

Embracing the Gray: Leveraging the Aging Talent Pool

The global population is aging.

It is projected that the world population of those 60 and older will increase steeply starting in 2025 and reach 2 billion in 2050. Meanwhile, research on work-life expectancy has shown that many people are able to work efficiently well into their 70s, leading many to question the validity of the “common” retirement age of 65, which was established decades ago and did not account for improved physical and cognitive health of the population nor our increased life expectancy. Today, as the labor shortage continues, organizations would be wise to ensure their talent pools include older workers, yet there are real barriers, misguided assumptions and age-based biases that undervalue and overlook their contributions.

“Ageism is defined as discrimination against older people because of negative and inaccurate stereotypes – and it’s so ingrained in our culture that we often don’t even notice.”

Kirsten Weir, “A New Concept on Aging,”
Monitor on Psychology magazine



The Benefits

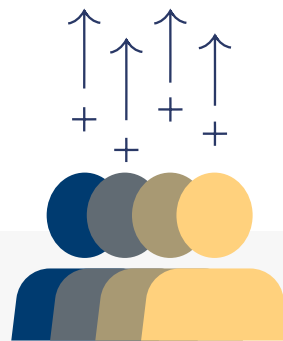
Hiring older workers certainly has several potential advantages:

Knowledge and Experience. Older employees often possess a wealth of professional skills and knowledge. Those who choose to continue to work in the same industry, or even the same organization, may require considerably less time and resources to be onboarded or go through on-the-job training. Such experience may also enable them to achieve a higher level of performance at a faster pace.

Soft Skills. Decades of work experience can not only sharpen older employees' technical skills and job knowledge but may also have enabled them to develop a wide range of soft skills that are equally if not more valuable for the company's productivity, such as skills in building relationships, communication and collaboration and even developing others, as research has shown that older employees and experienced retirees are more likely to enjoy mentoring and developing others.

Intrinsic Motivation. Older professionals' motivations for remaining in or returning to the workforce vary, from financial need to a desire for social interaction or a sense of purpose. Whatever the reason, research has shown that older employees tend to be more satisfied with their job and have stronger intrinsic motivation (motivated to perform for the job's sake, instead of external rewards), stronger satisfaction with coworkers and supervisors, stronger commitment to the organization, and greater loyalty to the organization.

Cost Benefits. Finally, hiring older workers, especially early retirees, may have financial benefits, since early retirees are often willing to work for a lower wage and will accept a more flexible employment contract (e.g., flexible work hours, part-time employment).



The Barriers

Despite the myriad advantages we've highlighted, many organizations are not prepared to deal with an aging and more age-diverse workforce. Numerous barriers can exist, including:

Age Bias in HR Practices. Current recruitment, selection and hiring practices of many organizations are designed for a younger workforce, and unconscious biases and stereotypes against older workers still widely exist.

- Recruiters/hiring managers may overlook older applicants due to concerns about them being resistant to change, lacking technological skills or being less adaptive.
- There is a false assumption that younger candidates are better suited for roles requiring fresh or innovative perspectives or that utilize the latest technology.
- Age bias may also be reflected in work equipment/setups (e.g., small laptop/monitor screen size or inadequate sound equipment that creates challenges for reading or hearing) and/or a work schedule that makes it difficult for older employees to successfully complete their work.

Age Bias in Talent Management. In some organizations, the way talent is managed tends to be based on perceived age-related differences in cognitive and physical abilities, career aspirations or commitment.

How is this manifested?

- **Implicit age bias in what "good" looks like:** When organizations inadvertently associate youthfulness with attributes like innovation, creativity or adaptability, it may result in older employees being perceived as less valuable or less capable of contributing to the organization's success, even when they possess extensive experience and knowledge.
- **Experience is undervalued:** Believing that younger employees are more adaptable or can more easily be molded to fit the company's mission and culture, organizations may overlook the valuable experience, expertise and wisdom that older employees bring to the table.
- **Stereotypes around skill sets:** Organizations may inadvertently base decisions using assumptions around certain skill sets or abilities. For example, older employees may be stereotyped as lacking technological skills or being resistant to change, negatively impacting their potential to be hired or promoted.
- **Assumptions limit opportunities for growth:** Organizations may unintentionally set different expectations for employees based on their age, which can limit opportunities for older employees. For instance, younger employees might be perceived as having more growth potential, while older employees may be assumed to be content in their current role and uninterested in opportunities for growth. This age-related bias can prevent older workers from getting the development needed to maximize their skills and their contributions.

Adapting to an Age-Diverse Workforce

Without age-agnostic HR and talent management processes as well as an age-diverse work environment, older workers may be misunderstood, devalued or dismissed, and as a result, they may be less engaged, unable to contribute their best or have little trust in the organization.

Older employees are often attracted to and thrive in accommodating work environments with flexible work arrangements (e.g., part-time hours, work from home), a [culture of inclusion](#) (e.g., free of affinity bias, zero-sum thinking, fear and conformity) and the opportunity to mentor and train other employees. Therefore, when looking to recruit and retain high-quality older talent, organizations should:

- **Create an inclusive work environment.** Cultivating [an inclusive work environment](#) in which everyone – including older employees – is valued and able to contribute their best is critical to business performance. Inclusion is not just about how workers *feel* – it is critical that older workers have access to information, networks, resources and other vital tools to deliver in their jobs. Older workers deserve to have their voices heard and the autonomy to make decisions in their role. This includes creating a workplace that provides for the comfort, safety and well-being of employees across all age groups, with work equipment that can accommodate potential changes in sensory and motor skills as one ages and job descriptions and duties that are free from potential age bias.
- **Refine your policies.** It is important to adhere to or refine your age discrimination policy that outlines the organization's commitment

to preventing ageism, the consequences of violating the policy and the process for reporting incidents. This is especially important for organizations to prevent legal repercussions as the workforce ages and as employees gain more awareness around age discrimination.

- **Implement bias-aware recruitment practices.** Conduct a thorough analysis to identify the key competencies, skills and qualifications required for each position, ensuring selection and assessment criteria are based on actual job requirements, rather than subjective preferences or age-related stereotypes (e.g., technological incompetence, resistance to change, low energy or low learning capabilities, etc.). Use this information to revise job descriptions and requirements to focus on skills, experience and qualifications instead of age or years of experience. Utilize age-neutral language in job advertisements and ensure that all recruitment materials are inclusive. Incorporate age diversity targets in recruitment goals to monitor progress and hold hiring managers accountable.
- **Offer equal access to training and development.** Regularly assess the learning needs of employees across different age groups and tailor training programs accordingly. Ensure that professional development and growth opportunities such as leadership programs are open to all employees, regardless of age. And because older workers may experience certain challenges with traditional training programs, consider utilizing a variety of learning methods and modalities to deliver better learning outcomes for young and older learners alike.

Rethinking Talent Management Practices

Organizations must also rethink their talent practices to accommodate an aging workforce. This includes consideration of age-related modifications to talent assessment, training, development practices, etc. to ensure equal opportunity, inclusivity and freedom from bias. The strategies below will help to ensure your organization is prepared for the future as the workforce continues to age and change.

Unconscious bias training: Provide unconscious bias training for hiring managers, HR professionals and supervisors to raise awareness about age discrimination and other forms of bias. Training should include strategies such as perspective taking, where participants learn to mentally walk in someone else's shoes, and goal setting, which involves setting specific and measurable objectives for diversity outcomes. Conducting a thorough process audit of talent management practices through the lens of potential ageism can also help to identify areas of unintended age discrimination that can then be adjusted to remove such bias.

Adopt bias-free assessment/evaluation methods: Incorporate methods designed to reduce the potential for discrimination and unconscious biases during various selection or evaluation processes in which assessments are used. These can include:

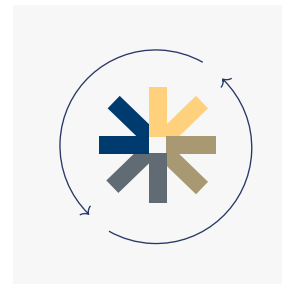
- **Skills-based assessments:** Use skills-based assessments such as structured interviews, work samples, simulations or technical tests to evaluate candidates' abilities directly related to the job. This evidence-based method is focused on the candidate's actual performance, reducing the influence of age bias.



- **Standardized performance evaluations:** Because traditional performance appraisal systems often hold the widespread bias that older employees are less adaptable or are resistant to change, they can be detrimental to older employees, especially when performance is evaluated solely based on subjective judgements from supervisors. Develop performance criteria based on the specific job requirements and competencies needed for success in each role, ensuring that these criteria are objective, measurable and not influenced by age-related stereotypes or biases. Utilize 360-degree feedback or multi-rater assessments to gather performance insights from various sources, including peers, subordinates and supervisors. This approach can help mitigate the influence of age bias by providing a more comprehensive and balanced assessment of an employee's performance.

Combatting Ageism is a Continuous Process

Last but not least, it is important to continuously review talent management processes to identify potential areas of age bias and discrimination. Regularly analyze data related to hiring, promotion and performance evaluations to detect patterns or trends that may suggest age discrimination. Implement a comprehensive employee listening program to provide you with insight into the experience of inclusion for all employees, including older workers. Make necessary adjustments to processes based on these findings to foster inclusion, fairness and objectivity, and to take advantage of this often underutilized and underappreciated talent pool.



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