

The Longevity Opportunity

By Lisa Marsh Ryerson

The world's population is growing older, faster, than at any time in human history. The Bureau of Labor statistics forecasts that in the coming years, annual labor force growth for both 65-74-year olds and even those 75+ will outpace other age groups. People ages 60 and over will soon outnumber children ages 5 and under because this age group is growing four times faster than the overall global population. Workers are living and working longer, and the multigenerational workforce is a reality that's here to stay.

Helping global employers adapt their workplace practices to capitalize on this trend is imperative if we are to unlock this future workforce potential – what I call the longevity opportunity. It can also help us build stronger communities and enable people of all ages to live happier, healthier and more fulfilling lives.

AARP, with the World Economic Forum and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), developed Living, Learning and Earning Longer, a collaborative effort to identify and share multigenerational workforce best practices worldwide. I was pleased to join the Global Executive Roundtable in Paris, where nearly 30 global employers discussed how to maximize the benefits of increased longevity in the global workforce. What follows are some takeaways from our discussion.

Research and Action

A common thread that ran throughout the roundtable is that the value of an intergenerational workforce should be beyond dispute. American business units scoring in the top 25% of engagement are 21% more profitable than those in the bottom quartile. And, a classic study of 18,000 German companies found a 10 percent increase in age diversity at innovative companies boosts annual productivity by about 3.5%.

Yet such numbers are just a start. We need to make an even broader business case for

the value of an age-diverse workforce across different sectors and industries. Additional rigorous research can further underscore that growth in productivity, engagement, innovation and revenue result from including older workers in a multigenerational workplace.

Businesses can jump-start their journey to a multigenerational workforce by reviewing their policies through the lens of age inclusivity. Extending parental leave to cover caregiving leave for any loved one – whether an older parent, partner or child or someone else – can ensure that this benefit remains relevant across an employee's career span. Eliminating recruiting practices that inadvertently keep older workers on the sideline – such as position descriptions that set an upper limit on an applicant's years of experience or job algorithms that prevent older workers from seeing job openings – can increase the age diversity of the qualified applicant pool.

Lifelong learning opportunities are also key. Training delivery methods should allow people of various learning styles, lifestyles and ages to obtain value. AARP Foundation's own example: Foundation University, which offers a range of seminars, webinars and other opportunities that keep staff learning new competencies throughout the work span. Completing such training is part of our employee evaluation.

We also must attack unconscious age bias and negative stereotyping. Sound policy and continued research can dispel out-of-date notions such as, "He is too old to learn new technology," or "She doesn't have the energy to do the job." Contrary to any stereotypes or assumptions otherwise, both research and our day-to-day operations at the AARP Foundation confirm that older workers are more productive, mature, and engaged and have lower rates of turnover and absenteeism, than younger workers.

Although understanding of older workers' true value is growing, attitudes and workplaces change slowly; therefore, we must be vigilant about combating discrimination when we find it.

AARP Foundation litigation actively fights workplace age discrimination in the courts, and we have submitted an “Amicus Curae” or “Friend of the Court” brief weighing in on an important Supreme Court case involving age discrimination in the federal workforce.

On another note, while we must do all we can to enable people stay in the workforce if they so desire, not everyone can or wants to work longer. Health concerns or caregiving responsibilities can end older workers’ employment prematurely, while some jobs are simply too strenuous for older workers. We must be mindful of these factors as we design our policies and practices.

Leading by Example

AARP Foundation is working to help older adults build their financial security and extend their working lives by building economic opportunity. Ideas are meant to be shared so they can spark still other ideas; in that light, following is a look at some of our initiatives.

Back to Work 50+ connects older jobseekers with community colleges, nonprofits and workforce development groups across the country that provide training, support and access to employers. Trusted local partners that specialize in working with older job candidates help them build updated computer skills, offer job search coaching, and match candidates with local employers.

WorkforYourself@50+, which highlights the entrepreneurial energy within the 50+ workforce, empowers older adults to explore self-employment options by enabling them to see how they can apply their skills and talents in an entrepreneurial setting. Among other offerings, the program partners with local economic development organizations to host workshops on entrepreneurship around the country.

The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) subsidizes the salaries of

low-to-moderate income older adults and pairs them with community groups to help them acquire experience and skills for future employment. Some 40 percent of participants have been hired permanently by the organizations where they gained their experience, while still others move forward with other employers.

MySavingsJar empowers vulnerable older adults to start a savings habit so they can move from financial stress to financial freedom. The online program provides incentives to save and offers both expert advice and peer support.

Opportunity Awaits

The longevity opportunity is real. Recent AARP research revealed that people 50+ contribute \$8.3 trillion to the U.S. economy, an amount equivalent to the third largest economy in the world; by 2050, that number will more than triple, to \$28.2 trillion.

Thus, an even greater longevity opportunity awaits. If we continue to share best practices among global businesses and organizations – and implement the insights and recommendations we’ve developed in Paris – we will be in a good position to make the most of it. ●



Lisa Marsh Ryerson
President
AARP Foundation