



The European Union Steel Industry: Generations of Workers' Experiences of Diversity and Equal Opportunities

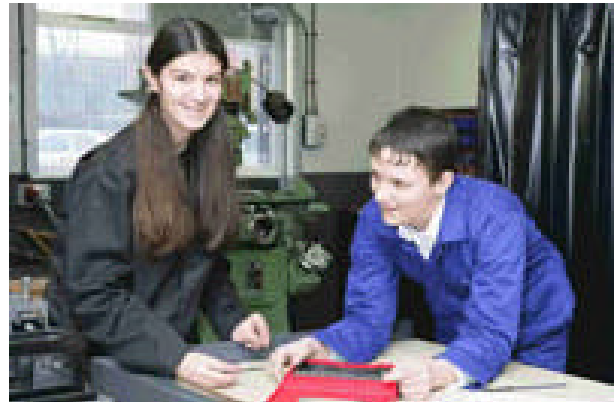
The steel industry has undergone much transformation over recent decades, and one outcome is a workforce polarised by age. For the steel industry, meeting the needs of different generations of worker can be problematic – particularly with regard to organising training to meet different learning needs, but also with regard to the transfer of knowledge and skills between generations of worker.

One aim of the restructuring and rationalisation of the industry during the 1980s and 1990s was to drastically reduce the steel workforce. Alongside programmes of redundancy, part of the process of reducing employment was a block on recruitment. A major consequence of this strategy was to produce a workforce populated predominantly by men aged 40 years and over. Nonetheless, steel companies have begun again to recruit workers, with the result that workforces across much of Europe are being polarised by age.

Mature Workers: The current age profile of the industry workforce is mature. Evidence suggests that whilst the average age is gradually reducing, the majority of production workers are in the 40-45, 45-49 and 50-54 age cohorts. This situation presents the industry with specific challenges, not least in replacing skills and updating and 'modernising' workforce skills and qualifications. In some places, mature workers struggle to keep up with the pace of work.

At present, the industry remains predominantly populated by men now in middle-age. Most often, these workers have been recruited straight from school and from stable, working class communities

in close geographical proximity to the plant. The result is a relatively unqualified workforce that is time-served and skilled by work experience. Such experiences are often accompanied by particular and often negative attitudes towards formal learning. It is thus a workforce that might struggle to engage with new learning opportunities – particularly in relation to more formal and class-room based programmes.



Source: Image provided courtesy of MetSkill

The steel industry requires a more highly trained and qualified workforce than previously. Involvement in a range of training and learning opportunities may be necessary for continued employment within an industry that is always looking to introduce new technologies, develop new ways of organising steel production and constantly subject to restructuring activity. It is important for workers to build their employability profiles, whether seeking to stay in or leave the industry (taking with them essential knowledge and skills).

The Question of Retirement: The industry stands to lose up to 50% of its workforce through retirement and redundancy over the next twenty years. The

majority of these workers will be mature workers often taking early retirement or voluntary redundancy options (in parts of Italy the latter is occurring in relation to regulations relating to the exposure to asbestos), which represents a major loss of experienced workers.

There are a number of complex issues and tensions between EU directives, government policies, company strategies and worker expectations, which tend to reflect the specific circumstances of place. More specifically, tensions are evident between the policies of governments, the strategies of companies and the decisions of workers about employment. To illustrate: (i) the age profile of the European steel industry is increasing and many governments want to prolong working lives to meet skills shortages; (ii) companies need to find a balance between the recruitment of new workers and the shedding of experienced people; (iii) however, in the UK at least, workers want and expect to retire early.

The 'New' Steel Workforce: The industry needs to replace those workers nearing retirement and in recent years has focused on recruitment of a more highly qualified workforce. 'New' workers are likely to be in their twenties and thirties and possess quite different and more rounded experiences of education than many of the more mature and time-served workers. Such changes suggest that there are pressures to recast learning programmes to meet the requirements of a younger and more highly qualified workforce. Traditionally, one other feature that is critical to learning in the industry is acquiring knowledge from more experienced workers. However, evidence suggests there are problems related to the transfer of knowledge between generations (for example, in relation to different cultures of learning and working).

Meeting Skill and Learning Needs: Quite clearly, the industry needs to cater for the different learning needs of workers and ensure equality of access to learning opportunities. However, with some exceptions, evidence suggests that at present this is not always the case, with more highly qualified workers accessing a greater range of learning

opportunities than the less well qualified. Further, whilst some plants make efforts to up-skill the current workforce, or skill them in ways that enhances their employability profiles, there is often a reliance on recruiting skills, which undermines the capacity of companies to respond to both short and long-term skill needs and shortages.

Mentoring and Knowledge Transfer: The transfer of knowledge between generations of worker is an important aspect of learning steel work. In some plants, formal mentoring is often an important part of this process. At the very least, the majority of companies rely on experienced workers to pass on knowledge to new workers informally on-the-job. For the most part new (often younger) workers and experienced (often mature) workers work and co-operate well with each other in this process.

However, there are issues concerned with how experienced and new workers relate to each other. This has implications for the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next if relations are not good. Evidence indicates that mature workers often expressed some concern with a lack of respect from younger workers. These young workers however, occasionally complained of bullying/mobbing from mature workers.

Workers are calling for more formalised systems of mentoring, complete with training and qualifications in mentoring skills, to facilitate the important process of knowledge transfer. More flexible approaches to retirement and the gradual easing out of mature and experienced workers with invaluable skills, including the option to transfer from full to part-time employment or job-share with co-retirees, might also facilitate processes of knowledge transfer and mitigate the impact of losing experienced workers.

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