



The Work Couch

NAVIGATING TODAY'S TRICKY PEOPLE CHALLENGES TO
CREATE TOMORROW'S SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES

Episode 10 – Business Protection (Part 2) with Liz Gray and Simon Long

Ellie: Hi and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder, I'm a senior editor in the Employment Equality and Engagement team here at RPC and I'll be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast you will feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way. To make sure you don't miss any of our fortnightly episodes, please do hit the like and follow button and share with a colleague.

Following on from part one of our mini-series on business protection, where we explored [how to deal with the departure of a senior executive](#) and how post-termination obligations operate in reality, today we're going to take a step back and we're going to explore how to achieve an age-inclusive culture. In particular, by supporting and retaining older workers who may be re-evaluating their working hours, but don't necessarily want to leave the organisation altogether.

And we'll also look at how businesses can use their talent, their experience and knowledge to mentor and guide the next generation through the ongoing challenges that businesses face today.

Age inclusion is set to be a key priority for people teams, given the UK's ageing workforce and the government's drive to boost the numbers of older people in work. So with me to guide us through this topic, I am thrilled to be joined by two age inclusion champions. Liz Gray, director at EY, who heads up EY's support for retiring partners. And Simon Long, growth director at 55 Redefined, an organisation that supports the over 50s and advocates for age diversity, positivity and inclusion across all areas of life. Hi both, thank you so much for joining me today. Liz, if I can start with you, can you tell us a bit about your role and why you chose to work in the sphere of championing age diversity and inclusion, in particular for those who are aged 55 and over?

Liz: Yes, Ellie. Yes, I work for EY and it's been the joy of half my life. I head up the support for our senior talent across EMEIA as they come to consider their retirement and I lead a really brilliant partner alumni programme. Over my time in this role, I've helped transition nearly 300 partners. And this has helped me realise why I really want to champion the change for those people who are aged 55 and older. I collaborate with a number of organisations outside of EY, including 55 Redefined, to make this happen. I've seen first-hand how a transition programme can change people's lives, and they can become far happier, healthier, and to continue to give long after their executive years.

Ellie: And I can't wait to hear about those stories later on in the podcast. And Simon, can you tell us about the reasons why you wanted to advocate for the over fifties and just tell us about the aims of 55 redefined?

Simon: Sure. Great to be on the podcast and particularly good to be alongside my good friend Liz from Ernst and Young. Lovely to see you. Yeah, well, it's a very personal story. Often, I suppose the best, most meaningful ones are. I'm 57 years old. I've still got a pulse. I'm alive. I'm kicking. I'm pleased to say, although this time about 18 months ago, I had hit rock bottom. I had had to close my business down after COVID and I had applied for 120 odd jobs, had no interviews and kept getting the feedback that I was overqualified, which I think most of us over 50 know is a euphemism for either too expensive or too old or too much of a threat. And unfortunately I lost my way, I lost my purpose, my mojo, I lost obviously money and I felt I had reached the end of the buffers. Stopped sleeping, lost weight, became a social recluse. So I went online onto LinkedIn and made an impassioned post complaining about ageism, shining a light on how hard it is to find work when you're over 50. And fortunately my now CEO Lindsey Simpson at 55 Redefined saw it, we had a chat and here I am 18 months later never having felt happier. Okay I've been richer in the past but I'm richer in many other ways now. And I can't thank enough, Lindsey, for the opportunity. So I'm doing this from a personal point of view. I have friends and family around me in not dissimilar situations, and I want to be able to make a

difference in the second part of my life. And that's what 55 Redefined is all about in terms of helping people connect with opportunities in the second phase of their life and helping employers find that hidden talent.

Ellie: That's fantastic, Simon. Thank you so much for sharing that personal story, because I think it really puts the whole topic into sharp context. Liz, we've called this mini-series Business Protection. So looking at the business angle, why is supporting and retaining senior talent such an important issue for businesses today?

Liz: Yeah, thanks, Ellie. I think the working age population is probably the key thing to be talking about. You know, if we're looking at that specific issue, our age population is shrinking by 25% in the UK, and our over 60s are growing by 40%. Or put another way, you know, 50% of the population will be over 50 by 2030. That's not that far away based on ONS data. So any way you cut the data, we face a problem. Now, failing to acknowledge the value of senior talent is either saying you have no value when you reach age 55 plus, apparently it dissipates overnight, clearly not the case in Simon, or as a global workforce shrinkage is not a problem to your business. Now, if your senior talent's likely to be the moral compass, and the DNA of the organisation, we probably need to have a bit of a rethink. In addition, we all know it's well documented that this generation have a strong desire to pass on the baton and to help younger people succeed. So who doesn't want that? You know, we also know that older workers have lived through a few storms and not unsurprising, when you talk about multi-generational teams, efficiency, and enhanced productivity are some of the key reasons why employers want to retain their senior talent.

Ellie: Absolutely. And I think it feeds into that sort of wider concept of everybody has a unique voice and just feeding in those different perspectives is always a good thing. Simon, from your perspective, what are the risks of businesses dropping a ball here and failing to support and retain their older workers?

Simon: That's a great question. Well, good news is with Liz and Ernst and Young, we've got a wonderful example of how to do this well. But for the majority of businesses, the issue of an aging workforce is a bit of a mystery in many ways, what to do about it, how to create a multi-generational workforce, what the benefits of that are, what the business case is for that. So I think the risk is that we, as a society, as much as employers, are sleepwalking really into a disaster, a nightmare where the combination of an aging population, as Liz said, cost of living crisis forcing people who've retired to come back into work or people who have retired and realise "crikey we're living longer, I've got another 30 or 40 years ahead of me", means that we are going to need to adapt our workforce and we're going to need to embrace the best of our with an increasingly less well supplied younger cohort. So those are the risks really, but in terms of stats, and I'm glad Liz that you referred to some, in addition to what you said, I think it's stunning that by 2050, we're gonna have 2 billion odd people aged over 60 on this planet of ours. That's a pretty sizable sum, and that in the UK closer to home, we're gonna be, I think it's 31 million by 2041, according to the Office for National Statistics. So, plate tectonics at work and in society and demographically are shifting. And if businesses don't get a grip on that, then however good their strategy for 10 years down the line is, if they don't have an age strategy, they simply will not have a growth strategy.

Ellie: So Liz, a whole host of pretty fundamental reasons why businesses need to take action now to tackle the issue of age exclusion. But I just wonder where do they start? So can you tell us how your team at EY are taking steps to bring about meaningful change and how you're embedding that age friendly approach?

Liz: Well for context Ellie, a traditional professional services business model is a pyramid structure both in age and in grade. So professional services as a sector may not have a high proportion of older workers, but we should take credit for being the training ground for senior people across most industries. That being said, we really do want to make some meaningful change here, but there is much work to do when you've got that type of business model. So I'm a bit of a giver. So a couple of things for me, three in particular. So for our senior people, we're pioneering work with our partners many years before they leave the firm. And I really want them to leave being confident, my mantra being I want you to change from saying, "I'm a former EY partner" to "I am". And this means that we're reframing the way that someone in their sixties or older are involved in a multitude of opportunities. And they are creating a new role model for generations to think about, well, what does the word, ghastly as it is, "retirement" mean when you finish a full-time executive role? The second area is around something new and groovy I call the EY ambassador programme. It largely costs you no money. We give partners two weeks' additional holiday or should they want to use it for their personal development in the year before they retire and then we get it back pro bono in the year after they retire. The firm wins because we get to retain this strategic brilliant mind, guiding junior people, and the partner gets access to a huge array of benefits, but most importantly, they're reconnected back with the business and an area of their interest. For example, we had a partner who launched a new product in the UK and as part of his ambassadorial role, he supported his successor to take it out to Europe to great success. That I think is an area where most businesses could really consider engaging in a flexible way this great resource. Now the third area, which is my gift, is something that is way beyond my role as a partner supporter, but the third area

is really around how EY's investing in HR policies to retain our talented, older workforce at all grades. So an example would be we now offer all people 10 days' care leave. Now that could be used for grandparent responsibilities, family emergencies, maybe injury. We are getting individual £500 wellbeing allowance. And also there's really great financial planning webcasts, which are focusing on the practical actions people should be taking at this stage of life.

Ellie: I love those so many practical ways that you can help people. So Simon, how is 55 Redefined getting the message out there to businesses about age inclusion?

Simon: Great question. Through a number of ways really. The first is by building up an unrivalled bank of data about workforce planning, about intergenerational work, about the trends that are influencing the different age cohorts as they come into and out of work and progress through careers, what the motivations are as we age. So first it's data and enabling our clients or just the wider community to understand what is really shaping this world and workplace that we live in. After that, it's about awareness. It's about how we help leaders and their teams understand why building an age-diverse workplace culture is beneficial. Because at the end of the day, it's lovely to do this from a moral point of view, but we know, and the evidence supports this that an inclusive multi-generational workforce is generally more productive, more cohesive. It better reflects the world and society that we aspire to be members of. And it also provides opportunities for innovation by embracing and encouraging different perspectives and attitudes from up and down the age spectrum. So we do that by providing training around things such as multi-generational workforce planning and engagement. So too around age bias and discrimination, just to burst the bubble of some of those stereotypes that we are all prone to have at times, but are particularly prevalent with regard to ages and perhaps one of the last "-isms". And then we also work with our employers and candidates alike through an age diverse job board, supported by recruitment attraction campaigns, targeting often passive candidates who may not even be aware that there are people out there looking for their skills, who value them and will embrace them with a structured learning and development programme. And then last but not least, we offer an accreditation programme so that clients can go out there and vote with their feet, demonstrate that they are committed to a charter, that embraces age diverse working practices and policies, and also enables them to demonstrate to their suppliers and customers that they care. And then finally through an age diversity diagnostic, which is a way of formulating through data a roadmap to help different functions within an organisation, different leaders, different team members navigate their way to this nirvana of an ageless workforce and in doing so safeguard the future health of their business.

Ellie: Fantastic. Liz, one thing I think some listeners will be wondering is how did you first make that approach to senior stakeholders to get their buy-in to changing the approach? Did you encounter any challenges there?

Liz: Yeah, I think like most professional services, there's an age of retirement and that's a bit of an issue where it's at 60, it's a hard deadline as such. So about 10 years ago I presented the reality of what it's like to be a partner alumni to the then financial services leader and what I found was that our partners, they felt abandoned after a career of 30, 40 years. It was what they described as a cliff-like feeling. They used to sit beside a colleague, a best mate, and then the phone never called. And this largely resulted in not a positive experience for EY as we would have liked in terms of advocacy. No one was winning and it was really frustrating me. So the financial services leader, when I presented the data to him, he got it immediately and I got endorsement from around the leadership team and it wasn't just in case there are cynics listening, it wasn't just because they were going to benefit personally. It wasn't easy and I've talked about this on many forums but he gave me a small budget and I worked out pretty quickly the best way to deliver impact. So I started with a training programme preparing partners for retirement psychologically, thinking about the options, you've got time, you've potentially got money, you know you've got so much in your kit bag, please feel confident to go out there because people really do desire your skills and it's growing. It's now across Europe and we have personal coaching for people three years out. Note if you are not going to pay for it people probably aren't going to advance it themselves. So think about that investment. But now we place people on charity boards. We've got people mentoring start-up's. We do webcasts all before they leave the firm. So they're up skilled and feeling confident with the "I am" mantra clear in their mind. But largely they have reframed their future. I know personally how much enormous value they place on the programme as alumni. And already for those who are looking for a dollar sign, we are starting to see results, but it's not about that. It's about the really good feeling they have about themselves due to what the firm invested in them.

Ellie: So it's really changing how they see themselves as they approach that retirement age. And I'd really like to hear about the impact that your programme has had on your people. So starting with those who would ordinarily have left the business to retire, tell us about those stories.

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- Liz:** Yeah, so that sort of feeling of a cliff, I sometimes refer to them as now giving them a parachute, bit cliché, but you know the idea of "actually now I can travel until I land of where I want to be" is just such an empowering thought that "I might be free-flying for a little while", but looking back over 10 years of data, you know less than 40 percent of partners who are leaving the firm were doing anything in applying their skills and experiences in a commercial manner. And now we have over 90% of partners. Now, a couple of examples, and if anyone is listening, and I don't mention you as my example, I was gonna put you next, I promise. But I've got a partner who retired from the firm and he founded an organisation whose purpose it is to change the lives of [50 million voices](#) globally who are unrepresented in the workplace because they stutter. His personal story and the conviction for his charity inspires so many people, especially those who are in our training course, to go and do something really wonderful. He makes me so proud as an EY alumni as to how he lives his life with genuine purpose and grace. There's another partner and he attended the training course and he decided I want to re-contract with the firm three days a week and balance his client work with his multiple passions outside of work, including music. And in the 18 months since he's been doing this, he's only gone and launched an album. For me, his experience is a future model. I mean, he's been able to de-risk his life, throw himself into his client work, working flexibly, which is important, but making most of the things that really make him smile. And I talk to partners ultimately about weaving their new superhero cape, like it's not an EY "we" cape, it's now their own cape and that's the power of what we try to instil in people
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- Ellie:** I love that sort of removing of risks, which hence the parachute analogy and just finding a bit more about your own identity, having been just perhaps defined by your work. It's brilliant to hear those stories. And what has the response been from those people who are benefiting from being mentored by those senior colleagues?
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- Liz:** Oh an easy one. I mean you can just look down the corridor the smiles. I mean there are dozens of people who have been promoted to partner having been coached by alumni or you know when they've come out of a pitch and you can see that it's been the wisdom of someone who's been alumni that's helped them or only last week we had a start-up who got the next round of funding given the current market pretty remarkable due to an EY alumni's mentoring. And again, you know, our ambassadors are helping partners in their businesses, and one in particular I'm thinking of, his business has almost doubled through the really critical challenge that he's received. And I am genuinely so grateful for the time that our partners, our senior talent give to try and help solve some of these really difficult problems and give their perspective because they just have so much to give.
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- Ellie:** Absolutely, that's so great to hear. Simon, let's look at some sector-specific considerations now. What do you think the challenges and opportunities are for the legal sector when it comes to age inclusion?
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- Simon:** Yeah, well quite a lot of the challenges are frankly common across sectors, irrespective of the discipline. But just before I answer that, listening to Liz there really triggered a couple of thoughts. The fact that you're placing a premium on lived experience, is wonderful to hear. We carried out, at 55 Redefined, a survey this time a year ago to ask what the motivations were of the over 50s with regard to work. Some people would imagine that they're going to say things like money, job title, location, but the reality was somewhat different. The number one thing, motivationally, was flexibility. So your point, Liz, about that partner who wanted to work on three days is really well made and it resonates. Also, big motivation was purpose. So again, you're reflecting that in the programmes and experiences of your partner. So that's brilliant to hear. And then thirdly, the opportunity to give rather than take because for much of our lives, particularly we're building a home, it's about how much you earn, what your job title is and so forth. So those motivations are all shifting. With regard to law, the legal sector, I think, well, let's get this right. I think it's 12% of law firms only have got a specific age diversity policy in place. But don't worry, you're in good company because most of the sectors are similar. That's from the Law Society report. It is worth saying, however, that things like age-related cases of discrimination, you've only got to look across the States, are rising at a worrying rate. So there are implications with regard to the type of client needs that you as a law firm will need to address, increasingly involving reputational or economic risk. I think also things like partners typically being older and there being set periods at which they're expected to leave the firm can become real issues, not least around the knowledge, institutional knowledge. I liken this to somebody being a bit like a library and that when that person with those decades of experience leaves, a library burns down or a hard drive is ripped out of a laptop. So how do we ensure that hard wiring happens between the cloud and all of that knowledge. So other things clients may like to see a mixture of people on the other side of the table when pitching, reflecting different ages and backgrounds. That may well also help with the referrals that the accumulation of contacts and networks can obviously result in. And I think perhaps also, technological innovation is something to be aware of. I mean, we know about AI and automation, but they require a blend of soft and hard skills. So I think there are a number of things that need to be looked at, and specific roles, mentoring, the sharing up and down the scale of experience and know-how, and developing initiatives similar to Ernst and Young that value

and celebrate the expertise of your older lawyers, whilst also providing opportunities for them to learn from the younger cohort coming into the firm. So those are just a few of the thoughts that come to mind.

Ellie: Yeah, I like that idea of that reverse mentoring and learning from each other about different perspectives. And you touched on the impact of AI, I mean, how will that impact that sort of aim to support and retain senior talent?

Simon: Oh, that's the old holy grail question on everyone's lips, isn't it? I mean, I've had a pound for the number of times we hear about AI and the way it's going to create an existential threat to humanity. I'd be a wealthy person, but let's try and bring it down to earth.

Ellie: I know.

Simon: I mean, there's no doubt that AI, I suppose that the stock answer is there are opportunities and challenges, aren't there? Positives and negatives. But as regards your question about retention and supporting senior talent, I think it can make a really positive impact, particularly the way in which, for example, in the legal sector, particular tasks can be automated, freeing up senior folk to focus their time and attention on value driving activities, relationship building and so forth. But you need a balance. I think it will allow legal professionals to focus on the more complex and strategic work without having to get stuck in the weeds of the detail, because that can be left to our friends at AI. And I think it also will provide a chance for all of us to learn, to learn quickly. I mean, the power of knowledge at the fingertips of AI is frightening. But with advanced algorithms, we'll be able to better capture, organise, I guess, retrieve and store huge amounts of legal information. So that means that your lawyers, your senior lawyers, will be able to make on the hoof decisions really deeply informed in a way that perhaps they're less able to do so now. And that provides value to your client, getting turnaround faster, and also access to just a broader wealth of wisdom. But I think finally, it should be seen as a support, not a replacement. So I think in conclusion I would say that there is the power to support senior talent but it can also produce greater efficiency around knowledge management and decision making and I think ultimately it's all about getting the balance right and not being afraid of it but embracing it and putting the right practices, processes and protocols in place plus training to get the best out of it.

Ellie: Absolutely. Liz, what would you add to that?

Liz: Well, you talk about embracing. We had a dinner the other night on AI, clearly the only thing that people want to talk about. And so I read that the World Economic Forum had this amazing statistic that AI will replace, wait for it, 85 million jobs in 2025. And it's going to make available in the same year, 97 million jobs.

Ellie: Really interesting.

Liz: So, being a bit of an auditor, we're sort of in a good position here. However, you know, it is a bit of an inflexion point, right? So if AI is going to change our lives and undeniably it will. Um, I still think that like Simon, senior talent are actually potentially the big winner here, right? So AI doesn't have the ability to do a number of things that our senior talent can do. You know, we talk about, um, you know, client focus and value driving. You know, also the thinking outside the box, the recalling the lessons learnt, which we've talked about before, um, you know, understanding human reasoning. I mean, that's a big one, right? Um, how to then sell, how to do the critical thinking. And for me, the big one, which is emotional intelligence, you know, ultimately we are all social animals, you know, one basic and undeniable need for humans is a need for emotional connection with each other. So AI may try and mimic the human intelligence, but you know, the emotional intelligence, I think that is the superpower of this seasoned professional.

Ellie: So finally, can I ask you both what would be on your wish list for supporting and retaining your senior talent going forward? So Liz, what are your plans for the future?

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- Liz:** Okay, so wish list. Flexible working, Simon and I have already discussed, so let's assume that's in the good employer box. And what would be the next thing I'd put on my wish list to retain senior talent? My experience would say creating a space for a conversation, whether you call it a midlife conversation, MOT for employees, but absolutely that is up there as a number one for me. You know, for my experience, it's having an opportunity for people to re-evaluate, to build confidence with not just their finances, their health and wellbeing, but also what they can offer to different organisations. I love the fact that our people have a chance to take stock, you know, press that reset button and they're feeling more you're resourceful and empowered now that they've got a plan that they're going to transition. I think, you know, important this element of an MOT gives employers the benefit of not only signalling their commitment to people, but what we've found is it really does boost the engagement and retention of people. One which is personal on my wish list, and Simon I think you're going to like this one, and when someone makes an ageist comment, challenge it, because I hope they're gonna be old one day too. So, plan for the future. It won't surprise you, I want to drive a campaign that challenges senior talent to reimagine their futures.
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- Simon:** Brilliant.
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- Liz:** I love this, is a German colleague, and she said, take out an Ikea paper ruler. Hold it at your age and it's likely it's just over halfway. Now I'd love all senior talent to look at that ruler and say, how do I want to spend my remaining years? You know, what are the skills and experiences, whether it be mentoring, advising, governing, writing, campaigning, la la. But so much of their skills can be made really impactful. And I want them to make that time matter. So... In closing for me on my wish list, I want this senior talent group to go and be brave and be courageous and go and live a brilliant next life inspiring others.
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- Ellie:** Really inspiring words Liz. It's just giving people that space and time to actually think about that isn't it? And Simon, what would be on your wish list?
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- Simon:** Well, firstly, Liz, those were wonderful words and it had the hair standing up on the back of my neck, I must say, so hats off to you for that. I think it would, well, it's bound to be a number of things, isn't it? Liz spoke about continuous learning and development, lifelong learning. I think that's definitely something that we need to be more systematic about, recognising learning and development isn't just for people in their 20s, 30s, maybe early 40s. So how can senior employees get a chance to still improve, to re-skill, to re-tool, including that, by the way, returning workers. Nine out of 10 returners are women, many of whom have perhaps been bringing up family or have had caring responsibilities. So how can we recognise that? Flexibility is something we've spoken about. I think that's crucial. It shouldn't be seen as a favour.
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- Ellie:** I love that.
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- Simon:** Mentoring, I think, is a biggie. There's so much value, as Liz said, in being able to spread our learning up and down the age continuum. I think there's also something around recognition, because a lot of what Liz is doing at Ernst and Young is hardwiring different habits and behaviours and recognising them for the value that they bring. And I think that in turn brings up the notion of mental health and wellbeing. I think a multi-generational world and workplace is a great catalyst for really encouraging the importance of learning, of health, physical and mental health and learning from one another. And then on the final side of things, I think it's probably around how to spread the word into the communities that we live and work in and to recognise that what we do in the workplace also should mirror what we want to see outside the foyer of our place of work or the entrance to our manufacturing plant.
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- Ellie:** Well, Liz and Simon, thank you so much for joining me today and really shining a light on the many benefits of supporting and retaining senior talent and sharing such inspiring stories. I think it's clear that age inclusive businesses are no doubt positioning themselves well ahead in these tough times of talent shortages, economic uncertainty, and even with the dawn of AI.

Ellie:

If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website <http://www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch> or if you have questions for me, Liz or Simon or perhaps suggestions of topics you'd like us to cover in future, then please get in touch by emailing us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk. We'd really love to hear from you. And finally, if you enjoyed this episode, we'd be so grateful if you could spare a moment to rate, review and subscribe, and please spread the word by telling a colleague about us. Thank you all for listening and we hope you'll join us again in two weeks.



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