Assessing cognitive function in an ageing workforce

Daniel Collerton, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust

Age is the single greatest risk factor for cognitive loss. As retirement age shifts, more workers are continuing in employment to ages where impairment becomes possible. However, relatively few workers become impaired and cognitive changes can be variable in type and severity, making the identification of cognitive change challenging in individual cases.

Poor concentration and mild forgetfulness are often non-specific, but severe forgetfulness, personality change, and impaired language and perception are more often indicative of true cognitive loss.

Clinical observation, informant opinion, and client self-report allow potentially ambiguous evidence to be checked.

For structured assessments, a two stage approach is most effective. An initial assessment of the impacts of cognitive change using an interview provides the context for interpreting the results of a formal cognitive assessment. The Clinical Dementia Rating Scale is a simple, validated interview based tool for estimating cognitive disability which is available without cost for non-commercial uses. Of the various cognitive tests that are available, the Addenbrooke’s Cognitive Examination is free, requires little training, and gives a good balance of breadth and depth within a short assessment.

As with all structured assessments, results are less reliable in the context of extremes of ability or education. The presence of poor physical or mental health makes simple cognitive assessments unreliable and potentially invalid and is usually an indicator for referral for more expert neuropsychological assessment.

The practical impacts of cognitive change can be difficult to predict and on job performance remains the most reliable method. Well practiced skills can often be surprisingly well preserved.

References
Biography

Daniel Collerton did his first psychology degree at the University of Cambridge and his clinical training at Newcastle University after research at the Institute of Psychiatry in London. He is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist with Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust where he manages the psychology service for older people in the South of Tyne area. He is an Associate Teacher in Clinical Psychology with Newcastle University. He specialises in the cognitive problems of later life and, in addition to his clinical work, he has collaborated in several studies of cognitive change in old age including the Newcastle 85+ study.