



The Time for Lifelong Learning Is Now: Supporting Older Workers in Navigating Career Changes in the Wake of the Pandemic



Authored by Shayne Spaulding

The pandemic created shock waves across the nation and the world, affecting nearly every area of life. The impacts on the economy and labor market have been significant, especially for older workers (those age 50 and older). In addition to being at greater health risk from exposure to COVID-19, there is evidence that older workers experienced higher increases in long-term unemployment than younger workers during the pandemic (Bennett, 2021).

As the economy picks up and employers are desperate for workers that have the skills needed for this new world of work, there are renewed conversations about how we can **make lifelong learning** a reality. Older workers—from their tenure in the workforce and acquired skills and knowledge—have valuable assets to contribute. While the pandemic may have promoted the retirement of some older workers, others may want or need to work well into, and even past, their 60s and will need support to do so effectively.

Today, lifelong learning supports are scattered and inconsistent across industry, employer, and age. To address this, providing a system of lifelong learning that meets the needs of older workers should include the following:

Building Foundational Skills

The labor market of today is undoubtedly different than the labor market of 2019 but is also different than the labor market of the 20th century. Workers need support and training in navigating frequent job changes and career changes. This support needs to happen beginning at a young age and continuing throughout people's working lives. Changes in technology in the last two decades have transformed the way that people look for and apply for jobs, and workers need to know how to look for work. The public workforce system—funded under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act—offers one source of help, but older workers may be underserved in this system (Wandner, Balducchi, and O'Leary, 2015).

Beyond career navigation, digital skills are also fundamental to success in today's labor market. In a recent Urban Institute study, we found that about half of older Americans (age 50 or older) possess basic digital skills but that, on average, they have lower levels of digital skills than younger Americans (Hecker, Spaulding, and Kuehn, 2021). Older workers with more digital skills have significantly higher earnings. Our research showed that older workers who were digitally literate had average annual earnings of \$57,190 compared to \$25,777, and that digital skills are associated with higher-paying jobs.

In a world where education is increasingly delivered online, where one must apply for jobs online and where jobs have increasing digital skill requirements, there is a need to support digital skill development. This includes supporting digital skill-building throughout the life course and tapping into innovative strategies for building these skills. Colleges, libraries, and community-based organizations all have a role to play in supporting Americans of all ages, including older Americans, in developing digital skills. Digital skills should be considered one of the foundational skills—like basic reading, math, and communication skills—needed for success in education and the workplace.

Developing Alternative Approaches to Skill Development

While digital skills are critical, workers need to keep other skills up to date as jobs change. In the past, education and training programs often did not offer the flexibility to accommodate the specific skill development needs of learners. If you needed to build new skills or earn new credentials, you had to start from the beginning, and rigid education requirements made it difficult to combine school with work. In the last decade or so, there has been an expansion in alternative models that make it easier for workers to take advantage of lifelong learning.

For example, **credit for prior learning** (or prior learning assessment) and competency-based credentials can make accelerated learning possible. In the case of credit for prior learning, students that demonstrate college-level knowledge can earn credit that helps them in making progress toward degree or certificate completion. This can be particularly important for older workers who may have mastered some skills through their prior work experience or education. For the same reason, a competency-based program also allows learners to progress more quickly toward earning a certification or credential necessary for a particular occupation or sector (Scott et al., 2020).

Online programs have also opened up new avenues for learning. With requisite digital skills and access to technology, older workers can now easily participate in online programs, which can provide flexible opportunities for learning, making it easier to accommodate upskilling and reskilling into daily life. Online is not for everyone or for every type of program but can be a good option for taking advantage of learning opportunities throughout one's career. It can be particularly useful for honing or building a new skill that is being demanded in the workplace and thus may help with advancement of workers within companies.

Policymakers, institutions of higher education, and funders all have roles to play in expanding access to alternative models of skill development. Changes in policy and funding for pilot efforts can encourage experimentation while maintaining guardrails to ensure quality.

Financing Lifelong Skill-Building

A limitation for skill-building can be the cost of further education. The Pell Grant program, which provides financial assistance to the lowest-income students, limits the amount that learners can receive over a lifetime (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Older workers are more likely to have exceeded these limits if they go back to school later in life. Furthermore, Pell grants are usually only awarded to undergraduate students, so the program is not a great option for those who are going back for a new degree or credential following prior education. Finally, students can only receive Pell if they are enrolled in at least six credit hours of coursework, which can limit their ability to participate in short-term programs. There is research to suggest that expanding Pell to include short-term programs could benefit workers (Baum and Holzer, 2021).

Employers sometimes offer tuition benefits or directly provide training that supports advancement, but due to discrimination and misperceptions about the skills of older workers, employers might not consider them for training or advancement opportunities (Employment and Training Administration, 2008; Lipnic, 2018). More should be done to address discrimination, as I discuss below, but older workers should investigate what kinds of educational benefits are available from their employer. And although there are other forms of financial aid available—like subsidized and unsubsidized loans—more resources are needed to support skill development across the life course. One example solution that has emerged is **Lifelong learning accounts**, which provide an opportunity for employers and workers to co-finance their education.

Addressing Discrimination in Hiring

Combatting discrimination in hiring is key to furthering the goal of creating a system of lifelong learning. Older workers have tremendous assets and skills to contribute to the labor market, and discriminatory practices can impede workers from taking advantage of learning opportunities and accessing jobs that demand the development of new skills. To combat discrimination requires education of employers and workers, enforcement of existing laws designed to protect workers, and new methods of hiring and recruitment that **aim to eliminate bias in the hiring process**.

I am optimistic that the transformed labor market that we see today—where there are changing perspectives and expectations about work combined with a shortage of workers—will create new incentives to address discrimination and create the system of lifelong learning that workers and employers need.

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