Issues that Mature Workers Face in the Work Place

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Abstract
Technology is rapidly changing; mature workers often cannot compete with their younger counterparts if they are not willing to stay ahead of the technological learning curve. Doing this will keep them competitive in the job market and will provide endless opportunities when faced with the possibility of job loss due to downsizing and other factors. Unfortunately, employers believe that mature workers are more of liability than an asset compared to the younger workers and that older workers are not as current as younger workers. Further, many people in organizations believe that younger managers are better problem solvers than mature workers (Coy, 2005). This study will discuss the various issues that mature workers face and how they deal with transitioning into a world of technological changes. The study demonstrated that mature workers will constantly have to deal with many issues that are not facts. Even though these issues will continue to be difficult to solve, as long as mature workers continue to stay active and are willing to learn new things, organizations will be able to solve the issues and improve the workplace for all, including mature workers.

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Abstract

Technology is rapidly changing; mature workers often cannot compete with their younger counterparts if they are not willing to stay ahead of the technological learning curve. Doing this will keep them competitive in the job market and will provide endless opportunities when faced with the possibility of job loss due to downsizing and other factors. Unfortunately, employers believe that mature workers are more of liability than an asset compared to the younger workers and that older workers are not as current as younger workers. Further, many people in organizations believe that younger managers are better problem solvers than mature workers (Coy, 2005).

This study will discuss the various issues that mature workers face and how they deal with transitioning into a world of technological changes. The study demonstrated that mature workers will constantly have to deal with many issues that are not facts. Even though these issues will continue to be difficult to solve, as long as mature workers continue to stay active and are willing to learn new things, organizations will be able to solve the issues and improve the workplace for all, including mature workers.
Issues that Mature Workers Face in the Work Place

"With the global marketplace changing rapidly, organizations and employees must be adaptable and adoptive in order to remain competitive" (Palmer & Johnson, 2005, p.1). Palmer and Johnson spoke of the critical role that training and organizational development play within an organization. They also emphasized that training and organizational development programs could assist employees in adapting to social, economic, and technological changes.

Mature workers face several issues, including: how they transition into and deal with technological changes, ageism, and age discrimination. These workers must be adaptable and adoptive in their experience in dealing with the discrimination against them in order to remain a competitive group of people within the workforce.

The mature worker is defined as a person who is still active in the work force at the age of 50 and over. Most mature workers are considered to hail from the baby boomer era of the 1950's. This mature worker is an experienced worker who generally takes the job serious and has been on the job for 20 years or more and plans to retire from that position. Many times, the mature worker has taken a job early in life to make ends meet, but the job has often led to a life long career.
There are many different definitions for the mature or older workers within our society, but the US Age and Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) defines the mature worker as employees who are over 40 years of age or more and consider the proper age of to be retirement at age 65.

Unfortunately technology is rapidly changing; for younger workers; this change is less troubling because they are computer literate. More and more organizations are leaning towards a paperless workplace. When employees clock in, place orders, hold conversations, and search for information, they are performing these tasks on the computer. Can the mature worker adapt to these technological changes? Some believe that they can to a certain extent. When younger workers have already adjusted and the mature worker has to learn how to adjust, this type of behavior or learning style places them into two different categories. These categories have terms names to identify the workers. The term that is used to distinguish the two different types of workers are called Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. The younger worker is the native and the mature worker is the immigrant. The native was born into this new technology era, but the immigrant has to migrate into this new era. Even though they learn this new way, they still revert back to the old way
of doing things. Prensky stated, “like all immigrants, some better than others- to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their “accent,” that is, their foot in the past” (p. 2). One way or another mature worker is going to have to adapt to the new technology.

“In 2003, more than half (55.5%) of the workforce within the United States used a computer or some other form of technology at work. This number is continuing to grow, as will the scope and sophistication of technology (United States Bureau of labor statistics, 2005). Technology-based occupations are also expected to grow significantly in the upcoming decades. Thus, the question of how the increased use of technology in work environments affects employment opportunities for mature workers is an important one” (Charness & Czaja, 2006, p.2).

As time goes on and technology advances, the mature worker workforce may further decrease because some of these mature workers are not aspiring to learn any new things. Instead, many are waiting for retirement. Some are set in their ways of doing things the old inflexible way and are resistant to change. Even the younger worker who has some computer knowledge now may not keep themselves current with
the computer updates, and they will soon fall off as well and lose the competitive edge they once enjoyed. “By 2025, more than 20 percent of our population will be over the age of 65. Historically, we have also seen a drop in the age of retirement from 64.9 in 1976 t 61.4 in 2005” (HRPAO, 2008, ¶1). This data suggests that the retirement age will decrease more in years to come, and these mature workers will soon have to leave the workforce earlier than age 65.

Problems in the Job Market

Mature workers are also faced with a variety of other problems in the workforce and are stereotyped as well. Employers believe that mature workers will not show up for work on a daily basis opting instead to use their sick time and vacation days. They believe that the turn over rate for mature workers is much higher than that of younger workers. Organizations believe that mature workers do not move as quickly as younger workers do and they are not as creative as their younger counterparts. Lastly, organizations believe that younger managers are better problem solvers that older workers (Coy, 2005).

According to Coy (2005), “you have to first distinguish between avoidable absenteeism and unavoidable absenteeism. Avoidable absenteeism is lower for mature
workers but unavoidable absenteeism tends to be higher for older, more senior employees. The voluntary turnover rate for mature workers being higher than it is for younger workers is false. Mature workers tend to work more slowly with workplace technology than younger workers is true due to the fact that it takes mature workers more time to grasp the knowledge of modern technology. With younger workers being more creative, it depends on what is meant by being creative. D. Galenson on the University of Chicago has identified two types of innovators in the workplace. (1) break-the-mold "conceptual innovators" tend to be young. In contrast, "experimental innovators" do their best work at older ages, drawing on a lifetime of observation, trial and error. An example of a conceptual innovator is the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Maya Lin. Examples of experimental innovators are novelist, Fyoder Dostoevsky and sculptor, Auguste Rodin.

Therefore, the perception that younger managers are better at solving problems than older managers is questionable and
debatable. Also these issues are stereotypes, and they are based upon assumption not facts.

Transitioning

When younger workers, who will someday become mature workers, have been on the same job for a long time, some issues may arise when the time comes for them to transition into a different or change careers. "The typical issues of transition may be pronounced for the mature worker. Although the normal issues of career change (insecurity, fear of failure, loss of job security and colleagues, fear of the unknown) are present in those career changers over 40, they may appear in more acute form and with special intensity" (Newman, 1995, p.64). Some mature workers may feel insecure in being able to learn something new versus the younger worker who may be perceived as a quick learner. Other mature workers may be entangled in the old way of doing things and not willing to make a change; therefore, they become engulfed in fear of losing their jobs. The mature worker may also be faced with issues with which the younger worker does not have to contend, such as: keeping up with the work pace and staying technologically savvy and competent.

When a career transition occurs, not only do the mature workers have issues and concerns but the employer has comparable issues as
well. The employer tends to believe that these mature workers will cause more problems than they are worth. “Mature workers often cost more than younger workers in terms of either higher wages or higher non-wage labor costs, such as sickness or health insurance” (Keese, 2006, p.2). Employers also believe that mature workers are not trainable. They believe that they will resist the training and not be available to absorb what is being taught to them, whether it is willing or non-willing compared to the younger worker. According to Brooke (2003), “employed people over 45 are also far less likely to undertake training than employed younger workers. Mature workers aged 45 were 2.6 times less likely to complete training courses while working than workers less than 45 years of age.”

Although the mature worker may face some negative issues, there are also some positives that may occur as well. Even though employers and younger workers believe that mature workers may become the problem of the organization, the mature worker may as well be the solution. Mature workers come with a lot of experience, wisdom, knowledge, and potential. They bring many older techniques that may assist the younger worker in performing his/her job better. Combining knowledge from the mature worker and perseverance from the younger
worker, can fuel phenomenal growth and optimize performance for the corporation. This can happen by giving experienced input and new young refreshed ideas. Also creating and implementing programs that will bridge the divide between the younger workers and the mature workers, such as team building and communication skills to improve the organization.

Contrary to what most employers may believe and what some studies may show, mature workers can often be of greater benefit to the organization than can younger workers. Because the turnover rate for mature workers is lower than that of younger workers, the training costs for mature workers is nine percent less than those for younger workers (Brooke, 2003). By investing in the mature worker the employers would not have to deal with the issues of the younger workers leaving to work for another organization (Brooke, 2003). By employers knowing that the mature worker will cost them less than hiring the younger worker, they then began to put the recruiters to work in targeting the mature worker group. When human resources departments actively recruit the mature worker, they desire certain criteria, qualities, characteristics, and experiences. They tend to look for stability, retirement aspirations, and loyalty. According to Brooke (2003), several members of the recruitment
focus group contrasted mature workers’ perspectives of loyalty to an employer over time to younger workers’ more “opportunistic” (sic) perceptions that their current rewards had to exceed other opportunities in the market place” (p.269).

Another benefit to recruiting the mature worker is that they tend to stay on the job longer. Brooke (2003), “states that an older worker is 2.4 times more likely to remain in his/her current employment that the rest of the work force. The cost of recruitment multiplied by the ratio of employment duration for mature workers and the rest of the workforce amounts to: $1,017 \times 2.4 = $2,441. Recruitment benefits estimates amount to: $2,441 \text{ (for the rest of the workforce)} - 1,017 \text{ (for older workers)} = $1,424. Therefore, the estimated net recruitment benefits of a mature worker amount to $1,424.” (p.270). That being said shows that employers will benefit more by hiring and maintaining the mature worker which will reduce turnover cost as shown in Figure 1. This graph shows that mature workers tend to stay employed longer to reach retirement than younger workers. (Brooke, 2003, p. 270)
Another issue with which mature workers are faced is learning in the latter years. Most of the mature workers are used to learning in the traditional environment with typewriters, pencil and pads, instead now they are learning a different way just as the younger generation.

According to Prensky (2001), “today’s students’ pre-kindergarten through college represents the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (p. 1).
Another factor that should to be considered is that some mature workers had to take care of family responsibilities and thus did not get a complete education. These workers should not be discounted, because they also have the ability to learn new things. However some organizations do take these factors into account and new ways are being produced daily for the older worker, such as:

- E-learning
- On line courses
- Seminars
- On the job training

One way of receiving an education after having missed out on a more traditional one is through adult education. This is something that has really made a difference in society. Learning for a mature worker means taking on greater responsibility for ones’ personal and professional development. According to Lindeman (1926), “we call this new way of education adult education not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits” (p. 5).

Learning, as an adult, is something that has to be wanted in order for it to be effective. Although adult learning and being a mature worker is truly a choice, something of interest has to be chosen and adaptable to a
certain learning style. Going back to school or starting a new job as an adult learner is the lifestyle for which adult learners yearn. Many people have choices in life and choose what is wanted; therefore unlike traditional education where there is not a choice; the learning does not become boring and un-attractive.

Ageism/Discrimination

According to Traxler (1980), ageism is defined as “any attitude, action, or institutional structure, which subordinates a person or group because of age or any assignment of roles in society purely on the basis of age” (p. 4). Ageism is becoming more popular in these times and people are beginning to use it like they use the other “isms” such as racism and sexism. What they fail to realize is that even though they sound alike, and have the same ending when spelling the words, they mean something totally different. Ageism is something that is acquired throughout life, as we get older; which everyone will do unless they are met with death at an early age. Sexism and racism is something that can go on in life no matter what age you are.

Ageism can have a negative impact on a person whether they are male or female. One type of negative impact can be the type of language that is used when identifying an older person. For women it can be “old
hag”, “old witch”, or “little old lady”. For men it can be “old hoot”, or “dirty old man”. The one common thing that these negative descriptive words have is the word “old”. Constantly calling someone old makes him or her feel bad, about themselves more so than the other words that are added makes the older person feel incompetent. When phrases like “over the hill” are used and statements like “don’t be an old fuddy-duddy” denote old age as a period of impotency and incompetency (Nuessel, 1982). Using the negative ageism language can harm the female more than the male. According to Nuessel (1982), “ageist vocabulary for women is more derisive because it represents them as thoroughly repugnant and disgusting” (p. 274). What it boils down to is women are victims of both ageism and sexism.

A potential cause of ageism is the fear of death. Most people connect ageism with dying. They believe that the older you get, the closer you are to dying (Kastenbaum, 1978). According to Butler (1969), “Ageism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged- a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and a fear of powerlessness, ‘uselessness’, and death” (p. 243). Currently it is well known that death does not have a certain
age that it occurs, so young people fear death as well. Even knowing that we are all going to die at one time or another, death is still feared.

Ageism affects the mature workers’ ability to adapt to change with new technology. According to Cutler (2005), “ageist views have typically held that older people are poor, frail, and resistant to change” (p. 1). As the technology changes and the mature worker gets older, their brain can not keep up; therefore, it is harder for them to learn new things on the job and keep up with the younger workers. Cutler (2005) states, “the older person may indeed have more difficulty using technology designed with a younger market in mind” (p. 2). In addition to all these barriers that ageism brings to the mature worker, stereotyping can play a major part in them. “In addition to their effect on the marketing of new technologies, ageist stereotypes can create obstacles that stand in the way of older people adopting new technologies when they are available” (Cutler, 2005, p. 2).

Mature workers are being discriminated against daily simply because of their age. Even though there are many organizations that are willing to retain mature workers, there are others that are unwilling to continue the employee of mature workers. If the reason for that
unwillingness is anything other than the low performance of the worker, it is discrimination.

Fortunately, there are laws in place to protect the mature worker to keep them from becoming a victim to discrimination. The US ADEA of 1967 (United States Age and Discrimination in Employment Act, 1967) is that law that protects the older worker. The law states that it applies to workers who are 40 years of age or more (ADEA, 2008).

“The ADEA includes a broad ban against age discrimination and also specifically prohibits:

- Discrimination in hiring, promotions, wages, or firing/layoffs.
- Statements or specifications in job notices or advertisements of age preference and limitations.
- Denial of benefits to older employees. An employer may reduce benefits based on age only if the benefits to younger workers.
- Since 1978 it has prohibited mandatory retirement in most sectors, with phased elimination of mandatory retirement for tenured workers, such as college professors, in 1993” (ADEA, 2008 ¶ 1).
The ADEA had more stipulations added to it in 1986 and again in 1991 by the Older Workers benefits Protection Act, which stated that it applies to employers with 20 employees or more (ADEA, 2008). There are three types of claims that an employee can claim against an organization if they believe that they are being discriminated against which are:

- "Discrimination by Disparate Treatment- less favorable treatment with a discriminatory motive..."
- Discrimination by Disparate Impact- a facially neutral employment policy adversely affects the member of a protected group. Focuses on the consequences of an employment practices, not the purpose or motive.
- Age-Based Harassment- refers to the creation of a hostile work environment that has the effect of unreasonably interfering with his or her work performance” (ADEA, 2008, ¶ 2).

If an employer is accused of any of these acts and found guilty, there is a way that the employer can rectify the problem. The employee can be called back to work with all of their benefits reinstated as if the firing or layoff never occurred.
In the employer’s defense, of not being accused of violating this law, they can put rules in place to their defense such as:

- “Employers may enforce waivers of age discrimination claims made without EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) or court approval if the waiver is “knowing or voluntary.”

- Valid arbitration agreements between employers and employees covering the dispute are subject to compulsory arbitration and no court action can be brought.

- Employers can discharge or discipline an employee for “good cause,” regardless of the employee’s age.

- Employers can take action based on “reasonable factors other than age.”

- Bona fide occupational qualifications, seniority systems, employee benefit or early retirement plans.

- Voluntary early retirement incentives” (ADEA, 2008, ¶ 3).

Recommendations

Mature workers are clearly faced with a variety of problems that younger workers do not face. These problems may cause the mature
workers to believe that they are incompetent or even fail. Below are some recommendations to assist them as they continue to work longer.

- One thing that mature workers can do is to exercise to keep healthy. Exercising will help them avoid health problems that may keep them out of work. It will also increase their range of mobility and enable them to move better. Exercising is also good for the heart, so by exercising it will help them perform their job duties as well as their younger counterpart parts.

- Another recommendation for the mature worker is to continue to learn. Mature workers have to stay current with new technology. They should take classes to learn about updates with technology, such as computers, cellular phones, and palm pilots. These are some of the things that are frequently used in organizations. A mature worker lacking that information will be less productive in an organization.

- Mature workers should stay current with modern technology such as computers. They can then take online classes instead of learning the traditional way of sitting in a class on campus, when they could be at home taking care of their families and learning at
the same time. Staying abreast and learning on a constant basis will help avoid problems for the mature worker.

- The mature worker should remain healthier by working more years before retirement. Working longer keeps the mature worker healthy and more motivated about life itself. Mature workers should not take comments made about age to heart. Many people do not always think before they speak.

- Later, when the mature worker does decide to retire and leave the organization, there is an organization, the American Association of Retired Person (AARP) that can help them through the transition. It is a special interest group and non-profit organization. AARP is for people 50 years of age or older and is dedicated to making their lives better for themselves (AARP, 2008). The AARP offers a wide variety of activities for the retired person such as: insurance, health care coverage and legal services. Members can also benefit from discounts with things such as vacations, rental cars and cruises and a list of other things.

- Finally, once the mature worker retires, they have to keep themselves occupied. They should join the organizations that are offering them the discounts and helping out with health care. This
will be beneficial with finances as well. Finances can become a problem once you retire, so this will definitely help out. As for the employers, they should not jump to the wrong conclusion about the mature worker. Their knowledge could be beneficial to the organization. Employers should treat everyone equal regardless of their age. The most important thing that employers should remember is that one day they will be the mature worker.

Conclusion

The global marketplace is changing rapidly. As a result, mature workers have many issues to deal with and these will certainly continue. However, employers need to focus more on facts than on assumptions. As Figure 1 shows, people in the age groups of 50 and over are retaining jobs and showing more loyalty longer than their younger counterparts. Mature worker are experimental innovators and do their best at the older age. The perceptions that mature workers are a liability to the organizations are based on assumptions not facts; they are basically stereotypes. The research shows that the cost of retaining the mature worker is less than hiring the younger counterpart. Another concept to focus on is that when the mature worker becomes the adult learner they are more serious and focused and takes responsibility for their learning;
which shows that the mature worker will be very serious about their work ethics. Lastly organization must realize that when they implement these policies for the mature worker and causes these issues to arise, they have to remember that one day they will become the mature worker and they will become the beneficiary of there own tool.

"There are many factors that need to be investigated more closely in relation to perceptions of employability of older versus younger workers. As the population in this country continues to age, research that illuminates all factors affecting the employability of both younger and older workers will become increasingly important, not only to the workers themselves but to those who set policy, train human resource specialist, and counsel workers in transition" (Forte & Hansvick, 1999, p. 26).

If organizations remember that these people have been working all their lives and for some of them their job is their life. Employers have to be more understanding with the older worker being that they may be dealing with psychological effects of getting old. Employers also need to understand that with age come knowledge and wisdom about the workforce, so take that and embellish the organization.
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