

Employment Age Limitations

Abstract of Discussions at a Meeting of the Eastern Massachusetts
Section of the Taylor Society, Boston, April 5, 1929

IS THERE a vital problem in connection with the retention of or hiring of people of middle age and over in gainful occupations?

The results of a survey of ninety-seven Massachusetts plants of various size were presented by Mr. Noel Sargent.¹ He stated that all have adopted some plan of group life insurance. "Eighty-seven do not discriminate against old employees, nor do they have any age limit. Age limits where they do exist are ascribed to the heavy nature of the work involved. It is interesting to note that practically half of the discrimination which does exist is out of regard for employees and not because of any harsh or arbitrary position taken by management as a discrimination in any sense. One of the big problems is to find something for the old employees to do when their efficiency begins to fall off."

On the other hand Mr. Clement Schwinges² maintained that while cases under which employees are actually discharged under an age limit system are rare, some firms make a practice of freezing out older employees, especially when resignation on the part of employees cancels an existing insurance or pension on the part of the employers. "But," he continues, "the list of employers who are willing to judge applicants on their past performance and experiences plus their expected productive capacity, regardless of so-called 'age,' is increasing constantly. The age limit will last no longer than other senseless fads."

Miss Adele Howe³ stated that not only did this type of discrimination apply to the laborer but to the professional man and executive as well.

"A type we have not stressed tonight is the men who emerge out of mergers. There is a high turnover among high executives. I have had five such

applicants within the last few days for minor positions. Two of the men were around forty. They were dropped out because of mergers and could not find work. Except in special cases preference seems to be from thirty-five to forty for executives; thirty for sales managers; and forty for accountants and engineers."

Miss Howe suggested the following remedies for the situation:

"First, help in educating those individuals who need to be brought up to date.

"The second step we feel would be to have a vocational advisor—or possibly more than one—who should interview and advise individuals, referring them to the proper sources for help, whether they should be employment agencies, social organizations or business houses which will take older people. In cases where re-education is necessary the advisor should point this out. The vocational advisor should spend at least half time in field work and become a real clearing house for information.

"The third step we felt was in putting out propaganda which should bring the whole problem clearly to the attention of the employer."

The position of the American Federation of Labor, according to Mr. Frank McCarty,⁴ is:

"We are in entire harmony with everything that stands for progress. We maintain that scientific appliances shall not eliminate humanity from industry. When lines are drawn against men, in particular those of forty-five years and up, it is one of the most inhuman actions. Death—whether through their inability to apply themselves to a craft, or by bullet and bayonet! Soul starvation! They are men who are at the height of their skill and thoroughly reliable; men who take pride in their work. There is no excuse for depriving them of work. It verges on the barbarous. Let the leaders stop, listen and think, and ask themselves what we are coming to. The statement has been

⁴General Organizer, American Federation of Labor, Boston.

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made that other openings may use up those who are put out of certain lines of industries. New industries have opened up in the past few years, and immigration has been restricted; but there is a very small decrease in unemployment figures. There is no reason to believe that there will be any immediate decrease in the number. With the rapidity with which they are putting machines into various industries and eliminating all forms of manual labor, if we forecast the future in the light of the present, we have every reason to believe it is going to be worse rather than better. So, the American Federation of Labor asks the leaders to keep in mind a value of humanity. This is not a cold-blooded proposition."

Professor Elliott Dunlap Smith⁵ pointed out that many times management is at fault. Age is less likely to be a factor in employment in firms which have the habit of continuous effort to keep up to date—continuous betterment of facilities and methods—than in firms which allow themselves to get behind and then have to make radical changes quickly.

"Where there has been continuity of job requirements, the formation and improvement of habits of skill of mind or hand usually more than compensates for any loss in inherent nimbleness. What has been learned outweighs any loss of capacity to learn.

"In those trades and professions where the fundamental requirements have remained stable workers command their highest wages after middle age.

"Wherever you find continuity in the development of a business by management, you find that the people, through the laws of habit, have much time to perfect their practices and to acquire skill whether of mind or hand; e.g., machinist trades in their various forms. Henry Ford in his airplane factory still uses machinists as machinists. His own secretary said, 'We have no young people here; these are all skilled men.'

"At General Motors, they treat machinists as machinists. There are almost no young men. The skilled workers are middle-aged craftsmen.

"This is true in the trades where there is a large amount of trade knowledge and a great field of manual aptitudes which takes years to acquire. This is true in the simpler things. As long as there is unbroken continuity from the past, the men who

⁵Professor of Industrial Engineering, Yale University.

carry home the highest wage from piece work are heavily burdened with years. You very rarely see men in the twenties with large pay envelopes; men in the forties and sixties are those who command the greatest openings. Acquired skill resulting from continuity with the past is worth a great deal more than the mental alertness of college graduates.

"Even where there have been fundamental developments of job and job requirements, if there has been continuity of development, middle-aged workers have been able to adapt themselves to the change.

"Where there is continuity large changes may be brought about gradually and without involving any great amount of learning at any one time. The difficulty of learning is largely dependent upon the amount of change that must be made at one time. Where there has been continuous job development, the learning faculties of the workers in regard to their methods of work do not atrophy but are kept alive by exercise. Recent psychological studies suggest that learning capacity, if exercised in regard to a particular field, can be kept at approximately full vigor well on in middle age. Where change in personnel requirements is gradual much of it will be cared for by the normal replacements in working crew.

"In selling and in managing, as to which there has been exceptional job development in the past two decades, in those concerns where this development has been continuous and the salesman or manager continuously exposed to it, middle-aged people still hold the principal positions. In the textile field as long as the change has been continuous, you find people in middle age earning the largest incomes because they are the quicker and better employees.

"If development of jobs is sporadic and involves abrupt changes, obsolescence in middle age tends to result. Such abrupt changes usually occur only after a period of stagnation. During such a period of stagnation, obsolete habits are strongly developed, and the middle-aged worker is confronted with a task of unlearning, even more difficult than that of learning. During such a period of stagnation, learning capacity in regard to work atrophies. Such abrupt changes involve extensive learning at one time.

"Thus, where departments or factories have been allowed to stagnate, middle-aged or even youthful

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³Chairman, Service Committee, Zonta Club of Boston.