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The Grey Revolution at B&Q

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Case 2: The Grey Revolution at B&Q ¹

B&Q is the leading British Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and garden-centre retailer, selling about 45,000 different products. In the early 1990s the company began to expand internationally, first entering Poland and then moving into the Asian market in 1996. In August 2001, the biggest B&Q store in the world opened in Shanghai, China (17,000 square meters, almost twice the size of an average UK store).

B&Q's efforts to promote diversity in its workforce are strongly rooted in commercial realities. The link between diversity and business benefits is at the heart of B&Q's approach with "the emphasis of [its] diversity strategy...customer driven, developing policy from minimum compliance to best practice". A shortage of skills and the need to keep experienced workers were the main economic drivers behind B&Q's so-called "Grey Revolution", launched in 1989.

B&Q believes that ageism is rife in the United Kingdom workplace. The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) has found that between 25 and 34 per cent of British employers impose explicit age limits on jobs (ibid). The UK government has estimated that at least 40 per cent of employers discriminate on the grounds of age (Ottaway, 1995). Whereas other European countries, including France and Spain, have age-related legislation (such as a ban on stating age limits in job advertisements), the UK has no legislation to prevent age discrimination.

B&Q and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) argue that discriminatory employment practices related to age disregard significant social and demographic changes such as the rapid growth in Britain's ageing population. More than 40 per cent of the UK workforce is currently over 45 years old. Furthermore, the past 15 years have seen a substantial decrease in the number of 20-24 year olds in employment.

In order to address changing UK demographics and the need for well-motivated retail staff with practical DIY home improvement and gardening experience, B&Q launched its "Grey Revolution" with a number of measures aimed at attracting and retaining older employees, including the introduction of the new over-50s stores.

B&Q's Lorian Coutts explains that the initiative was a reaction to severe shortages in the labour market at the time:

The adoption of our over-50s policy was, for the most part, a reaction to the changing job market in the late eighties. They provided an under-used pool of labour.

In addition, older people were thought more likely to have knowledge and experience in the DIY trade. The belief that older people would therefore provide better customer service was a key argument. This was supported by the results of subsequent B&Q customer surveys.

When Warwick University evaluated a new over-50s store against other stores, it found that the over-50s store topped the list in most measures. In her 1993 review of the Grey Revolution initiative, Mandy Jetter notes the following achievements: a massive reduction in unattributable stock loss, a very low absentee rate, [and] the best sales award

¹ ILO, 2001d.

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for the whole of B&Q. Other figures are cited by B&Q to demonstrate the success of the over-50s stores compared to other B&Q retail outlets:

- profits 18 per cent higher
- staff turnover 6 times lower
- absenteeism 39 per cent lower
- shirking 59 per cent lower
- improved customer perception of service
- increased skill base in the staff team.