

Healthy Aging and Well-Being at Work: Opportunities for Action

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As we recover from the pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to rethink how we live and work. Workplaces can play a pivotal role in protecting and advancing the mental health and well-being of older workers. In doing so, they will help an often-overlooked population thrive at work, at home, and in the community. They will also foster more resilient and successful organizations.

In October 2022, I issued the *Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being* which offers employers of every size and across every industry evidence-based guidance to support the mental health and well-being of all workers.¹ Building on a foundation of five Essentials, the *Surgeon General's Framework* calls on organizational leaders to reexamine how they protect workers from harm, foster a sense of connection and community, show workers that they and their work matter, support work-life harmony, and create opportunities for growth and learning. These five Essentials are especially important for workplaces that employ older workers and want to recruit and retain older workers in years to come.

Participation in the US workforce for those ages 55 and older has trended upward for the past two decades and is projected to increase through 2030.² For the older age segment of 65 to 69, labor force participation was approximately 25 percent in 2000 and is

expected to reach nearly 40 percent by 2030.³ Nearly 11 million Americans ages 65 and older are now in the labor force (working or actively seeking work) as of 2021.⁴ The average reported retirement age has increased from 57 in 1991 to 61 in 2022.⁵ These profound shifts in the workforce make it imperative that employers ensure older workers have the resources necessary to support workplace well-being and to thrive at work. The *Surgeon General's Framework*, through its five Essentials, lays out how this can be done.

The Five Essentials

First, employers can **ensure protection from harm** for older workers by prioritizing their physical and psychological health and safety. For example, workplace leaders can encourage time off for mental health care and support workers' access to mental health and substance use care. Another way workplace leaders can support protections for older workers is by enforcing existing rules and laws designed to protect them from discrimination. This includes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Older Americans Act of 1965, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.⁶ Age-inclusive workplace policies and programs are effective only if the institutional culture surrounding them is equally inclusive. Unfortunately,

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age-based discrimination remains pervasive in the workplace. Nearly 80 percent of older workers surveyed by AARP in 2020 reported that they either saw or experienced age-based discrimination on the job — the highest level since 2003.⁷ Employers can review existing workplace diversity and accommodation policies to ensure they encompass age and disabilities. Doing so protects both the rights and the well-being of older workers and places them on equal footing with their colleagues.

Second, workplace leaders can champion a culture of feeling valued and **matter at work** for workers of all ages. This begins by regularly communicating these values across an organization to redefine how older adults are viewed and valued in the workplace, and to promote healthy aging and well-being at work. Leaders at all levels can consider sharing their own stories and challenges in grappling with ageism. Employers can proactively promote healthy aging via platforms such as AARP's Employer Pledge Program. This program acknowledges their commitment to an age-inclusive workforce, to demonstrating efforts to provide equitable opportunities for workers of all ages, and to valuing the perspectives and skills of experienced workers. Finally, leaders can involve older workers in shaping mission statements, values, and cultures of gratitude and can recognize their roles in achieving organizational goals.

Third, employers can **support measures that allow for work-life harmony** for older adults. Nearly 54 percent of people ages 50 to 80 are caregivers who say they've helped a senior adult with health, personal, or other care tasks in the last two years.⁸ Others may be returning to work after injury or unemployment or living with chronic illnesses or a disability.⁹ Supportive workplace policies, in addition to paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave, can include scheduling flexibility, remote or hybrid work arrangements, part-time or temporary work, elder care subsidies, retirement counseling and phased benefits, job accommodations, transportation assistance, and antidiscrimination protections, particularly for caregivers.^{10, 11} Leaders and managers across all organizations can learn how to communicate about work-life challenges and the resources available to support their staff.

Fourth, employers can **build opportunities for workplace connection and community**, which researchers have associated with greater worker engagement, retention, productivity, creativity, and a sense of belonging and well-being.^{12, 13} Organizations can create structured time for social gatherings and initiatives to foster sharing of diverse lived experiences and for peer support and mentoring by older workers. Cultivating meaningful work relationships can reduce stress and anxiety at work and can support healthy aging. This is

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especially important with more remote work arrangements today where many teams must adapt to how they communicate, collaborate, and build strong connections in virtual environments. In this regard, employers can communicate the value of social connection at work and support the contributions of older workers to nurturing these relationships.

Fifth, workplaces can provide **opportunities for professional growth and learning** for older workers. A 2022 AARP survey found that despite their willingness to learn new skills, fewer adults ages 50 and older had participated in training and education programs at work.¹⁴ Leaders should cultivate a culture of learning at work and should include older workers in training, education, and career advancement. The US Department of Labor's Senior Community Service Employment Program, the nation's oldest work-based skills training for older adults, offers valuable resources for employers. Investment in this area also includes leadership, management, and mentoring and coaching programs that can support worker engagement, satisfaction, and retention.^{15, 16}

Ultimately, although workplaces will each have different abilities to offer certain financial, health, and wellness benefits and programs, all workplace well-being initiatives must be shaped by the voices of workers themselves, including those of older workers. By prioritizing and investing in efforts to address older workers' well-being, organizations can experience valuable returns. Numerous studies over the past few decades have shown that when organizations invest in workplace mental health and well-being, they see higher productivity, improved retention rates, and lower

organizational costs, including reductions in illness-related absenteeism and annual health care claims.^{1, 17} The evidence is clear: A healthy workforce is the foundation for both thriving organizations and healthy communities.

A Societal Obligation

Our responsibility to remake workplaces into spaces that support mental health and well-being for a growing cadre of older workers in the United States today is about our broader societal obligation to ensure that all workers across the life span know that they matter and that their work matters. This call to action is in alignment with the United Nations' *Decade of Healthy Aging (2021–2030)* and the National Academy of Medicine's 2022 Consensus Report: *Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity*. Both initiatives underscore the imperative to provide greater support to older people, including by focusing on the role of work environments in mental health and well-being.^{18, 19}

Employers have a powerful role in creating a culture of well-being for older workers. Employers can look to older workers as leaders and can empower these valuable managers and mentors with the resources to drive policy and program changes. They can give older workers the same opportunities for growth, support, and success as they give their younger colleagues. The benefits of doing so — of building a safe, healthy, multigenerational workforce — will accrue to individuals, organizations, and communities alike. And it will enable us to take an important step toward building a healthier, more resilient, and more inclusive society for all. ●

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