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Transitioning Workplace Paradigms: Addressing an Aging Workforce

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While many employees look forward to retirement, there is a growing cohort of aging professionals who have no intention of leaving the workforce. Whether currently employed, seeking a job, or contemplating a career shift, the aging workforce presents a unique set of circumstances to an organization's culture, environment, and structure.

Providing quarterly seminars to large groups of federal employees retiring from government service, I am a firsthand witness to the impact of life-altering transitions and shifting careers. Aged 55 and older, the majority of my audience is comprised of participants that are either planning to launch a second career in the private sector or start their own business.

Meanwhile, senior executives who would typically age out of corporate careers in the private sector are now being asked to stay longer in order to avoid the loss of knowledge and experience these employees bring to the organization. Conversely, other aging employees are either being 'pushed out' of roles they have spent a lifetime building, or losing jobs they desperately needed.

With 35-plus years of employment history, the aging workforce has much to offer organizations that need experienced leaders, knowledgeable employees, and loyal foot soldiers. Connecting an older workforce into a workplace culture that is driven by youthful exuberance conjures up images of Robert De Niro adjusting to his role as a 70-year-old employee in the movie: *The Intern*. Whether or not your older employees are returning to the workforce as an intern, more often than not, they possess a goldmine of knowledge and experience that is worth excavating for your organization.

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As with any effective organization, maximizing human capital is a critical component to success. There are two primary generations to bear in mind when addressing an aging workforce: The tail end of the Silent generation (those age 74 and older) and the Baby Boomers (those age between 55 and 73). Each of these two generations have distinct characteristics that, when

understood and capitalized upon, bring significant advantages to the organization's strength as a whole.

Additionally, and aside from the perspectives driven by age differences, when employing older workers in an intergenerational workforce, there are many factors organizations need to consider.

Management Styles and Systems. Management plays a critical role in employee performance. Because there are positive and negative perceptions which may affect a manager's treatment of an aging workforce, it is important to educate leadership about generational differences. Since traditional variables of age and experience are no longer defining management potential, a key challenge of the multi-generational workforce is the lack of comfort with younger employees managing older employees. If management is leading from an outdated paradigm or a one-dimensional mindset, organizations will suffer the loss of both young talent and mature knowledge.

- ✓ Consider Gallup's Workplace Management Practice research which has suggested aging managers must learn to transition from the traditional 'boss' mentality toward today's 'manager-as-coach' mindset.ⁱ
- ✓ Acknowledge and address accordingly, generational management expectations:
 - Silent generation respects authority and won't question their lead.
 - Baby Boomers question everything and prefer managers who seek consensus or treat them as equals.
 - Generation X prefers managers who are straightforward, genuine, and hands-off.
 - Generation Y (Millennials) want constant feedback from management.
 - Generation Z are independent-minded and expect autonomy.
- ✓ Encourage managers and employees to look for opportunities to capitalize on what each generation has to offer the collective goal.
- ✓ Be mindful of generational differences or perspectives regarding authority and work hierarchy, management should align their approach to individual employees accordingly.

Goal-setting. Generational differences affect the way a goal is viewed, pursued, and reached. The aging workforce is very goal-oriented. Whether setting their own goals or having goals established for a team, they are motivated by goals and are driven toward fulfillment of that end point. When setting goals with Silent and Boomer employees, consider the following about these groups:

- ✓ They prefer clear goals with specific timeline expectations.
- ✓ They were weaned on SMART goals and will follow that prescription for successful goal-setting.

- ✓ They are accustomed to an *annual review process* and will need to adjust to a system of reviewing progression points for coaching / review sessions with team leaders.
- ✓ They appreciate acknowledgement of milestones as smaller goals reached along the path toward the final, larger or team goal.

Relationship-building. In a survey of 20,000 employees, the top reason people leave their job include poor management, senior leadership, and communication.ⁱⁱ Creating a culture of relationship-building is based on gaining a personal understanding of individuals. Knowing specific aspects of individual capabilities, personal interests, and skill strengths will improve productivity and job satisfaction among all employees. Developing a company-wide intergenerational understanding of perspectives will improve competitiveness, reduce age discrimination, and avoid 'brain drain'.

- ✓ Provide an environment which encourages the establishment of productive and meaningful working relationships.
 - Encourage continuous communication among team members
 - Provide opportunities for team members to share pertinent information about one another
 - Utilize software that maximizes cooperative tasks / information sharing
 - Clarify roles and goals of team members to prevent 'overstepping' but allow 'collaborative efforts'
- ✓ Listen. Aging employees want to know they are being heard and that their ideas matter.
- ✓ Know the generational relationship *modus operandi* and educate the workforce about communication differences:
 - Silent Generation are accustomed to dealing with people and have excellent interpersonal skills.
 - Baby Boomers prefer face to face communication.
 - Generation X wants information delivered informally.
 - Generation Y insists on giving feedback whether requested, welcome, warranted or not.
 - Generation Z considers email old school and uses their phone screen to communicate.ⁱⁱⁱ

Work-Life Balance. Most aging employees have gained a sense of the rapid passage of time and will not waste their energy in an unfulfilling role. Additionally, many are struggling with both the management of elderly parents' needs and the launching of their young adult children. They will remain loyal workers if their job can maintain a sense of meaning and purpose with regard to their personal goals or challenges.

- ✓ Consider phased retirement programs such as reducing workday to part-time or remote consultation as needed
- ✓ Develop knowledge transfer capabilities and options for work tasks that can be fulfilled remotely.

- ✓ Offer flexible working arrangements as an incentive to hire and retain aging talent.

Physical needs. A friend recently told me about her husband's situation as the CFO of a major, multi-national employer. She noted "he works so hard and would love a chance to get some exercise during the day. They have a great facility, but there is no way he would work out among all those young kids in spandex. Plus he's concerned he might get injured." Daily exercise may be even more critical for the aging workforce as it is for younger employees. The aging employee needs fitness opportunities, ergonomic considerations, and wellness programming capable of accommodating older bodies that do not move, sit, or flex the same way younger bodies do. It is important to evaluate an organization's options for the physical needs and interests of aging employees.

- ✓ Consider providing outdoor walking trails or indoor walking maps for discreet exercise opportunities.
- ✓ Insist that in-house fitness personnel have certification and/or knowledge about training or exercise with older populations.
- ✓ Equip exercise facilities with AED (Automated External Defibrillator) and other safety and emergency devices and offer training regarding their use to employees.
- ✓ Coordinate programming that offers slow-moving, strength-building, flexibility-enhancing, and balance-improving activities like Tai Chi or Yoga.
- ✓ Ask older workers what kind of activities they would enjoy participating in at work

General Strengths & Suggestions. For the employees that are reentering the workforce to simply stay active, we find that the job title is often not as important as the interest in the work they are doing. For many, they have spent the majority of their lives doing what had to be done and are looking to satisfy a passion or interest with their later, most likely, optional working years. Some simply want to use their knowledge and experience to serve others. As self-disciplined, eager learners with a strong work ethic, the aging workforce has many strengths to offer. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers are dogged, determined workers who show consistently higher levels of engagement.^{iv} In addition, the Silent Generation is the healthiest and most educated generation of elders that have ever lived.^v With decades of accumulated organizational knowledge that will be lost with their departure, it is important to keep in mind the following:

- ✓ Discuss where they think they would be best utilized within the organization.
- ✓ Understand the specific human capital they have to offer the organization and try to match it with opportunities that will utilize their strengths.
- ✓ Remember, they are often working because they 'want' to be there, not because they 'need' to be there.

- ✓ Be mindful of the fact that if you want them to stay, you need to give them a reason to do so.
- ✓ Set them up as mentors and educators to employees who would benefit from their work or life experiences.
- ✓ Find *patient* Generation X, Y, or Z employees to serve as 'learning partners' for aging employees with technology gaps.

If you want to keep your young, talented employees, as well as benefit from your older workforce, the entire organization needs to understand the mores of the various generations they are working with throughout the day. An effort to educate employees about generational differences will not only enhance job satisfaction, it will also improve intergenerational productivity.



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Resources:

ⁱ Harter, Jim, Ph.D., Chief Scientist for Gallup Workplace Management. Interview conducted by Mary Ellen Rose, PhD for WELLCOM. 2019

ⁱⁱ Branham, Leigh. 2005. 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

ⁱⁱⁱ Trunk, Penelope. 2011. Get Ready to Hire Generation Z.

<https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/get-ready-to-hire-generation-z/>

^{iv} Pitt-Catsoupes, M., Matz-Kosta, C., & Besen, E. (2009). Workplace flexibility: Findings from the Age and Generations Study. Boston: Sloan Center on Aging and Work, Boston College.

^v Howe, Neil. The Silent Generation, "The Lucky Few"

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