



# What Universal Design Can Teach Us About Our Aging Workforce

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## **Americans in their 50s and 60s are arguably America's largest under-tapped pool of talent.**

This is something of a puzzle. Older workers should be immensely **attractive to employers**, given the experience and expertise they bring. They tend to have lower rates of turnover than younger workers, promoting organizational stability. Indeed, some research has even found that age-diverse teams tend to be more productive, perhaps because of the sharing of knowledge and experience across generations.

Yet employers don't seem to be universally impressed. As I've found in my own research, only about **half of Americans are steadily employed throughout their 50s**. There's extensive evidence that many workers end up leaving the labor force years earlier than they would like, and while there are many reasons for involuntary early retirement, employers' actions are a key factor. Both research and journalistic accounts show that organizations often do little to try to retain older workers—and in some cases, actively push them out of work.

If there's a silver lining for firms, it's this: Employers' general neglect of older workers opens up a powerful source of competitive advantage for organizations that see their value. What, then, should employers do if they want to tap this talent?

I'd argue that they should think of a curb cut.

You may have heard of universal design, an idea that comes from the worlds of architecture, urban planning, and product design. The classic example is a curb cut, a ramp that links a sidewalk to a street. While the ramp is particularly valuable for people pushing strollers or using wheelchairs, it smooths the way for everyone. There is a universal design analogy in the conversation about America's aging workforce.

Advice on how to attract and retain older workers often seems to assume that their needs and desires are fundamentally different than those of younger workers. If that's the case, employers might have to adopt specific policies to recruit or retain older workers, but this poses a conundrum. Research shows that American **employers may avoid age-targeted HR policies** for fear of being seen as discriminatory. In other words, the idea that wooing older workers requires radically different HR policies may itself be part of the problem.

What do older workers want? In many cases, what they want is not so different than what younger workers want: decent pay and benefits, reasonable schedules, safe and supportive working environments, and the flexibility to respond to their own needs, take care of their families, and participate in their communities.

These and other important aspects of job quality are, unfortunately, far from universal. Schedule instability, for example, is extremely common in service-sector jobs such as food service and retail, which employ large numbers of older workers. In these sectors, workers' schedules often feature little advance notice, large changes from week to week, back-to-back closing and opening ("clopening") shifts, and shifts that are changed or canceled at the last minute. Older workers are not immune: Researchers have found that **more than 80 percent of service sector workers aged 50 to 80 experience routine schedule instability**. Such schedules are hard on people's health, finances, and families—at any age.

This is where the curb cut comes in. An employer that offers workers of all ages more control over their work schedules is following the principle of universal design. Schedule control may have particular benefits for some groups of workers, including older adults. Many adults in their 50s and 60s, for example, are caring for their own aging parents and need to be able to plan their caregiving responsibilities. But rather than singling out particular groups, a universal design approach asks what changes would benefit workers across the board.

Not all job-quality improvements are costly; some even improve productivity. For instance, researchers worked with Gap Inc. to improve schedule stability. In a **randomized trial**, some Gap stores gave workers better schedules. They created more consistent shifts, with similar daily and weekly start and end times; they provided more adequate work hours for some part-time employees; and they enabled more employee input into scheduling through an app that allowed associates to swap shifts without manager involvement. Employees reported better sleep quality and less stress, while Gap stores gained higher sales and labor productivity, driven by better retention of experienced employees.

Other research with employers in traditionally low-wage sectors shows that when employers take the **"good jobs" route**, staff turnover declines, managers are able to get away from constantly dealing with crises brought on by understaffing and inexperienced workers, and customer satisfaction rises. For employers interested in improving job quality, researchers have encapsulated guidance based on years of research in programs like the **Work Design for Health Toolkit** and the **Good Jobs Institute**.

Importantly, changes like these work on the principles of universal design. While they may have particular benefits for particular groups, they typically apply to workers across the board. They are the workplace equivalent of a curb cut, smoothing the path for workers of all ages—and giving employers greater access to the major pool of talent represented by America's older workers.