

Older Just Means Older

Make it easier for mature workers • BY PATRICIA A. MILLIGAN AND PATTY P. SUNG



Patricia A. Milligan, top, is a senior partner and the regional president-North America for consultancy Mercer. Patty P. Sung is a principal in Mercer's talent business. This article has been adapted from the e-book "Education and Skills 2.0: New Targets and Innovative Approaches." They can be reached at editor@CLOmedia.com.

The view persists across the world — a broad perception that aging workers are ill-equipped to meet the physical demands of work and ill-suited to the new roles and expectations of the modern economy.

In studies and in conversations with HR experts, employers cite their lack of enthusiasm for mature workers, despite positive perceptions of this group's work experience, knowledge, loyalty and work habits. Employers complain of higher compensation costs compared with younger workers and the cost to train mature workers in new technologies. Employers hold many negative stereotypes: that mature workers are less productive than younger workers, produce lower-quality work, are less mobile and are resistant to change.

But ignoring the mature workforce — specifically, that portion of the workforce born in 1963 or earlier — may ultimately prove damaging. Despite years of recession and sluggish growth, employers across the world are struggling to find employees with the skills they need for business success. Limiting the hunt for critical skills to those under 50 unnecessarily restricts the field and increases the difficulties employers face.

So far, efforts to solve the problem have been pursued mainly on a piecemeal basis by individual entities. If anything, the changing demographics of populations around the world mean that employers have a smaller pool of new talent at their disposal. This is putting pressure on fields — especially health care and oil and gas industries — that require highly trained talent or specialized skills and whose current workforces are aging.

Limiting the hunt for critical skills to those under 50 restricts the field and increases the difficulties employers face.

Fortunately, solutions exist to cope with this new workforce challenge. Successful organizations are using three levers, individually or in combination, to close skills gaps, transfer knowledge and enhance productivity:

Lever 1: Retain mature workers to close critical

skills gaps in the short term.

Lever 2: Leverage the extensive knowledge and experience of mature workers and retirees to prepare the next-generation workforce.

Lever 3: Recruit and re-skill mature workers and retirees for new roles and new fields.

Some companies are implementing policies and practices that combine more than one of the aforementioned three levers to close skills gaps, transfer knowledge and enhance productivity. Central Baptist Hospital in Kentucky, facing health care-specific workforce challenges, uses all three.

Lever 1 is a flexible scheduling policy to keep mature, experienced workers on the job longer, although all employees can participate. CBH offers employees part-time, seasonal positions with full health care benefits, specific positions with shorter shifts and job or shift-sharing. It also enables employees to move from full time to part time while remaining in the same position, or to transfer to jobs with reduced patient responsibilities. Additionally, employees can request specific schedules and post schedules to an online website to facilitate shift changes.

Levers 2 and 3 involve the Career Coaching program, which helps develop a leadership pipeline and retain talent. The program facilitates knowledge transfer by providing nurses with support from a retired nurse coach. It also helps nurses develop action plans to attain career goals, including re-careering and continuing education. As a result, many nurses have returned to school to continue their education and develop new skills.

In combination, these programs have enabled CBH to reduce its turnover and job vacancy rates to a level well below the national benchmark for health care. In addition, the percentage of its registered nurses over age 45 providing positive job satisfaction ratings increased from 65 percent in 2006 to 88 percent in 2010.

That example is only one among many. But it shows that the returns to businesses, nations and the growing number of workers over 50 from such coordinated efforts can be substantial. At the same time, individuals who want to work both for personal satisfaction and financial security will benefit from these multi-levered efforts to ensure their work is valuable — and valued. **CLO**