The Advantages and Disadvantages of Age Diversity in the Workplace

**Summary:** Many workplaces have not yet caught on to the idea of age diversity. Here's why that should change.

There can be no question that diversity has become the hot topic in today's modern workplace. Businesses have scrambled to hire an increasingly wide range of employees from various ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations. However, one faction of the diversity push that seems to be playing catch-up within the workplace is age diversity.

Too many enterprises, particularly startups that operate within the tech segment, gloss over the presence of an available older workforce. Why this is can come from several sources such as:

- Hiring managers and businesses may feel there's no value in an older workforce.
- Older workers will never be as productive as younger workers.
- Older workers simply won't *last as long* as younger workers.
- Worse yet, older workers are simply invisible to younger workers and their establishments.

In a recent US News and World Report article which focuses on the advantages of hiring older workers, a 52-year-old woman named Patricia understood she faced a plethora of challenges as she applied to a company dominated by men. While no one should have to “adjust” themselves to the extent Patricia did to land a job, she nonetheless took to the task of shortening her name to Pat and effectively eliminated any and all dates on her resume. At the same time, the now Pat set her sight on wowing the hiring managers in the interview process – a surefire tactic that *experienced* job seekers and employees who have been in the workforce understand as an opportunity that can bring them closer to viable employment.

The result: Pat got the job, and thrived with it until her retirement nearly 20 years later. It was a magnificent coup against an emerging workplace machine that tends to disfavor older workers, no matter their gender.

However, with most people, older workers notwithstanding, Pat had to misrepresent herself to a degree in which she was regarded as a viable employee in the interview process. Pat essentially:

- Altered her name on her resume to hopefully catapult herself beyond any opening issues of her being female.
- Effectively erased any notions of her age by extracting from her resume her college graduation dates and work-related timeline.
- Resigned to pull off a glowing face-to-face interview, with the understanding that her gender and age could prove fatal to her
netting the job she wanted.

In a sense, it’s shameful that a responsible adult, 50 or older, may have to do this to prove their mettle in today’s working world. But unfortunately, more and more workers within the Baby Boomer era find they have no choice but to somewhat misrepresent themselves just to get work.

The blame for this can fall on many shoulders.

Hiring managers may have preconceived notions that older employees are simply unqualified in every way other than an ability to successfully complete the tasks and aspects of the job for which they are applying. Older employees may not:

- Last as long on the job.
- Be a financial burden via health insurance.
- Become a liability to a business’s productivity because of days called in sick, injuries, or any other maladies that (they think) can cause an older worker to be unreliable.
- A cultural misfit.

Additional blame for older employee disregard can be saddled atop the existing workforce and their age. For instance, Millennials may not know or understand the first thing about how older employees work. Or, if they do understand the work process of an older generation, Millennial workers and hiring managers (who are, by the way, ascending in droves upon the workforce), might think it’s just weird that they may rub shoulders or share cubicles with a person who resembles their mom, dad, or even their grandparents.

Perish the thought!

**Betcha’ the old guy can outdrink your 24-year-old butt!**

Granted, work isn’t about partying after work. However, the above section title holds more validity than the imagined shot glasses filled with Jameson might intone.

For the purpose of this article, “outdrink” means “outwork,” which from age, experience and wherewithal all points to the older worker having the advantage.

In today’s working world, older persons are more often than not, looked at as tired and out of touch. And yet, this isn’t necessarily true at all.

For instance, on a cultural front, an older worker is very similar to younger workers. Older workers aren’t electronically inept; they also use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit – you name it. Tinder even, which some Millennials wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot selfie stick.

Older workers more than likely know what emojis are and what LOL stands for in a tweet. More often or not, older workers also know how to outwork and consequently, out produce, a younger worker who is either just getting into the job market or already has a one or two years under their belt.

The reason for this is simple experience.

However a task is completed, be it from multitasking, knowledge of the task, or prior work-related events that translate into their current job, the one asset that can be counted on with an older worker is work experience.

**Experience is a lofty quality that should never be overlooked or underappreciated, no matter the age of a workforce.**

**The nitty-gritty of the older worker**

As diversity occupies much of what is being done to reshape America’s workforce into a more inclusive entity, it is becoming substantially clear that older workers have valuable assets to add to the modern workforce.

That same US News and World Report article lists six reasons older workers are more an advantage than a disadvantage to any workplace atmosphere. Those reasons are:

1. **Older workers have experience**

As noted, an obvious benefit of older workers is the experience and skills they bring to a job. If a problem, be it logistics-related, communication errors, or some sort of misrepresentation occurs, older employees can offer strong advice. Having experience in the work world suggests they may have already seen and resolved the usual issues that can affect a company, whether that...
Employers may have legitimate concerns about older workers being behind the curve when it comes to technology or a younger generation’s verbal and written jargon. However, computers and software, as well as euphemisms that do not necessarily sound like comprehensible American English can be taught in a short amount of time. What can’t be taught or trained for is the immense experience an older worker has after having spent 20 or 30 years in the field.

2. Older workers have “been there and done that”

Having been in the workforce for a long period of time, and working, more than likely, a variety of jobs can be a definite advantage for the older worker. In short, their experience has exposed them to a number of workplace scenarios that could benefit any manager as well as the overall business.

Older workers can give job and training advice, solve problems that younger workers may not have encountered in their short span of their own work history, and be a fantastic sounding board off which younger workers can bounce work-related ideas.

3. Older workers have more confidence.

By the time you are in your 40s and 50s, maybe even in your 30s, as an older worker, you’ve probably seen quite a bit occur in the working world. Least of all you will have more work-related experience than your twenty-something counterpart.

Long-term exposure to the working world will, if anything, instill a strong sense of confidence in an older worker; which is the sort of confidence a rising company (or a company that is trying to hold its market share) should rely on. Confidence within the older worker translates into fearless leadership even if the older worker has no one to lead or manage. More importantly, the older worker’s confidence can rub off on the rest of the staff, causing them to have more confidence.

4. Older workers provide reliable service.

Older workers know the value of reliability. Showing up on time to work, doing what tasks are at hand, then finishing those tasks on time and within budget can alleviate a huge burden from a manager or business owner’s back. The workplace experience older workers have is demonstrated through their professionalism and timeliness, both of which are easily taught, then adopted by the other workers. As a workplace specialist puts it in the US News and World Report article, older workers “…actually show up at work on time, and they aren’t texting all day.”

5. Older workers are loyal.

A page can be taken out of the older workers’ book of gratitude for virtually all generations of employees. This is because many older workers have learned to be fiercely loyal to their employers.

Maybe it has something to do with the job itself, the health benefits a business may provide, or gratitude that the older worker was hired in the first place in this time of Millennial robots anchored to their phones, to which loyalty in the workplace may as well be an unexplained phenomenon.

Sadly, loyalty can’t be taught. It has to be felt and understood, which is an ability many Millennial workers simply don’t have the capacity to do on their own. This is what makes – or should make – the older worker extremely attractive to hiring managers in today’s workforce.

6. Older workers can save money.

In nearly every case, experienced workers can hit the ground running, which will immediately reveal the superiority of their work skills above younger workers. Older workers understand learning curves and how with each job, that curve is different. They are also not afraid to speak up if they don’t understand an aspect of a task, or of their job.

Older workers also understand the concept of efficiency and saving money. They realize the ultimate “gift” of getting paid to complete a task, particularly in a job-starved market. If an older worker does not hit the ground running, in many cases it will take the older worker very little time to get up to speed. Again, it’s the appreciation of a company for giving a job that leads to the older worker to be as efficient as possible while producing as much as possible. This is definitely an increasingly rare commodity as younger workers tend to selfishly look out for themselves while older workers look after themselves, yes, but their company as well.

Older workers can also play a vital role in developing younger workers into a more economical, yet innovative and inventive workforce. Older workers can actually become on-the-job teachers or mentors. Instead of spending, and potentially wasting, a lot of time and money, older workers can instead be beneficial as they share work experiences with younger workers.
This, of course, is the best case scenario for an older worker, particularly when that worker finds him or herself in a smaller, youth-filled startup company. But sometimes it doesn’t work out as planned, which can lead to an older worker not fitting in with the rest of the team.

Like anyone else in the workplace, each generation can have its bad apple employees. With fairness in mind, here are some of the disadvantages to hiring older workers as listed by Wise Step.com.

1. Lack of proper communication.

The one true result that can come out of a lack of communication amongst workers is a lack of trust. With the older employee that lack of communication can arrive from various sources:

- An age/generational gap in which the older generation simply does not know what the younger generation is talking about, and vice versa.
- Preconceived notions brought on by the older worker in which he judges the younger worker as lacking experience, depth, integrity, and respect, etc. This can definitely bring up communications barriers.
- If the older employee is employed in a business where the younger employees use a lot of technical jargon, the older employee who does not understand this jargon may shut down or tune out, increasing the chances that they will miss key points that can affect their overall job performance.

While an older employee may feel embarrassed or inadequate because they don’t quite comprehend what’s being communicated at work, hiring managers need to instill confidence in that employee. Remember, in almost every case, older employees have a value that can be applied to the work needs at large. It would behoove hiring managers to team up older employees with younger employees who have a bit more patience and empathy for an older worker who is trying to stay viable within the company.

2. Resistance to adopting a new work culture.

Culture, even if it is not pronounced, is still a large part of every work environment. And with that, there are employees who do not want to change their way of working in accord to their new work environment. Whatever the reasons may be; an inability or outright refusal to accept the emerging reality of technology, a more relaxed work environment, a work-life balance that the older employee is not used to, or just a different way a new environment with unknown employees of younger ages execute their methods of getting the job done – any of these can strain both the older worker and the younger worker as they collaborate each week.

So with that, the older employee needs to be more aware of their surroundings. They should understand that while this work atmosphere might be different from other work environments they have experienced, the overall goal still is, and will always be to get the job done. Much of the same goes for younger employees. They need to know that yes, their fellow older employee is older and that it may take some time for the older employee to feel comfortable within a new work environment. Thus, patience has to be practiced on both sides as well as a bit of tinkering with the workplace culture to appease both generations of workers.

3. Clusters, gangs, and groups.

Often called cliques, an office full of these clusters, gangs or groups can be off-putting to an older employee, particularly if they come from environments where ample amount of team agreement (or disagreement – as long as it was team generated) was used toward successfully achieving a goal. Hiring managers need to eradicate these groups not just for the sake of an older employee, but honestly for the sake of the company. Tribalism never works within a company. Not only will new employees suffer from being in or not being in a company’s various cliques, other employees may suffer as well, which can lead to a breakdown in production.

4. Discomfort due to others' attitude or behavior.

Attitude is everything. Attitude determines friendships, relationships, and approachability. While we’d all like to think that work diversity caters to a variety of attitudes and behaviors, this simply is not the truth. At work, work needs to be executed and completed, no two ways about it. At issue, however, is that there may be different routes that an older worker may take to get the job done, as opposed to the younger worker.

At this rate, a compromise has to occur. Ill behavior can be ill afforded in an environment that relies on strong working relationships in order to be productive. goofiness, joking around – sure, that’s all well and good. However, when it comes to the end result, which is for a business to please its clientele, attitude from either generation’s worker should not be a part of the mix. The older worker needs to be tolerant of the younger worker’s style and work-related behavior and vice versa. Only then will there be enough common ground for both generations to come together and be productive.

5. Attached only to particular style and no social mingling.
Older employees, who are anchored in a style of work predicated on being nothing more than a worker in lieu of their younger comrades, will almost certainly sink their own boat.

Again, like most of these potential incongruences between older and younger generation workers, having a style of work that bucks Friday beers or the occasional weekend get together will eventually ostracize the older worker, further cementing them into what might already be perceived about that worker as too old, out-of-touch and conservative.

This issue falls squarely on the shoulders of the older worker. In this scenario, they simply need to loosen up. While younger coworkers may not feel positive about this style of work, it nonetheless is your responsibility to ease up and not go against the cultural grain of the company.

So go ahead and socialize. Have a beer and a shot. At least show your young 24-year-old coworkers that you can out-drink their butts, not to mention outwork them!

**In conclusion**

The true reality of any of this revolves around the true reality of work: everyone needs it, everyone has to have it, everyone wants it, and everyone has to do all they can to keep their work.

And with the added pressure of diversity in the workplace, expectations that differing workforces can come together as one are rooted as much in hopefulness as they are in warranting that this will happen no matter what.

Older workers need their jobs as much as black workers, transgender workers, white and brown workers, and of course, younger workers. With that said, it behooves us all to take a collective breath, step back, and remember that the working world doesn’t revolve around us. We revolve around it. All of us do.

**See the following articles for more information:**

- Tips for Hiring and Welcoming Younger Workers
- Ask Yourself These 10 Questions to Ensure You Find the Right Employee for Your Company
- 7 Common Traits Companies Look for in a Team Player