

Building Innovative Multigenerational Teams in an Aging World

By Priyanka Gothi

If there is anything the year 2020 has proved, it is the fact that the future of work is uncertain, volatile, and designed for the past rather than for the future. And while remote working and connected technologies have proved that they are here to stay, the role of the humans at work is being questioned once again.

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Unprecedented economic shockwaves also mean that the progress made in workforce inclusion have once again taken a backseat and the strategic attempts to build diverse, multigenerational teams have given way to short-term solutions around maintaining teams for “business as usual” scenarios.

This is, however, a reactionary move and doesn't account for the fact that COVID-19 or not – the world is continuing to age rapidly and that will have a far reaching impact beyond healthcare – touching all aspects of life with respect to how we learn, work, and continue to stay productive.

COVID-19 has also revealed the vulnerabilities of ageing economies and how they could suffer economic and social consequences if they continue to ignore the opportunities and risk of this massive demographic shift.

On a positive note, these trends are also signaling an exciting era of worker rebirth and reinvention — in which people will continue to evolve and pivot to different roles across their lives and as they age, rather than getting phased out. In light of this lifelong worker, the future of work will be shaped by how we design it for life stages and ages.

Today in Asia, we can already see up to four generations working side by side in the same organization, resulting in a whole new approach to designing every aspect of work, from learning and development to retention, for these diverse cohorts. As the employee career span lengthens, this significant demographic change presents employers with a brand-new opportunity to reimagine the workforce of the future.

In an ideal world, older workers would be valued for their experience, hired for their networks and wisdom. Therein lies one little hiccup. Age discrimination is alive and kicking. One out of three people over the age of 50 in Hong Kong alone has experienced age discrimination when looking for work.¹ The notion of hiring older workers is often unheard of. Even if an older candidate is considered initially, the “boomer bias” kicks in from the first interaction. Organizations typically haven't given thought to what it takes to attract this talent pool and are not yet prepared to fully open their doors to mature talent.

What this also means is that generational diversity, in comparison to diversity related to gender, sexual orientation, perspective, or race, has seen relatively less progress in Asia. Conversations on this topic, in fact, typically focus on the younger end of the spectrum — that is, looking at ways to engage and retain millennials and Gen Z talent — and rarely address older workers and the implications of an aging workforce.

Nevertheless, in super-aging economies such as those of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan, we can see early indications of change, as the newly emerging role of the aging worker is starting to get real notice. This is, in part, driven by longer-than-average life spans and a palpable talent shortage that is beginning to tangibly affect organizations.

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Effecting the Shift

At Wise At Work, we work to accelerate the shift. We partner with organizations of all sizes to help them reimagine the potential of a rapidly aging world, through training, reemployment, and strategy. By launching inter-age initiatives that use strategic play, design thinking, and other tools, we are hoping to trigger “disruptive thinking” when it comes to talent sourcing and management.

Through our work with thousands of older workers in Hong Kong, we know that people are not ready to hang up their boots at age 60 or 65 (or even later). In fact, according to a recent survey we conducted, the more educated people are, the less likely they are to ever want to retire. In addition to the basic desire to work, we also discovered that most people age 50-plus want to stay in the workforce to achieve or increase financial independence. Indeed, greater longevity when paired with more healthy years has a huge impact on when we are able to retire. Yet, health

disparities persist and not everyone enjoys the gift of longer, healthier lives and work years.

So, how do we foster the embrace of talent from all age groups? Based on our work with organizations, here are some solutions that can help create an age-inclusive culture that allows multigenerational teams to thrive.

Avoid ageist labels. Terms such as millennials, boomers, Gen X, and so on can reinforce stereotypes. When used in certain ways, these terms can generate alienation and discourage reinvention. There is plenty of research to suggest that most generations want the same things when it comes to work. An article from Harvard Business Review is one that we refer to most often².

Think life stage, not generational cohorts. In the context of a multigenerational workforce, taking a life-stage approach may be a better idea than an age approach for hiring and development needs. An older worker may have family caregiving responsibilities, as will a much younger parent. Not all millennials are tech-obsessed,

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and not all boomers struggle with passwords. Organizations need to evolve and develop human-centric strategies that account for life events, reducing or increasing responsibilities, and addressing mental and physical health needs as they design ways to engage and retain employees.

Activate multigenerational engagements.

Create opportunities for different age groups to engage with and learn from one another. We run an engagement program called “Meet the Generations” that allows different generations to derive value from one another as well as teach each other skills that are unique to their age or life stage cohorts. This facilitated exchange allows cross-generational teams to develop a healthy appreciation for the values and skills of different age groups, while creating a space of trust and breaking down stereotypes.

Let everyone innovate. According to the 2019 edition of Deloitte Human Capital Trends, when more than 10,000 companies were asked if age was a competitive advantage or competitive disadvantage in their organization, more than two-thirds of the companies considered older age a competitive disadvantage³. In addition to a likely technology-oriented bias, behind this assumption are apparent boundaries

of thinking that have prevented them from including older talent in the innovation process. Research has shown that diverse teams produce better solutions. According to Boston Consulting Group, companies with above-average diversity in age, gender, nationality, career path, industry background, and education on their management teams report innovation revenue that is 19 percentage points higher and profit margins that are 9 percentage points higher than companies with below-average diversity⁴. When we ran “Grey Is the New Black,” a public program to drive inter-age innovation, we saw 15-year-olds team up with 79-year-olds to create stunning solutions to Hong Kong’s social challenges. So a quick note to companies here: innovation is not just about technology — it is about creative problem-solving, and age diversity can only strengthen the process and make it richer.

Co-create job roles. We have found that several organizations that want to create opportunities for mature talent don’t know where to start. That’s where co-creation comes into play. We recently ran focus groups with a large global bank to help it meet and engage with potential candidates over age 50 and understand what roles, remunerations, and job titles would attract

such candidates. From the focus groups we got incredible insights that allowed the organization to custom create these roles and drive a culture of age inclusion very quickly.

Embrace flexible work. The events of the last few months have allowed for a global experiment of remote working that has largely been successful and allowed companies to continue their work despite social distancing norms. Increased acceptance of this model could help companies become more inclusive – and allow for older adults or others with mobility issues to actively participate in the workforce. The “Zoom meeting” culture that has germinated due to COVID-19 has also forced working adults of all age groups to embrace technology and normalized remote learning and working. These could be pivotal in ensuring the creation of agile, age-agnostic teams.

Develop people across age groups.

When was the last time you saw a program for “high-potential” staff being developed for people over 50? Chances are, not often and possibly never. The notion that only younger talent can be nurtured causes two outcomes. The first is that mature talent rarely gets developed the way younger talent does. And second, as a result mature workers pick up on the signals sent by the lack of investment and this has implications for morale and motivation. To avoid this situation, it is imperative to foster worker development across age groups and life stages, ideally in mixed-age classrooms to cultivate peer-to-peer learning and common standards of teaching for all regardless of age or life stage.

Future Workplace

There are many ways to drive a culture of age inclusion in a rapidly aging world. Regardless of the approach, the understanding of today's

reality drives the effort: the past can surely not define the way of the future. Organizations will have to extend the boundaries of their thinking and uncover new definitions of talent, create new tools to up-skill all regardless of life stage, and evolve a new culture in which people can stay relevant — regardless of their age. ●

¹ <https://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/upload/ResearchReport/2016161633111925251.pdf>

² <https://hbr.org/2019/08/generational-differences-at-work-are-small-thinking-theyre-big-affects-our-behavior>

³ <https://www2.deloitte.com/cn/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/pr-global-human-capital-trends-2019.html>

⁴ <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation.aspx>



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