



# Age discrimination laws could trigger avalanche of claims

**SWEEPING** age discrimination laws will change the face of Britain's workplaces and lead to a flood of compensation claims, experts warn.

Many firms are ill-prepared for controversial reforms being introduced next month and can expect 20,000 legal challenges a year from disgruntled employees, they say.

New legislation will make any form of age discrimination in the workplace illegal. It will be punishable by unlimited compensation awards.

The changes herald the biggest shake-up in employment law since the sex and race discrimination laws of the 1970s.

Recruitment law experts who have assessed the likely impact of the legislation, which comes into force on October 1, say it will give workers a vast range of new grounds on which to take action against their employers.

Firms will no longer be able to offer promotions to staff on the basis of length of service. At the same time, clearing out the 'old guard' at a firm simply to make way for younger staff could

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land companies in serious legal trouble. Age-related remarks in the office will become illegal, according to experts, in the same way that sexual banter is frowned on.

Women staff have won huge amounts in compensation after being subjected to comments of a sexual nature from colleagues.

Simply muttering that a young worker is 'wet behind the ears' or 'needs to go around the block a few times' could lead to legal action, experts say.

Job advertisements asking for 'young and dynamic' applicants could fall foul of the new laws, and firms will no longer be able to set retirement ages below 65.

The traditional 'milk round' of career fairs at universities could be challenged on age discrimination grounds.

Sabbaticals or extra holidays awarded to staff as a reward for long service – a policy adopted by half of all British businesses – are likely to become illegal.

Firms could also be vulnerable to 'ambulance-chasing' applications from

older out-of-work candidates whose main aim is to launch a legal case when they are rejected. Unlike unfair dismissal compensation, which is capped at £56,800, age discrimination payouts will be unlimited.

The aim of the legislation, which has been introduced to comply with an EU directive, is to create an 'age neutral' employment market.

Jon Tait, a recruitment expert at Capital Consulting, said it would have a wide range of consequences.

'All the evidence suggests that many firms are not ready for this change and haven't realised how astonishingly wide its implications are,' he said.

'It is going to fundamentally alter the way offices work right across the country.'

Jon Whiteley, the firm's head of diversity, forecast thousands of new claims at employment tribunals.

They already deal with 100,000 work dispute cases a year. Mr Whiteley predicted 20,000 extra cases could be brought on age-related grounds.

He said bans on office banter that could be construed as 'ageist' would create 'antiseptic workplaces'.