

# **The 50+ Worker and the Modern Workplace**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

Retirement is both an option and a liability to society and to the older person concerned with sustaining themselves after the support of full time employment ends. The retirement of the baby boomer generation will dramatically affect the American workforce for years to come (Montenegro, p. 7). Large numbers of retirements will lead to a decline in organizational workplace expertise. Moreover, successfully bridging the movement from a full-time job to engaging in experimentation with alternative occupations in retirement is a focus for many individuals seeking continued meaningful lives. Work and the associated mental benefits of gainful employment tend to uphold the self-esteem of older workers. This desire for sustained self-esteem leads them to seek a sense of “fulfillment” and a feeling of “being productive to society” that, in turn, will hold them in the workplace (Montenegro, p.10). For many, belonging to a work community has been the sustaining social contact in their lives and losing it is seen as detrimental to their well-being.

In a study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in conjunction with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) (McIntosh, p. 6) it was determined that:

1. Older workers have a higher level of organizational commitment than younger workers.
2. Training older workers costs less than or is the same as training younger workers.
3. Age does not affect the amount of time required to train an employee.
4. Older workers are able to grasp new concepts as well as younger workers.

A significant observation is that older people are a fast growing demographic in both Internet and technology use with many fully embracing modern methods of communication. This eagerness to learn information technology is a trait corporations



Older workers (45 and beyond) are also at a distinct disadvantage when seeking work due to misconceptions as to their productive capacity by hiring personnel. This can lead to a systemic perception by management that expending monies on hiring or training for these workers is wasted. Thus a “self-fulfilling prophecy” is created in which older workers are not allowed to enhance and/or maintain their technical skills to the same level as their younger co-workers. It is also important to note that the longer time an older worker is unemployed, the less likely s/he will be to seek employment given feelings that they are inadequate [a compounded impact of psychological and perceptual negative, stereotypical type casting] (Kossen).

Legislation forbids age discrimination (Montenegro, Kossen). Unfortunately, many managers judge older workers not on age but on a perceived lack of technical skills and diminished cognitive capacity. Older workers become labeled by unsubstantiated assumptions by management that as employees they will, if hired, demonstrate: increased absenteeism due to illness; more accidents on the job thus increased health care costs; and a tendency to not remain on the job long enough to fully contribute to organization enhancement of internal “experiential knowledge.”...they don’t contribute enough because they won’t be around long enough to contribute (Kossen).

Additionally, knowledge and experience of older workers are discounted against unsupported managerial misconceptions. It has been clearly documented that older workers are adaptable and can be retrained at less cost than hiring and training younger workers. Furthermore employment of older workers in productive jobs is becoming a necessity: given modern society birth rates, demographics, and the emerging fact that there are not enough young, skilled workers to fill necessary work roles (Montenegro, Kossen).

A crucial impediment to reversing management preconceptions about the accumulative affects of age is to challenge and change management’s artificially constructed models of age. Current perceptions of aging see it as “defect accumulation” in which aging is perceived as a period of “substantial mental and physical decline” (Kossen, p. 15). This model is strongly held and it, as a paradigm, distorts many attempts to integrate the older worker more fully into the workplace. This model is “extremely resistant to contradictory data” (Kossen, p. 16) and masks the productive work older

employees contribute to the workplace. Thus the efforts of even older workers currently employed in the workplace become an “exception to the rule” and thus undervalued or worse, ignored.

Another theory that contributes to negative aging preconceptions states that older people become “disengaged” from mainstream society (Kossen, p. 17). This is reinforced by social norms that say disengagement at a specific age is the desired outcome of becoming older. Thus aging becomes a time driven decline that is medically labeled wherein older people suffer from a gerontological negative “medical disease”. While aging was once associated with authority and respect (traditional, tribal societies) it is now considered a liability in a youth driven marketplace (western, individualistic). Societies that discard older people thus create an associated workplace realm in which unemployed older people are seen as less valued. “Local and international studies show quite convincingly that, across all economic classes the mortality rate of unemployed people is higher than those with jobs” (Kossen, p. 19).

Generally, overcoming these perceptions requires re-education of management and society as a whole. This process must directly and cogently challenge misplaced preconceptions about aging and the “uncritical use of the culturally conditioned deficit accumulation model of aging” (Kossen, p. 21). Change comes when people change their minds. As stated earlier, we need to remember that economically, the future holds a strategically important national need for increased numbers of skilled workers. Economies in growth create jobs and there is a concern that there will be a lack of workers to fill positions. Skilled workers will be at a premium with employers increasingly concerned about a lack of competent workers to fill future positions.

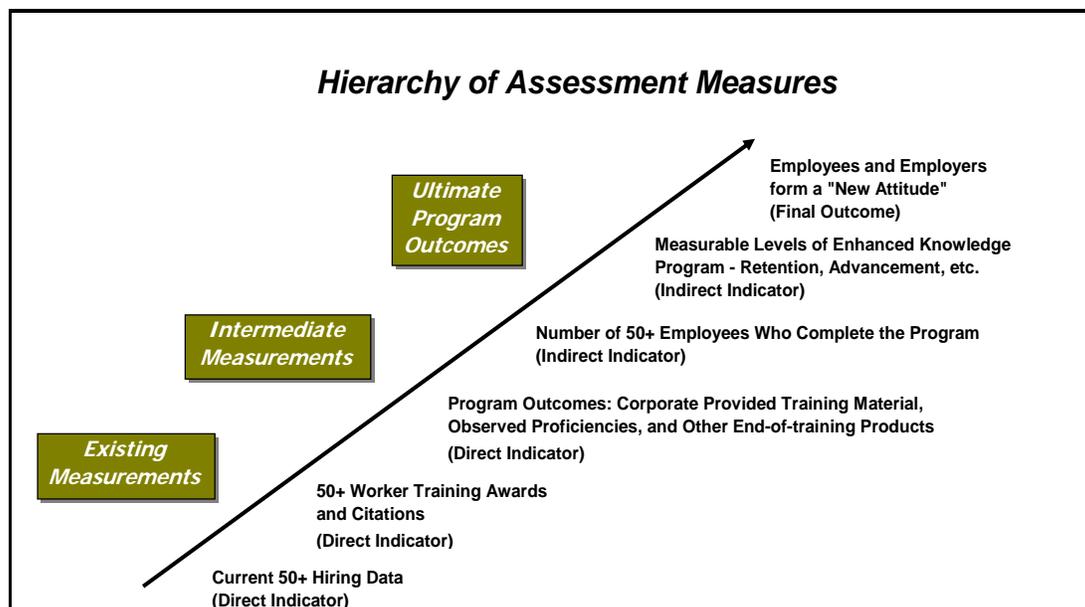
Empirical studies of “determinants of individual worker performance” (Kesselman, p. 12) present evidence that there is little decline in ability or productivity linked to age. Indeed productivity generally rises over the lifetime of worker (Kesselman, p. 12). “Older workers bring to the workplace a wealth of institutional knowledge and networking connections that cannot be replaced by younger workers. As the...economy enters an era of growing skills shortages, any policy that allows many of the most seasoned workers to be forced out of their jobs seems counterproductive” (Kesselman, p. 18).

Workers “starting work at 22 and retiring at 65 will spend only 39 years working, barely half their lifetime” (Kesselman, p. 18). Demographic changes foretell an aging population and holding well educated, experience workers in the workforce is an advantage that cannot be ignored (Montenegro, Penner, Dohm, Lichenstein).

## Further Study

Any organization that seeks to provide work for older workers needs to build its criteria for evaluation around the program stakeholders. Evaluation seeks to inform participants as to the effects of a given program by clearly assessing program activities. This process is graphically described by the following table.

## Exhibit 1



A company wishing to expand its employee base to include older workers should utilize the following questions as a means of determining their managerial preparedness:

1. How friendly is the job environment to the older worker?
2. Is the older worker respected by fellow employees?
3. Does the boss demonstrate respect to the older worker?

4. Does the workplace support racial and ethnic diversity?
5. Does the employer provide challenging opportunities for the worker to demonstrate knowledge and skill proficiency?
6. Does the employer support the older worker with learning opportunities designed around their needs?
7. Does the employer utilize the older worker in ways that allow him/her to help others?
8. Is scheduling of time at work seen by the older worker as flexible and reflective of their needs (part-time)?
9. Is the location of work convenient for the older worker (work-at-home)?
10. Does the employer provide health and pension benefits that support the older worker?

In essence, does the employer meet the needs of 50+ workers? Given the level of commitment company management makes to utilize the skills of older workers, these evaluative criteria must be integrated into HR program deployment.

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