

OLDER WORKERS: The Solution to Coming Labour Shortages by Angelo Pesce, CHRP, CMC

Stemming the Exodus

The first “tsunami” wave of baby boomers reached age of 56 in 2002. This large group is beginning its slide into retirement. Those of us charged with responsibility for human resources must find ways to stem the mass exodus that will begin the next decade. We need to create a work environment that entices the aging worker to see value in remaining in the workforce.

Why do this? We are facing a labour shortage, thanks in large part to demographic trends. The generation following the baby boomers, better known as the “baby bust” generation, is a much smaller cohort and won’t help us meet our future work-force requirements. Moreover, the 20-and-under cohort will continue to decline as an overall percentage of the total population due to the falling fertility rate in Canada. At the other end of the spectrum, the over-65 population will continue to increase. Where are the workers going to come from?

Why We Need Older Workers

Canada has traditionally turned to immigration to fill labour shortages. However, with the declining fertility rate, immigration is only part of the solution. Indeed, the target quotas established annually by the federal government for new immigrants have not been met for some years now. Many who immigrate to Canada often face issues regarding the value of their academic and professional credentials and matching experience in the Canadian context. This has led to the underutilization of many skilled immigrants.

Reductions in the labour force, undertaken in the last generation when there was a surplus of workers, have worked too effectively. Deferred income schemes, registered pension plans, and registered retirement savings plans (RRSPs) were established to foster financial independence so that individuals could leave the work force as early as possible. Many did just that, and it now seems we are paying the price.

When coupled with the trend to lower fertility rates, the picture is looking bleak: future employment shortages are looming. What can be done? The solution that makes the most sense is to retain our aging workforce by creating a flexible work place that meets their needs.

The baby boomers will no doubt take advantage of all financial schemes, such as pension plans, deferred salaries, and RRSPs to retire. While they will retire, this doesn’t mean they don’t want to work. In fact, they will insist on a choice to continue working or not. They will also insist on working differently: a different kind of work, different hours, and different days or periods of time.

In future, successful organizations will have a very large component of older workers in their staff mix. How can this be? We often worry about an aging work force because we assume older workers are not as productive, get hurt more, can’t learn new things, get sick a lot, and are generally not desirable employees.

We are learning a great deal about aging and the impact it has on an employee’s ability to stay productive. Through research being done at Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care and other

organizations, we are making huge leaps in understanding what happens to the body as we age: from the brain to the toes.

Stereotypes about Older Workers

It's time to change our thinking. Let's examine the stereotypes commonly associated with the older worker and the real skills and assets this worker brings to an organization.

Myth: Older workers are in poorer health and require more sick days.

Fact: In fact, they are absent for fewer days than younger workers.

Myth: Older workers are more accident-prone.

Fact: Older workers have a lower accident rate than their younger counterparts.

Myth: Work performance decreases with age.

Fact: Older people show a decrease in performance on tests for cognitive (mental) ability because these tests are designed to omit factors such as experience. Yet it is experience and knowledge accumulated over the years that enable older workers to perform on par with, if not above, younger workers.

Myth: Older workers are less trainable than younger workers.

Fact: Older workers can learn quickly and effectively, provided they approach the task at their own pace, have access to written instructions, and can practise various elements of the task.

Truths about Older Workers

The truth is that older workers are an important asset to the work place. Employers who adjust the work environment to meet the needs of older workers will benefit for the following reasons:

- Older workers need less supervision because of their reliability and conscientiousness.
- Older workers report that they continue to work for several reasons: in order to remain active, for life experience, and for the social network. As a result they tend to be loyal and co-operative with employers and staff.
- Older workers tend to report higher job satisfaction, which results in a lower turnover rate.
- While some older workers will perform at a slower pace, when quality of output is measured, the number of products produced has been found equal between age groups.

As mentioned above, they have the gift of experience, which makes them a valuable resource for on-the-job knowledge.

How to Accommodate Older Workers

It's important that employers understand the cognitive, physical, and sensory changes that happen as one ages and how this can have an impact on work. If employers understand these changes, and make efforts to accommodate them through supportive and flexible HR practices, they can be managed quite successfully. Here are five approaches that create a work place that capitalises on the strengths and accommodates the weaknesses of the older worker.

1. Accommodate cognitive changes

As adults age, the brain undergoes a decline in cognitive speed, problem-solving, divided attention, recent memory, and perspective memory (e.g., remembering an appointment). What do not decline are knowledge, sustained attention, immediate and remote memory, and accuracy. The impact on work will mean that more time is needed for learning, repetition, and practice, and 'uni'-tasking.

Employers can counterbalance these effects by providing training that allows the older worker to work at his/her own pace, practise new skills, and avoid embarrassment. You can also offer memory training and exercise programs, continued education ("use it or lose it"), training in stress management and organizational skills, group work-based activity, and coaching.

Studies have shown that older individuals tend to be morning people, while younger individuals tend to be evening people. If older workers function and perform better during the first half of the day, organizations should consider placing them into a morning work schedule, rather than an afternoon.

2. Accommodate physical changes

Older workers are at risk of a number of medical problems; these might include high blood pressure, various types of heart disease, arthritis, and other conditions associated with aging. Health problems can affect workers in many ways, for example:

- requiring more time to complete certain tasks, but not necessarily decreasing the quality or accuracy of the task
- reducing the ability to deal with excessive physical stress
- requiring more physician visits, more bathroom breaks, more days off, and a less strenuous workload. This can result in increased absenteeism and lower productivity. However, older workers are often among the most responsible employees and, in fact, absenteeism may not be a significant problem.

Employers should consider the following initiatives to help promote a healthy and productive lifestyle:

- Provide on-site exercise facilities or encourage use of external facilities
- Encourage informal low-impact exercise
- Offer nutritional programs and counselling
- Encourage regular medical visits
- Allow modified work routines with more flexibility, especially in terms of schedules
- Invest in office and technical aids to help older workers
- Identify a mentor or coach who can be approached when there are problems that have to be addressed.

3. Accommodate sensory changes

Older workers are also at risk for visual and auditory deterioration, including decreased visual acuity and loss of high-frequency hearing. The impact on the work place can include increased error rate and incidence of accident, and slower performance of tasks, most of which can be rectified by proper attention to treatment and the use of sensory aids (hearing aids, glasses, etc.).

To help keep the error rate within the normal range, employers should provide larger computer screens, brighter and appropriate office lighting, and appropriate health insurance benefits (e.g. optical, hearing aids). You should educate your staff how to communicate effectively with older employees without bias or the appearance of condescension.

4. Motivate older workers

While changing the environment in ways that accommodate the needs of the older worker is important, motivation is another key consideration in keeping older workers engaged and committed. All workers, irrespective of age, will work faster and longer when they are provided with incentives and encouragement. The older individual should be eligible for promotion, exposure, and opportunities to learn different aspects of the field.

5. Create retiree alumni

Build a pool of retired employees you can draw upon to fill part-time, contract, and volunteer positions in your organization. Just as universities do, make them part of an alumni association through which they receive your in-house newsletter, annual report, and invitations to attend special celebratory events.

Recently retired employees who've had a positive experience with your work place will want to maintain ties and remain in touch with colleagues. Many will desire to stay productive and busy, and will welcome an opportunity to volunteer or work for you again in a more flexible arrangement.

Conclusion

With an open mind, greater understanding, and some accommodation, we will find that the way to solve the labour shortage of the future lies within the very group whose exodus will cause the problem.

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