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WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER:

Strategies for Assessing Employee Retention During COVID-19

During these turbulent economic times, employers like yourself make difficult manpower decision. You must balance today's staffing needs with those needed after the economic rebound. Against this backdrop of significant economic uncertainty and pressure from stakeholders, decisions about your workforce must be informed by the most accurate data.

FIVE THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Life stage, not age, drives everything. As the number of jobless individuals rise, history tells us that older workers often come under pressure to make way for younger ones. Companies have a track record of offering early retirement packages to try to incentivize voluntary departures. However, assumptions about age should not drive employer decision-making. For a range of reasons, many older workers cannot afford to retire or may not want to retire. A manager might assume that an employee approaching 60 years old is winding down toward retirement. However, women and other primary caregivers returning to work may still be building their careers. These days, a stay at home parent returning to the workplace might have 30 or more years of work ahead. Additionally, older workers who lost their jobs during the prior recession may be making up for lost time and wages. Moreover, after workplace early retirement programs have concluded managers have often realized that critical capability had exited the company. Sometimes, it was necessary to re-hire those workers. But often this capability was lost for good.

For older workers themselves leaving a job may precipitate a period of personal crisis. It is apparent from previous recessions that some older workers took early retirement packages in haste, only to regret it later, realizing that they had to drastically scale back their lifestyle or were simply missing work. Also, those older workers who have lost their jobs during layoffs often find themselves among the long-term unemployed. They can neither find a job nor retire, a situation that may have consequences for both their mental and physical health.

A simplistic focus on older workers overlooks the complexities of people's lives and can leave a business unprepared for the future.

Full labor force participation creates more opportunities for all. Historically, older workers often come under pressure to retire in order to open up job opportunities for others. This is especially true during periods of recession. However, the research is clear—Job markets with higher levels of employment among older individuals are associated with higher levels of youth employment. It is sometimes assumed that an economy has a finite "lump of labor" hours that must be fairly distributed. However, the number of jobs is not fixed. Employers might be well served to consider older and younger workers as complementary rather than as competitors for the same jobs.

While young and old are sometimes characterized as competing for the available jobs, in reality we are all in this together.

Ageism is illegal and bad for business. As jobless figures rise, ageism can creep into organizational decision-making. Age stereotypes affect both young and old. The common misperception that older people are not able learn new things, are less productive, and unwilling to change is demonstrably untrue. Less understood is that commonly held, positive stereotypes concerned with retaining older workers may be unintentionally prejudicial. Long term employees are portrayed as keepers of corporate memory. However, even this stereotype can misconstrued to confirm broader societal perceptions that they are "of the past" and, thus, less able to meet the demands of modern workplaces.

And just as age stereotypes apply to older people, age stereotypes are often applied to mature adults but can also can be associated with youthfulness. For example, younger workers are valued for their presumed enthusiasm, innovation, technological savvy, ambition, risk-taking, desire to learn, openness to change, collaboration, and understanding of social media and technology. However, again, these are mere stereotypes that don't acknowledge that workers of similar ages may have different experiences, skills and attributes. And, conversely, workers of different ages may have similar experiences, skills and attributes.

Rather than relying on stereotypes about workers as a group, it is better to consider what relevant expertise and experience individuals have, regardless of age. Workplace policies should be built on a foundation of age neutrality.

Generational assumptions can thwart organizational success. The research is equivocal: Generally, chronological age does not predict job performance, although there are small yet positive statistical relationships between being of an older age and some job attributes. Importantly, however, research indicates that there is often greater variation, in job-performance terms, between people of the same age than people of different ages, meaning that it is unwise to make assumptions based on a given person's age. A better starting point, then, for managers undertaking workforce planning is to assume that, for practical purposes, age and performance are not directly related.

Much research on age has focused on generational differences, but this has failed to demonstrate the noted attributes of different generations and not acknowledged differences within a generational cohort. In devising workplace strategies, it is therefore unwise to ignore within-group differences and draw on simplistic generational categorizations such as Millennial or Boomer, which some argue are inherently ageist. Instead, managers should apply the same approach to all workers because generational differences may not hold, and the costs of such generationizations might outweigh the benefits.

As a consequence, age-based decision-making may not only be discriminatory, it also presents no competitive advantage, and considering the needs of distinct generations overlooks the rich diversity present in workplaces.

Age diversity is the future. There is sometimes a perception that by keeping younger workers, a company is investing in the future. However, instead, considering age inclusion over the entire employee lifecycle is key—from university graduates looking for their first work experience to people seeking to build a career after raising children, through to older workers looking to transition to a new employment challenge or to step down as they near retirement. At one time, it was considered that people's lives could be divided into three broad phases: school, paid work, and retirement. But today it is recognized that life phases are becoming blurred, less predictable and more flexible. That means labor pools are diverse and, as the COVID-19 crisis passes, employers will need to implement a diverse range of strategies focused on recruiting and retaining workers of all ages and life stages.

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CALL TO ACTION FOR EMPLOYERS

The broad lesson here is to look beyond worker categorization and stereotypes and consider their range of experiences. This diversity, if deployed properly, can be a source of immense strength for organizations. While undeniably adding a layer of complexity to your decision-making during what is a period of unprecedented economic uncertainty, adopting open-minded, flexible approaches to workforce planning will leave your company better positioned for when the economy recovers.

For more information on COVID-19 and its impact on the 50+ population, **visit aarp.org/coronavirus.**

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