



## Easing the skills crisis with intelligent PPE

*Around 25% of UK Construction workers are over 50, and as the Industry prepares to lose more of its skilled workforce over the next decade, questions are being asked about the factors contributing to the problem and what possible solutions we need to implement, if a crisis is to be averted.*

*Stuart Walsh, Managing Director of Gripaid Ltd, has developed Gripeeze, a product that aims to prolong the working life of our older construction workers and help to prevent early retirement later in the lives of younger tradesmen.*

*Here, Stuart looks at how a simple revision to our standard PPE kits, could alleviate some of the pressure on one the UK's leading economic drivers.*

The skills shortage currently facing UK construction presents a set of challenges never before faced by any individual sector. Not only is it resulting in rising wages and a delay in crucial work to the country's infrastructure, but efforts to rectify the impending housing crisis are also being hindered by the deficit in young workers coming up through the ranks, with housebuilding currently running at around half the level needed to meet demand.

But as well as addressing this deficit in young skill, there is also a massive opportunity to ensure our older workers, those who are already committed to their jobs, with a valuable skillset and robust work ethic, are encouraged to remain in work, on our building sites, for as long as possible.

A large percentage of the construction workforce is approaching natural retirement age, but there is an additional proportion being forced to retire early due to work-related ill-health. Furthermore, recent studies show that awareness of the effect that the aging population is having on the construction sector, has declined since 2009, indicating that it is more important than ever for employers to be encouraged to tackle the issue by offering them as many options as possible, before construction is faced with 'mass-retirement'.

So how many skilled tradesmen are out there, unable to work due to injury? How many would be able to work again if the opportunity address their injury was made available? And what impact would it have on the economy if a large proportion of these skilled tradesmen were able to return to work?

The construction industry is unique, in that workers generally accept ill-health and injury as 'part of the job' and early retirement is largely accepted. A study of construction workers in Ireland<sup>1</sup> showed that musculoskeletal disorders accounted for 30% of all early retirements - as well as back problems, this encompasses a range of conditions referred to as Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), Cumulative Trauma Disorder (CTD) and Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS). In bricklayers, carpenters and plasters, these injuries are commonly caused by overuse and consequent damage to muscles in the hands, arms and shoulders, due to constant gripping of tools and pneumatic power drills.

Early retirement not only has connotations for the skills crisis, it presents a further problem in that less skilled operatives are available to train and transfer their skills to the upcoming workforce. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has reported that although vacancies are often available, most candidates offer insufficient skills and work experience to bridge the gap. It seems obvious then, that in order to address this issue on a number of levels, more care has to be taken of our older, skilled workforce.

Whilst prevention rather than cure is the favourable route, it's now a luxury that many of older workforce no longer have. So, what can be done to get them back out on site? And to prolong the working life of those approaching the same situation?

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Gloves are a standard, everyday item in construction PPE, yet it's the hands and arms that typically incur RSI in bricklayers, carpenters and plasterers. This is caused by repetitive overuse of the hands, which then transfers up the arm and into the shoulder, resulting in pain, cramp, lack of dexterity, numbness, tingling and weakness. These symptoms are further exacerbated by poor circulation brought about by hands being in a gripping position for long periods.

It makes sense therefore, that Gripeeze has started here in the bid to to combat RSI - representing a simple rethink in how we utilise gloves to prolong working life-span and preventing later injury.

A simple strapping mechanism works to fix the hand in place around the work equipment being used, allowing the user to 'let go' of the item whilst retaining a steadfast grip. The muscles in the hand are immediately relaxed, as too are the muscles in the arm, thus allowing full circulation in the fingers and relieving tension in related muscles around the neck and shoulders.

Whilst the idea is modest, the implications of this are significant. Tradesmen with arthritis and RSI problems, who would normally have had to consider retirement, now have the potential to continue working, no longer hindered by previous injury and not at risk of incurring further damage.

By revising standard PPE to include a modified glove, we secure the future wellbeing of our younger workforce, offering potential for a longer, more productive working life, protecting and preserving their muscles.

A recent study conducted by Loughborough University concluded that the opportunity for designing tools and procedures more suited to the older worker has so far been largely overlooked. But why even think about designing new tools when it's possible to provide the resources to continue using existing ones, thus preserving industry costs and quickly increasing the productivity of our most skilled tradesmen.

Tip of the iceberg it may be, but perhaps ensuring the longevity of our most experienced personnel is the most obvious place to start.

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Sources: <sup>1</sup>H Brenner and W Ahern Article: Sickness absence and early retirement on health grounds in the construction industry in Ireland (2000).