

SOCIOLOGY

New Plans for Older Workers

Problems of the older person in our society are at last being faced and sensible solutions are being offered. As a result, persons 50-65 find new challenge in meaningful futures.

By CHARLES A. BETTS

► IN A FAST-MOVING industrialized society with the accent on youth, problems facing older persons have become increasingly acute. Fortunately, however, society has started to focus on them realistically.

As a result, doles, handouts, charity and dependence on relatives are giving way to programs fostering self-reliance and continued productivity even in this age of automation.

In the United States today, there are approximately 30 million persons, two-fifths of the labor force, who are 45 years or older. Moreover, by 1970 it is estimated that 20 million persons, or 10% of the population, will be over 65.

With this increase in the number of older citizens has come an increase in automation and an increase in competition from younger workers.

Job Security Threatened

At a recent conference sponsored by the National Council On the Aging, an industry representative said:

"Technological change is having its sharpest effect on the older worker's job security and job opportunities for one basic reason—assets of experience have declined and handicaps of outdated basic or vocational education have increased."

To counteract the trend, many steps are being taken. Significantly, the problem of the aging worker is getting top level consideration from the Government and from the private sector. The National Council, for example, is under contract to the U.S. Department of Labor to conduct studies and administer projects to aid unemployed workers 50 years and older.

Such projects are underway now in South Bend, Ind., Milwaukee, Boston and Baltimore, with three other cities soon to be chosen.

The pilot work was begun and continues at South Bend where the closing of the Studebaker plant left 8,000 persons without jobs. Of these, 3,000 were over 50. And those 3,000 had a total of 2,000 dependents under 20 years of age.

In this situation the National Council, in cooperation with unions, management, state and local officials, operated a retraining school and an employment clearing house for unemployed workers. Cooperative industrial management and labor in the South Bend area have played a big part in relocating the displaced workers.

In addition to retraining and relocation, technological changes in jobs themselves—job redesign—is of great importance in solving the problem of the older worker.

Industry's profits depend at least in part upon high levels of productivity. While many older workers remain as productive as younger employees, many do not. If, then, the oldsters are to hold their own, job redesign is essential to eliminate stresses that reduce productivity.

Encouraging results in this field have been noted by the Manpower and Social Affairs Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Stephen Griew of the University of Otago, New Zealand, and a consultant to the committee, reports a number of significant advances.

One firm, for example, bolted its smaller lathes to the walls instead of the floor. Older machinists no longer suffered backaches and a previous record of labor turnover almost disappeared.

In one radio and television factory, efficiency of older workers was improved by placing over a complicated wiring system an opaque stencil with holes exposing only the connections to be made by the worker. This oriented his attention and eliminated distracting detail.

In a chemical works, older employees had difficulty in lifting 50-pound containers prior to pouring out the required amounts of liquid into other receptacles. The plant rigged up a syphoning device to drain the liquids.

In a food processing plant, it was found

that a small group of women from 50 to 60 years of age was creating a bottleneck in filling tin cans with beans. The problem was solved by rearranging the work room so that the women could fill the tins without having to stoop to pick up the beans.

Simple? To be sure. But effective.

The OECD study points out that most of the job redesign is geared not only to older workers but to everybody. But while all seem to benefit, the older ones benefit most.

Job Redesign Helps

In the opinion of the OECD, job redesign can "dramatically" improve the production and job adjustment of older workers. Implications are thought to be far reaching for two reasons.

First is the obvious conclusion that redesign makes it possible for older workers to be productive longer.

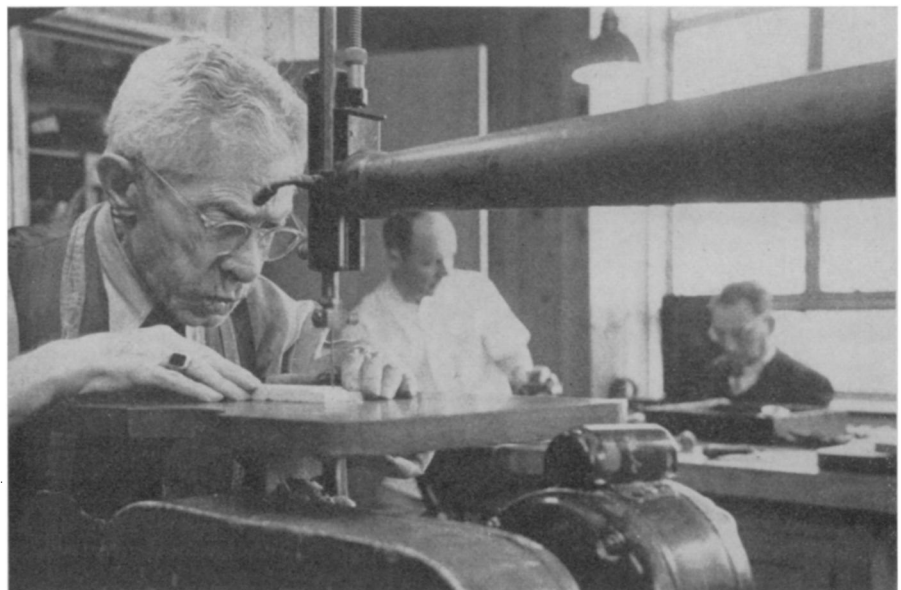
Second and certainly more important, redesign utilized in a pattern of increased automation helps keep job technique and job demands in proper balance.

The direction of technological change, the OECD finds, is away from activities that would appear superficially to favor older workers. It would seem reasonable that automation would make jobs easier and therefore less strain on older persons.

To the contrary, while automation may relieve drudgery, it also may create for the older employee more problems than it solves.

For example, simple tools are replaced by complex tools. And, the speed of the task to be performed is more often than not determined by the machine and not the man.

Job redesign, therefore, makes possible



National Council on the Aging

JOB REDESIGN—New and easier ways to do the same job as well as retraining for new skills are key points in any program of more employment for elderly workers.

a continual process of balancing the demands of automation with the mental and manual skills of the workers, young and old.

Concern for the older citizen is not only centered around employment, although that is the essential. Sociological factors such as housing, recreation and sense of belonging in a community are also important.

Change in Housing Approach

In this area, the National Council's executive director, Mrs. Geneva Mathiasen, feels that planning should be based on the premise that older citizens are productive members of society, not just worn-out bodies and spirits sitting around waiting to die.

Much has been done in the last few years in the field of especially designed housing for older persons. This type housing, it should be emphasized, is not in the old-folks-home category. Rather, it is non-institutional housing, often financed like low or middle income housing—with Federal subsidy.

Such housing is designed to be as accident proof as possible. It features small buildings, no stairs, low shelves, easy-open windows, non-skid floors, bathroom support rods, and signal systems for emergencies. Many units have dining rooms for residents.

Recently, the National Council has completed a directory of between 500 and 600 housing units for the elderly across the

country. The Council, located at 49 W. 45th St., New York City, is prepared to act as a clearing house for those interested.

One relatively new aspect of the problem is just now starting to get attention. This is described in the lingo of the professional as working with the "mentally frail" left to their own luck through absence of family, desertion or poverty.

Federal statistics show that 300,000 persons in the United States who draw Social Security are not competent to handle their own money.

What to do with them is the primary question facing the researchers. Some have relatives or close friends to handle their finances. Others have only themselves.

Most of those receive no attention until some act of peculiar behavior brings them to the attention of the neighbors, and ultimately the police. In Detroit, for example, 5,000 elderly persons were turned over to the police in a single year because they were acting strangely and nobody knew what else to do with them.

This, like all other phases of our society's approach to the problems of the elderly, needs and is getting increased attention. Hopefully, the solutions will multiply faster than the problems so that the dream of peace and prosperity can be realized by Americans, regardless of age.

• Science News Letter, 87:298 May 8, 1965

PUBLIC HEALTH

Health Program Evaluated

► THE BILLION-DOLLAR program of the Government's National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md., received both praise and criticism in the citizens' study committee report to President Johnson.

The committee stated that the current billion-dollar budget of NIH is not too high. It would even add a million dollars in overhead to pay a non-Government advisory group to make sure the NIH decisions are sound.

"We suspect that there are few, if any, one-billion-dollar segments of the Federal budget that are buying more valuable services for the American people than that administered by the National Institutes of Health," the report said.

On the critical side is the recommendation that the new non-Government advisory group, to be called the Policy and Planning Council, should be established "to operate at the level of the director of NIH." Two dozen "highly qualified and analytical professionals, with the usual quantity of assistants and supporting services" would be worth a million dollars a year, the report said.

Such a group of prominent non-Government scientists and laymen, continually reviewing the major NIH decisions, will provide essential assurance that "the great powers of the Government are not being unwisely or arbitrarily employed in the vital field of health research."

The report stated there is serious question "whether NIH can indefinitely remain the strong and positive influence it has become unless a way is found to provide such assurance."

Criticism is implied in the suggestion that the power of the separate Institutes and Institute Councils should be lessened while the authority of the director of all the Institutes be increased.

Why a single group of cancer chemotherapy collaborative projects should be allotted \$30 million when less than \$1 million in total goes into such collaborative efforts in the entire field of arthritis and metabolic diseases is seriously questioned."

Dr. Dean E. Wooldridge of Los Angeles, Calif., was chairman of the study committee, whose report was titled "Biomedical Science and Its Administration." Thirteen members made up the committee, but nearly 1,000 persons cooperated, including NIH officials.

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Do You Know?

Aedes aegypti, a mosquito which carries the virus of the yellow fever, has been eradicated from 16 countries in the Western Hemisphere.

The direction of most acute vision for dolphin and great barracuda is straight forward, while that for sailfish and white marlin is slightly upward and forward.

The phosphate content of the Arabian Sea is approximately five times that of other oceans.

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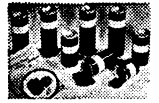
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