

Introduction

The Aging Workforce: Ready or Not

By Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes and Robert B. Hudson, guest editors

Many baby boomers have fond memories of playing games of Hide and Seek on warm summer evenings. Twilight is usually the best time for this game because the shadows invite the game players to stretch their imaginations. And there is the practical side of playing at twilight because it is then that the number of mosquitoes is at least bearable.

Hide and Seek is an interesting game because the suspense is not so much in who you are going to find (Who ever heard of a game of Hide and Seek when an unexpected guest player suddenly ran across home plate yelling, “Home free!”). Rather, the suspense is connected to when you will discover the familiar person who has been hiding. Then the suspense builds to a crescendo as the players race to home base. Who is the fastest—the person who is “It” or those who’ve hidden and now dash for home?

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the aging of the workforce was a bit like a game of Hide and Seek. Demographers knew that the population of the United States, as well as the

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populations of other countries around the world, was aging. For some time, healthcare and social service providers who work with and in behalf of older adults have understood that the aging of the population would not only increase the demand for their services, but would also pressure their organizations to think creatively about new types of services needed.

But how many people really understood how the new (or should we say the “old”) age demographics of the twenty-first century would affect the workplace?

This issue of *Generations* focuses on the aging of the workforce. Together, the articles have an important message to employers in the non-profit, for-profit, and public sectors: “Ready or not, here they come.” One reason we say, “Get ready” is that old ideas about aging and work may no longer apply to today’s circumstances. Within the past ten years, we have witnessed some transformative thinking about aging and work. For example, in the 1990s, many people almost took it for granted that

older workers would be focused on retirement rather than continued work. We can no longer make that assumption.

Of course, preparing for this complex and far-reaching phenomenon is not a child's game, but rather one of the most serious challenges of our time. Therefore, the goal for this issue is to introduce readers to different perspectives on the diverse aspects of the current state and the future possibilities associated with the aging of the workforce. Each section of this issue examines aging and work from different points of view.

Many of the authors give voice to the perspectives of older workers, a majority of whom expect to “stay in the game” past the traditional retirement threshold of 62–65 years. The authors of these articles emphasize the importance of remembering that older workers are a very heterogeneous group. Their motivations for working, the opportunities and choices they have, and the challenges they encounter vary depending on a range of life situations, personal characteristics, and socioeconomic circumstances.

Other articles focus on the adjustments that employers are making or expect to make. In the spirit of enlightened self-interest, some employers are starting to see a “value proposition” in the recruitment and retention of older workers.

Finally, some of the articles present a public policy perspective about the aging of the workforce. One contribution of this perspective is that it helps us to examine the adequacy of the protections afforded older workers who decide to extend their labor force participation.

Section One, “A Labor Force Turning Point,” includes two articles that detail aspects of the workplaces where older workers are. Steven Nyce provides important context for consideration of a potential shortage of workers. In her article, Ellen Galinsky discusses research data that illuminate a dramatic picture of changes that have occurred over the course of the work lives of the baby boomers.

Section Two, “Workforce Aging: Implication for Workers,” grapples with three important topics: the reasons older people work, the diversity that characterizes older workers, and the challenges for older workers who face involuntary unemployment. In their article, Michael

Smyer and Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes discuss factors that have motivated the baby boomers to think about work and retirement in new ways. Phyllis Moen turns the discussion to the gap between what older workers want and what is often available to them. Jeffrey Burr and Jan Mutchler sharpen our focus on the diversity of older workers' experiences in their article. In his article, Stephen Sweet raises some very important questions about how our society wants to respond when the work that older workers have been doing disappears.

Section Three, “Workforce Aging: Implications for Employers,” looks at issues related to aging and work from the perspectives of employers. Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes considers the extent to which some leading-edge employers are getting ready for the aging of the workforce. Chantel Sheaks provides a critical look at one option, phased retirement, which everyone agrees is desirable but which has proven difficult for policy makers, employers, and employees to make a reality.

Section Four, “Workforce Aging: Societal Implications,” draws our attention to the aging of the workforce as a social issue. Nancy Morrow-Howell's article helps to connect the work and nonwork lives of older workers who may be engaged in unpaid (volunteer) efforts as well as paid employment. Rob Hudson and Judith Gonyea discuss the relevance of public policies that can either support older workers or constrain their choices.

Section Five, “Options and Promising Practices,” comprises four articles that underscore the relevance and currency of the topic of aging and work to employees, employers, and policy makers around the world. In her article, Diane Piktialis offers examples of the policies and programs that some leading employers have adopted in their efforts to recruit, engage, and retain older workers. Helen Dennis and Kathryn Thomas have contributed an article that underscores the challenges of myths, stereotypes, and discrimination that some older workers encounter. Edward Rogoff discusses one new arena that some older workers may explore: entrepreneurship. The issue concludes with an article written by Philip Taylor, who provides us with insights from countries that have been experiencing the

aging of their populations for the past decade. Why is the aging of the workforce a compelling topic? Why should you read this? The aging of the workforce may well be one of the defining concerns of our time. The aging of the workforce will not only touch older workers, but will also affect how younger workers and workers at midlife function in today's multi-generational workforce. The new age demographics will affect the families of older

workers—families that depend on these older workers as well as families that support them. The aging of the workforce will undoubtedly have some impact on the policies and practices of workplaces in the nonprofit, for-profit, and public sectors. Finally, we anticipate that the aging of the workforce will continue to stimulate new policy conversations about our expectations for work across the life cycle. So get ready, here they come. ☺

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