The Journey to Work – a barrier to older workers?

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Abstract

According to the National Audit Office, transport difficulties are one of the barriers to employment experienced by people aged 50 plus. Huber and Skidmore suggest that "the happiest grannies are those who achieved a balance of caring and part-time work." However, difficult conflicts may arise for older workers regarding work location, travel arrangements, mode of travel, family or caring commitments, and the need for leisure time and a well-earned degree of freedom and flexibility.

The journey to work is being investigated as a part of "Working Late", a 4-year collaborative research project funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme. Following evidence from discussion groups with domain experts, employer representatives and older workers, a questionnaire survey was conducted, both online and paper based, to quantify the scale of the problem. More focussed interviews then contribute towards design solutions and strategies which will support personally sustainable travel and well-being, not just for older people but for all employees.

Introduction

According to the National Audit Office [1], transport difficulties are one of the barriers to employment experienced by people aged 50 plus. According to their study, difficulties include the cost, time and availability of public transport, and in some places, the unwillingness to travel outside their immediate locality to find employment or training opportunities. Although owning a car gives older people independence and improves their quality of life, older drivers may compensate for age-related decline in physical, sensory and cognitive abilities by avoiding road and traffic situations with high workload, bad weather, darkness, rush hours, complex junctions, etc. [2].

Some studies show that as people age, they become less likely to travel by private transport, especially with respect to their own car driving [3]. However, older people are travelling more than they were a decade ago, and they wish to continue driving for as long as possible. Our ageing population is likely to see this trend continue. For those who give up or reduce their driving, public transport poses its own barriers: physical inaccessibility of the transport and stations, heightened by a person's own declining mobility; concerns over personal security; costs; lack of information; and the quality of

services, including the availability, routing and reliability of required routes [3]. Reduced comfort and crowding may be further issues. For some people the use of public transport will feel like losing that degree of control which they felt when using their own cars to get to work.

New technology in both private and public transport may also pose barriers to older travellers. Older and disabled people may be the most likely to benefit from technologies such as navigation and traffic information systems; however, they may have difficulties in taking full advantage of them if the systems, as well as the information provided within them, are not designed with their requirements and limitations in mind [4].

Although disability tends to increase with age, the vast majority of ageing baby boomers are leading healthy, active working lives. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has recently welcomed the government's announcement that the default retirement age will be abolished, opening up employment opportunities for older Britons while they are willing and able to continue working [5]. However, even though employers and government recognise that this will lead to benefits all round, there are other factors that may impact on an older worker's decision to stay in the workforce. As suggested by Ball, a broader base of practical initiatives to extend working lives can be supported and implemented through age management measures [6]. These should include consideration of an older person's journey to work and how innovative and creative solutions can support their needs and preferences.

Many older people are also experiencing conflicts with family commitments and activities, such as caregiving, babysitting, etc., and these could have an impact on their travel decisions. According to Huber and Skidmore [7], "The happiest grannies are those who achieved a balance of caring and part-time work: 87 per cent agree strongly that their role is rewarding, compared with 66 per cent of those working full time and 65 per cent of those not working." However, asking grandparents to undertake high levels of family commitment might lead to difficult conflicts regarding work location, travel arrangements, mode of travel, and the need for leisure time and a well-earned degree of freedom and flexibility.

The issues described above have led to an investigation as part of "Working Late", a 4-year collaborative research project funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme (www.workinglate.org). The overall project, running from 2008-2012, is addressing a range of practice and policy relevant issues and is developing strategies to enhance productive and healthy environments for the older workforce. This paper focuses on one aspect of the research: private and public transport commuting to and from work, and the enablers, barriers and choices that older workers may face in this area. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How might commuting affect an older person's ability to continue working?
- Can older workers adapt their travel to accommodate changing needs and job circumstances?

Answering these questions will lead to a more inclusive design of employment and transport services, supporting the social innovation which legislation on employment equality is trying to promote.

Method

Two forum discussions were held with domain experts, employer representatives and older workers who formed the project's expert and user panels. These explored the key influences that travelling to work has on employment and suggested a number of issues which should be explored further [8]. With much-appreciated cooperation from these panel members, a questionnaire survey was then conducted, both paper-based and by emailing the link to an online version developed in SurveyMonkey.

Since our objective was to explore and gain an understanding of the issues for workers as they near retirement, rather than compare the younger and older working population, our sampling strategy requested that only those 45 years of age and over should complete the questionnaire. Given the affiliations of the user and expert panels, our snowballing sampling strategy led to a higher proportion of public sector organisations; however, the distribution covered a wide range of industry types and locations across the UK.

The purpose of the survey was to investigate the extent to which the journey to work may prove a barrier to older workers. The survey sought primarily qualitative data; however, some quantitative data have also emerged (e.g. on age of workers, type of work environment, commuting distances, method of transport, working practices, and the proportion of the respondents who have or have had problems with their journey to work). The questionnaire survey also served as a recruitment process for the core data collection activities, the upcoming interviews and focus groups.

The aim of the interviews was to gain more detailed information about issues with the journey to work and to explore potential solutions for these issues. The interview process was designed to be iterative, with initial interviews informing those conducted later. Survey respondents who had provided contact details were selected as potential interviewees if they answered 'yes' to one or more of the following questions:

- Do you have any specific difficulties with the journey?
- Do you foresee any additional problems arising in the future?
- Have you ever considered retiring or changing job as a result of issues with the journey?

A subset of these respondents were contacted by an email asking them to further participate in the project by taking part in a phone interview. Attempts were made to ensure that a range of respondents were selected as representing the older and younger age ranges, both genders, the type of journey travelled (e.g. village to city), and the different issues raised within the survey.

The interviewer contacted the interviewees by phone at a prearranged time. Interviews lasted around 20 minutes and were recorded, with the consent of the participant. Although interview questions were informed by the interviewee's earlier survey responses, each interviewee was firstly asked to describe their journey to work, then to expand on their individual issues and solutions before being asked about their views on employer responsibility with regard to the journey to work. Prompt questions were used to gain additional information or to ascertain whether solutions suggested by other respondents in the survey could be applied to the interviewee's circumstances.

The interviews are currently ongoing and will be supplemented by a number of focus groups where the various solutions suggested by interviewees will be discussed to determine their wider applicability.

Preliminary results

1215 respondents completed the survey. Out of these, 63% were female (787) and 37% male (443). The majority of respondents were aged between 45 and 55 with 28% (339) in the 45-49 age group and 36% (442) in the 50-55 age group. A further 25% (304) were aged between 56-60 and only 10% (124) were aged over 60. The relatively low number of participants in the over sixties group may be influenced by the state retirement age of females being 60 prior to 2010.

The majority of respondents (78%, 952) worked in the public sector with only 6% (76) working in the private sector. A further 15% (176) of respondents selected 'other', the majority of whom worked for a charity. This large number of public sector employees was a result of the snowballing effect of the initial survey distribution. For the majority of respondents, the car was their main transport mode (75%, 914).

25% (302) stated that they had specific difficulties with their journey to work, 32% (391) could foresee future issues, and 19% (232) had considered retiring or changing their job as a result of their difficulties. These percentages are not mutually exclusive.

Respondents were asked to provide details of the issues that they had or thought they were likely to have in the future. These comments were grouped according to the type of difficulty. Table 1 shows the top 5 current and anticipated difficulties. Up to 3 problems/issues were coded for each respondent.

Table 1: Current and anticipated difficulties in travelling to work

Current Difficulties			Future Difficulties		
Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage	Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Cost	147	48.7%	Cost	88	22.5%
Stress	67	22.2%	Relocation	79	20.2%
Health	42	13.9%	Change in circumstances	51	13.0%
Time	26	8.6%	Health	46	11.8%
Fatigue	25	8.3%	Traffic	46	11.8%

The most common 'Cost' related issue for both current and future difficulties was related to the petrol/diesel costs and/or running a vehicle. A worry among some respondents was that the cost of their commute and car ownership in the future will outweigh the benefit of working. For one respondent the cost of the commute has a direct impact on the decision to work: "When I no longer can afford my car it will mean I have no transport to work and therefore I will take retirement when I am 60."

Often 'Stress' was caused by traffic volume and holdups and the resultant worry of not arriving at work on time. Health related issues included specific medical conditions and disabilities as well as more general aches and pains that respondents felt affected their mobility. For future issues, respondents' concerns were that existing health issues

would get worse or that they would develop them as they got older.   'Time' relates to the time taken up with the journey. Some respondents felt that their journey took a larger proportion of their day than they would like.   Fatigue issues generally related to having to drive home after a busy or stressful day at work or a long shift, or one ending late at night or early in the morning.

In relation to future issues, relocation of their employer – either planned or just a possibility – was a concern due to the likelihood of increased journey time and length. 'Change in circumstances' was coded when anticipated changes in the journey were not related to the employer, e.g. the respondent planning to move house or worries about withdrawal of public transport services.   'Traffic' issues generally related to the belief that the amount of traffic on the road is increasing and that this is likely to continue in the future and cause additional congestion problems.

Conducting interviews and analysis is currently ongoing; however, there are some emerging issues and potential solutions. 17 interviews have been conducted so far with a roughly equal split between male and female respondents and those who are between 45-55 years old and those who are over 55 and therefore closer to state retirement age. All except 2 were employed in the public sector. The interviewees' survey responses show that half had stated that 'Cost' was a current issue for them and 'Fatigue' and 'Health' were issues for some as well as a range of other issues.

A number of solutions to cost were suggested. A couple of interviewees had either bought or were planning to buy a smaller, more fuel efficient car. One interviewee had decided to switch from driving a car to riding a motorcycle as this allowed them to filter through traffic and shorten their journey time. Another solution was to plan other tasks such as shopping or checking on elderly relatives as part of the journey to and from work in order to minimise the number of journeys.   Some interviewees felt the costs of their commute were excessive but were able to budget for them. However, a couple of interviewees, both approaching retirement age and having made the decision to work part time, felt that the cost of their commute influenced the number of hours they worked and their choice about when they would retire.

A common solution to traffic issues and avoiding the stress of the journey was to plan the journey to and from work to avoid peak travel times. This was possible as employers operated flexitime schemes. Working at home for one day a week was a solution to one interviewee's problem with fatigue caused by the journey; however, although this would also help other issues such as the cost of the commute, many of the interviewees felt that they did not have this option either due to the nature of their work requiring them to attend their work place or not having access to the necessary IT equipment at home.

For the 2 interviewees with specific health related issues, potential solutions were much more complex. A male interviewee had a stressful city commute which involved parking at some distance from his office. He was increasingly finding the walk to the office difficult due to a knee complaint. He stated that he dreaded the commute and that it was also affecting his mental health.   He had explored getting a Blue Badge (UK's scheme for parking concession for people with mobility problems) but had been refused. However, although not requested by him, he was transferred to a regional office with on-site parking which has alleviated his difficulty for the time being. For a female interviewee her commute added to the fatigue caused by her condition of ME, or Chronic

Fatigue Syndrome. Although entitled to a taxi through the Access to Work scheme, she had decided that the cost to herself would not be less than her current commute, and she was also unwilling to give up the freedom and flexibility of using her own vehicle.

Discussion and conclusions

Older workers have a number of issues with their journey to work which have a greater or lesser impact on their choices of when to stop working or reduce their hours. Cost appears to be a significant issue but preliminary results suggest that this is not clear cut and requires further exploration. The initial survey analysis and interviews revealed that although for some the cost of the commute was considered excessive, these costs were manageable. For others these costs represented a significant proportion of their salary and there were real worries about whether certain commutes were sustainable in the future. Although cost is certainly an issue for younger workers as well, the cost of the journey to work may have a greater impact on those wanting to reduce their hours of work in the stages running up to and following retirement age. Especially for those who choose, or are required, to work the same number of days, but reduce their hours, the cost of the commute is static but income is reduced. What impact this has on workers' retirement choices requires further exploration, but initial results suggest that the cost of the journey may be influential, in particular for certain job types or salary brackets.

Some of the issues and solutions raised in the survey and interviews are influenced by the large numbers of public sector workers in the sample. The current economic climate is a probable contributor to cost related worries, as a number of respondents compared the freeze in their public sector salaries with the steady increase in fuel costs. The number of respondents citing relocation or potential relocation as a future issue is also likely to relate to this. For example, many councils and police forces are streamlining their operations, which involves the merging of services and the centralisation of resources in specific areas. For some older workers the prospect of having a longer, potentially more stressful commute is enough for them to consider their choices in terms of job change and retirement. This would be supported by Huber and Skidmore's study [7], in which 78.5% of baby boomers agreed with the statement that 'although I enjoy my work, my private life is more important to me.' 49.5% of boomers also 'resent overtime eating into their free time, even if it is paid.' Clearly, as one of our interviewees commented: "Employers in the future will have to be thinking pretty creatively – once the economy picks up and people are needed in the workforce."

Flexitime is cited by many respondents and a number of interviewees as a solution to traffic related problems. Many public sector employers have offered flexitime for many years. This may not be the case with private sector employers and thus the findings of the survey reported here may not be applicable to every older worker. Strategies such as flexitime and other design solutions such as car sharing, identified by employers and employees and investigated in this research, will support personally sustainable travel and well-being, not just for older people but for all employees [9].

Next steps

Further interviews and focus groups will help to gather more information to assess the guidance and support that would help older workers in their journey to work. It will also enable us to explore and describe the relationship between travel decisions and organisational factors. Further research will also consider any additional needs and solutions posed by younger workers and people with disabilities to ensure that their needs are represented.

Stories and recommendations will feed into a resource to be developed later in the project, with information presented from the point of view of both employers and employees.   Using an iterative design process, this resource will be designed and assessed by employee and employer representatives, and will aim to feed into practical policy initiatives to support the older worker.

Acknowledgements

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