in mind…
…to serve the interests of audiences in all regions of the UK and to reflect their diversity to the nation as a whole…
…to be fully and directly accountable to the licence paying public.
(BBC 1993: 17)

Age equality, redundancy and early retirement

An internal report as far back as the mid-1980s found that ageism, especially among women, was widespread in the BBC (Sims 1985). Initiatives on age since that time had included removing age limits from recruitment adverts and covering ageism in recruitment training courses (BBC 1994: 3). For more than 55 years, the BBC had offered pre-retirement courses for staff (BBC 1990: 77). In 1991, the BBC's equal opportunities statement was amended to include disability and age.

The BBC's policy for handling redundancies during its contraction rewarded length of service and so was of most benefit to older workers (BBC 1987: 59). For instance, staff made redundant during 1992–93, the year for which exit data was available, received one month's salary for every year of service, up to a maximum of 24 years. The BBC was also able to offer generous early retirement deals for those leaving before the 'normal' age of 60, and a good occupational pension. Since 1974, BBC pension increases had matched annual inflation to within 0.5% each year, ensuring a secure income in retirement.

Findings from the empirical study of records of staff

The first part of this section examines historical trends in the age distribution of the workforce, official retirement at age 60, and staff working beyond retirement age, from 1978 to 1993. The results show a stark decline in the presence of staff aged 50 years and over. The

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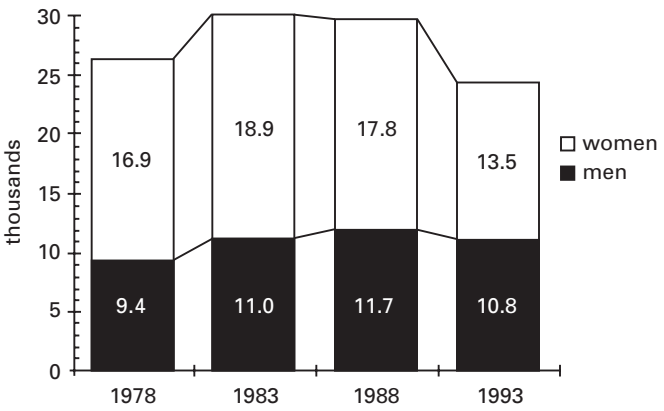


Figure 1. BBC staff numbers at 5-year intervals, 1978 to 1993

second part looks at departures, recruitment and part-time working for a more limited 12-month period, from November 1st 1992, to October 31st 1993. This reveals age as a key determinant of when and how staff left, and whether any members of their age cohort were recruited. Part-time working was relatively rare, influenced by gender and age, and limited almost exclusively to the most junior positions in the BBC. Finally, gender was found to be an important variable.

Historical trends and comparisons: 1978 to 1993

Company employee age profiles. Staff numbers reached a peak between the two benchmark years of 1983 and 1988, at 30,959 in 1985 (BBC 1985). Eight years later in 1993, numbers were down by more than 6000, to 24,258 (Figure 1). How did older workers fare during this time? Analysis of the data shows their proportions dwindling steadily. In 1978, more than a fifth of all staff was aged 50 and over. This had fallen to a tenth by 1993. Figure 2 shows the downward trend in relative numbers of older workers at five-year intervals. The pace of change started slowly, accelerating after 1988.

By 1993, the BBC was a youth-dominated enterprise. How typical was this of other organisations, and most notably, other media outlets or public sectors? In the early 1990s, such comparisons were hampered by a near-total absence of comparable case study data. No information was available on other media organisations and research on other public sectors was limited to the study of mature and older workers in local authorities, by Itzin and Phillipson (1993). This study was

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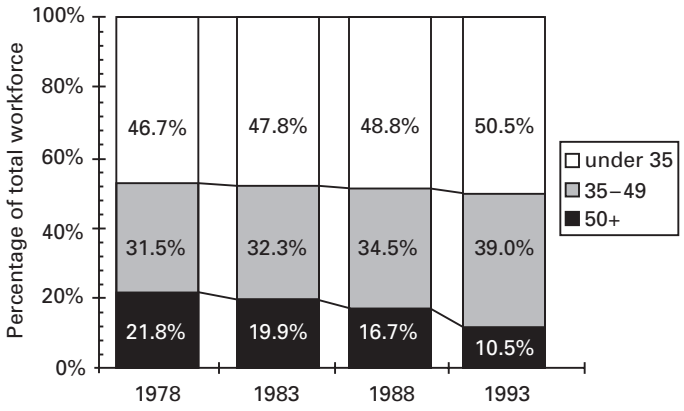


Figure 2. Age profile of BBC staff numbers at 5-year intervals, 1978 to 1993

conducted in 1992 for the Metropolitan Authorities Recruitment Agency (METRA), and information was obtained on local government in England and Wales only. Data for the BBC, on the other hand, was for 1993 and included Northern Ireland, Scotland and the World Service. The two public sectors differed in the functions they performed, and for this reason, it was felt more relevant to compare the BBC data with METRA figures for Administrative, Professional, Technical and Clerical staff (APT&C) only, since they were more comparable to posts typical of the BBC. There were also major differences in the size and composition of the respective workforces. The sampled local authorities had a total of 246,754 staff (APT&C) against the BBC's 24,258, and a greater proportion of women and part-timers than the BBC. Finally, it is important to note that the standard retirement age was 65 for men and women in most local authorities (Itzin and Phillipson 1993: 27) and 60 in the BBC. This, inevitably, affected the distribution of staff in the 60 plus age range.

There were, however, notable similarities between the two sectors. Like the BBC, local government had developed progressive equal opportunities policies; introduced internal market mechanisms; contracted out services; reduced the number of full-time jobs; and used redundancy and early retirement to cut staff numbers.

A comparison of relative age distributions between these two public sectors for 1992–93 shows significant differences (Table 1). The most noticeable feature is the large proportion of 25–39 year-olds in the BBC. This peak towers over the hump-like age distribution for local government. Older staff were far less prominent in the BBC as a

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TABLE 1. *Distribution of staff in local authorities and the BBC by age, 1992–93*

Ages	Local Authorities*	BBC**
	%	
Under 25	9·5	7·3
25–39	38·2	58·5
40–49	30·7	23·7
50–59	17·3	10·0
60–65	3·9	0·4
Over 65	0·4	0·1
Total (= 100%)	246,750	24,300

* Itzin and Phillipson Survey, APT&C staff.
** BBC Records at 31 October, 1993.

percentage of total staff, than in local authorities: around 11% for 50 and over in the BBC against 22% in local authorities.

Staff aged 60 *and over*. A comparison over the fifteen years of the numbers of employees taking 'normal' retirement provides a measure of the status of older workers in the Corporation. Data on premature retirement (at the BBC's request) and voluntary early retirement (at an individual's) was unavailable before 1992. Retirement at age 60 fell fourfold as an exit route at the BBC from 1983. Fewer than 100 people retired at 60 in 1993, representing 2.2% of all departures in that year. In many parts of the BBC, such as television and radio output, retiring at 60 was rare. In certain central departments, such as personnel, policy, finance and legal affairs, no-one had reached retirement age.

The BBC's standard retirement age for men and women is 60. However, for certain staff on weekly pay grades, such as cleaners, catering assistants and security officers, the BBC operated a degree of discretion, mainly up to age 65. Numbers of staff on the payroll beyond the retirement age of 60 contracted at an even faster rate than for those aged 50 plus (Figure 3). In 1978, around 900 staff were over the age of 60, representing 3.4% of the total workforce. This had dropped to 86 staff in 1993, a mere 0.35% of staff.

BBC departures, arrivals and part-time working: 1992–93

Departures. The study included an analysis of departures, numbering several thousands, over a 12-month period to October 1993. By setting official reasons for leaving against age, gender and total workforce

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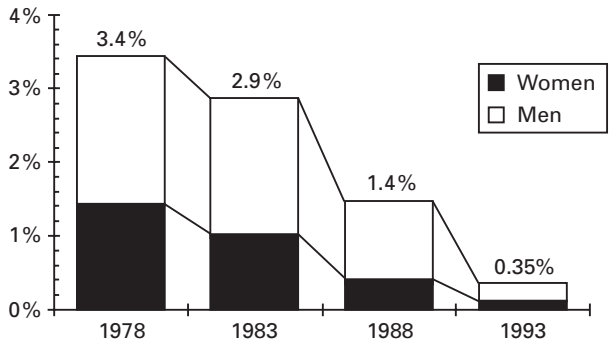


Figure 3. BBC Staff aged over 60 years, as a percentage of total staff, and by gender, 1978 to 1993.

composition, a picture emerged of the dominance of age in the exit process. Cessation categories included redundancy, resignation, the end of a non-renewed contract, ill-health, death and finally, retirement, which covered the three routes of 'normal' retirement at 60; premature retirement at the BBC's request at 50 or over; and voluntary early retirement at the individual's request, also at 50 or over. These were official classifications, recorded not by staff but by personnel managers, although exit interviews were conducted for resignations and voluntary early retirements.

Although the largest exodus of staff in absolute numbers was among those under 35 years of age, older workers were by far the largest group in proportionate terms. The numbers of over-50s had dwindled substantially over the previous fifteen years, as the above analysis has demonstrated, leaving a relatively small rump of older staff still in secure, full-time positions. Nevertheless, relative to the size of their age cohort in the organisation, they were by far the most likely to leave. Nearly a third (32%) of those staff aged 50 and over and still in the BBC in October 1992, went within the following year.

It was no coincidence that redundancy was the main reason for leaving the BBC during this period. It accounted for 45% of all departures, far ahead of exits due to the end of fixed-term contracts (29%); resignations (17%); or retirements (4%), whether standard, voluntary or premature.

Age was an important determinant of exit route. Younger staff were far more likely to resign and leave at the end of a fixed-term contract. Older workers tended, in contrast, to qualify for 'cushioned' farewells, i.e. financial packages built into redundancy and retirement schemes. Of the staff aged 50 or over and leaving in that year, 65% had been

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made redundant. Only 26% of staff aged under 35 had been given redundancy terms. Setting these redundancy figures against total numbers of staff aged under and over 50, reveals a far starker picture in which older workers were four times more likely to be made redundant than younger workers (21% against 5%) in the course of that year. This would appear to confirm findings elsewhere: financial inducements lead to the premature withdrawal of older staff from salaried jobs.

It was surprising that numbers leaving through premature or voluntary early retirement were so small. Possibly those qualifying for these packages had already left the organisation prior to the 12-month accounting period. Alternatively, the cause may have been the BBC's personnel accounting system whereby those departing staff aged 50 and over were entered in the redundancy category even though they may have qualified for early retirement benefits as well. Either way, the evidence would appear to point conclusively to the systematic targeting of older workers for early exit, largely through redundancy packages.

Recruitment. Recruits to the BBC in the 12 months to October 31st 1993, were overwhelmingly 'Second Agers'. More than 96% of all staff taken on were under 50 years. Older staff were recruited, but two thirds of them were to the lowest ranks of administrative and technical support staff.

Part-time working. Numbers of part-time staff were small in all age groups: 1115 part-time staff in 1993 out of a total workforce of 24,258, representing 4.6% of staff across all ages. Age was a factor in part-time status: staff aged 50 and over were nearly twice as likely to be part-timers as younger staff, and this proportion rose steeply at 60 years and over. Women were much more likely to work part-time than men in all age groups, but particularly in the 50 plus category, where they were 18 times more likely to be part-time than men. But none of these part-time posts were in the highest grades. Only 0.8% of all part-time jobs were in the most senior positions, and these were all held by women under 50 years of age. Part-time positions tended to be in the most junior grades of administrative and technical support.

Gender

Age profile. Fortunes for older workers differed according to their sex. Firstly, the fifteen-year decline in the proportions of older staff in the Corporation was largely at men's expense. Men saw their statistical

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advantage within the workforce diminish over the years. Yet they continued to dominate the 50 plus age group throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, outnumbering women by a ratio of approximately two to one. This was an enduring benchmark in a workforce undergoing substantial change on many fronts.

Women made substantial and continuous gains among the under-50s over the fifteen years. By 1993, they had overtaken men in the under 35 age group and made steady in-roads towards numerical equality in the 35 to 49 age band. The trend was slow to take effect among the oldest staff, although a noticeable change appeared between 1988 and 1993.

Older men and women were present in even numbers in the most junior grades. In the top and middle grades, however, men aged 50 and over far outnumbered women in the same age group, by a ratio of six to one among senior management and professionals, and four to one in the middle management and professional grades. Older men were also more likely to be in senior positions than men in younger age groups.

Normal retirement. There were gender differences in retirement at 60, with men more likely to reach retirement age than women. The exact proportions varied between years. Men retired at that age at twice the rate of women in 1988, but at a ratio of three to two in 1983 and 1993. There were also gender differences among those staying on over 60, with men more likely to stay on than women.

Redundancy. Exit routes also varied between men and women. Women of all ages were less likely to be made redundant than men and more likely to resign. Women were half as likely as men to take early retirement as an exit route in the 50 plus age group.

Recruitment. There were gender differences in recruitment. Women were more likely to be recruited than men in the under-50s age group (by a ratio of three to one) but proportions in the over-50s were roughly equal. Older men tended to occupy the high grades, older women the lower ones.

Discussion

This is a case study of a public sector company that has good reason to prove the exception in its employment of older people. Its special position as the nation's public broadcaster, as well as its track record in

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equal opportunity initiatives, would suggest an equally outstanding commitment to the on-going participation of its more mature staff. As a publicly-funded institution, accountable to its individual licence-payers within an ageing nation, one might have expected to find an age-balanced workforce. Where there were redundancies, the expectation was that these would not be age-related. Where there was recruitment, one would expect an age mix of new staff. Finally, one would anticipate an increase in part-time working with age, across gender and seniority.

The reality has been different. The BBC followed national trends in the fifteen years of the study period and targeted older workers for early exit. In the late 1970s, staff aged 50 and over were a substantial presence in the organisation, one in five of all workers. By the early 1990s, their numbers had diminished dramatically. Far more significant in terms of proportions and actual numbers, was the stark decline in staff over the age of 60. This had left the Corporation with virtually no representation of this age group. This was a dramatic shift for a public service aiming for a diverse workforce, in order to serve and reflect a diverse nation.

The reasons the BBC followed, rather than bucked, the national trends were in line with the push and pull factors affecting many other large public and private companies during this period. In the face of growing competition, income restraint and legislative change, the BBC needed to reduce staffing levels rapidly. The BBC's policy for handling redundancies rewarded length of service and so was of most benefit to older workers. The BBC was also able to offer generous early retirement deals and a good occupational pension. The attraction of targeting older workers was understandable, given the apparent convenience for both sides. Older staff facing structural and technological change in the workplace could bow out 'gracefully', cushioned by lump sum payments and secure pensions. Managers and senior executives were able to offer inducements which facilitated voluntary, seemingly uncontentious, staff reductions. The lack of age discrimination legislation left older workers unprotected. Equal opportunity policies at the BBC concentrated on gender, race and disability, confirming the 'hierarchy of oppressions' found in other research. Initiatives for older BBC workers were limited in the main to pre-retirement seminars. This was a course of action which eased older workers out, rather than kept them in.

Statistical data for a one-year period suggested redundancies were largely age-related, that recruitment favoured younger people and that part-time working was rare for older men.

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This lends support to other studies which have found a cycle of discrimination against older people. The younger the workforce, including personnel officers, the less likely that older people will be seen in a positive light.

Fortunes differed in the BBC for men and women. The dominance of men in the 50 plus age group, by a ratio of two to one throughout the study period, may have reflected a historical imbalance between the sexes, especially in technical grades, which was slow to change in a company with a long-serving workforce. Women were less likely to benefit from the generous packages available to older staff. However, the gender differences in reasons for departure need further investigation. National figures on occupational pensions show lower levels of membership and entitlement for women due to their broken years of service and part-time work. Women at the BBC may have been more likely to leave by resigning than men because they were less likely to have built up sufficient contributory years to make an early retirement route worthwhile.

Prospects for older BBC staff, and especially older men, were hampered by the lack of flexible job opportunities: few BBC employees aged 50 and over and in middle and senior grades ended their BBC careers as part-timers, despite evidence of its popularity in other organisations. It is possible that those wishing to become part of a flexible labour pool did so as freelancers or consultants, after accepting early retirement. Further research is needed on the extent to which former BBC staff transferred to the casual sector. But there is evidence of 'a full-time culture' at the BBC: numbers of part-timers of all ages were much lower than for the labour force as a whole in 1992–93. The use of 'final' salaries in estimating occupational pension entitlements was a financial disincentive for older staff wanting to end their career as part-timers.

The wholesale exodus of older staff during the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the loss of countless years of expertise and knowledge. A survey of freelancers in broadcasting suggests much of this experience was lost to the industry as a whole (Woolf and Holly 1994). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that older staff felt resentment towards the BBC and a sense of waste. Further research is needed on the extent to which older staff were able to exercise choice in their departures. Data related only to numbers and documented reasons for leaving. These are open to interpretation since, at their crudest, they are simply a form of personnel accounting. They do not measure the extent to which managers or staff influenced decisions to stay or go, or by which route if more than one existed. Nor do they gauge the degree of knowledge

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involved in the process. For instance, was the low resignation rate among older staff due to a succession of well-publicised redundancy packages, from which older workers knew they would benefit?

The effect of the long-term withdrawal of older people from the BBC was the development of a youth culture which could be hard to reverse. By the early 1990s, staff aged between 25 and 39 formed nearly 60% of the total BBC workforce. This numerical strength was particularly striking when set against age profile data for a sample of local authorities in England and Wales. The BBC's youthful staff profile was true not only of programme output departments but of the central departments of personnel, finance and policy. It was surprising to find that no-one had reached the official retirement age of 60 in this core sector in 1993.

Equally worrying was the neglect of age as a variable in personnel planning. The lack of systematic age monitoring appeared to reflect an unofficial consensus which placed age at the bottom of the equality agenda. It was regrettable that no tracking system was in place to monitor the careers of older people in the freelance media sector. Given the casualisation of the media over the last fifteen years, and trends in early exit, self-employment and part-time working, the fortunes of older freelancers deserve urgent research attention. Otherwise, they will continue to be an invisible, ill-defined and forgotten resource.

This study focused on the BBC's core workers, those permanent, mostly full-time, and in many cases highly experienced staff, often in positions of influence. They were spread wide, both geographically and hierarchically, and included presenters, reporters, editors, producers, directors and senior management, as well as personnel officers, sound recordists and secretaries. It is in the nature of broadcasting that the vast majority of staff would be drawn in, at one level or another, to production, with its intense team-working, its shared editorial frames of reference, and its ideas-to-funding routes for programming output. In this sense, the composition of core staff is critical to customer relations, creative output and responsiveness. Whilst the loss of experienced staff from the BBC is common to other organisations needing to contract, its impact may therefore be more far-reaching. It is an organisation with a unique role as a public service broadcaster. The BBC accepts explicitly that the make-up of its workforce influences the programmes which it transmits. It has taken positive action to ensure its staff reflect more closely the balance of the population in terms of gender, race and disability. It believes these changes are needed to fulfil its duty to serve the country as a whole. The result of its redundancy and early retirement policies, coupled with a full-time working culture and a

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recruitment process which appears to favour younger people, is a workforce in which those aged 50+ are becoming excluded. Further research is needed on the extent to which workforce composition affects programme output, both for and about older people. But it is difficult to see why the age profile of staff would not be as important to the BBC's output as its gender or racial composition. The fact is that while the population served by the BBC is ageing, its own employment policies have led to a workforce increasingly out of step on age grounds with the country it serves.

Conclusion

The BBC is the nation's public service broadcaster with a track record in equal opportunities initiatives and a commitment to offer accountable, diverse services. As such, its employment practices may well have bucked the national trend towards the growing marginalisation of older workers. This statistical study of the BBC's employment record for staff aged 50+ showed instead that the Corporation followed the rule, and not the exception. Its need to contract swiftly and uncontentiously appeared to take priority over its commitment to retain an age-diverse workforce. Discrimination on grounds of age, although not deliberate, was an inevitable by-product of redundancy and early retirement policies. It could be argued that in the absence of age discrimination legislation, older people appeared unprotected in the workplace and a low priority in equal opportunity terms. The lack of statutory employment requirements on age meant short-term efficiency demands could come before, firstly, the individual rights of older staff and, secondly, the long-term interests of the Corporation in reflecting the population in its staff composition. It could also be argued that the exodus of staff aged 50+ represented a loss of expertise and a waste of human resources on a grand scale. A standard retirement age of 60 for men and women at the BBC could be seen as an anachronism. Creativity and enthusiasm in broadcasting does not stop at 60. A flexible retirement age might appear more suited to an organisation serving audiences of all ages.

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