

Older workers (1953)

EARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR MATURE WORKERS

FACTS, OBSTACLES AND POINTS OF VIEW

An Address by

John M. Convery, Employee Relations Division
National Association of Manufacturers

before

University of Michigan's 6th Annual Conference on Aging, Ann Arbor, Michigan
July 8, 1953

1953.

In examining any social problem, it is well to remind ourselves that we are looking at a picture which is constantly changing in a way which we can predict with little certainty. It's not long since many of us were pointing to the declining birthrate and on that basis making some predictions that have already proved embarrassing. Trends have a way of being interrupted, and so long as we are dealing with people who are free, we shall find it difficult to keep pace with this changing situation.

For instance, we have frequently seen figures going back over 50 or 60 years which indicate that while the percentage of the population which falls in the upper age bracket is increasing, the opportunity for employment of this same group is on the wane. The movement of people to cities, and our progress in industrialization are given as the principal reasons for this situation.

But let's look at the facts in these very cities where the problem is said to be most difficult. Whereas I have heard speakers in New York City, for example, say they could see little hope for either the aged or the middle-aged in the way of gainful employment a most depressing picture..... I find that -- so far as employment of older people is concerned -- the country's largest city is very much holding its own.

Charles A. Pearce, Director of the New York State Labor Department's Division of Research and Statistics, pointed out recently the tremendous increase in the number of older people in New York City.

In the ten-year period from 1940 to 1950, while the population of the city increased 6%, --

the number of persons over 65 years of age increased 49% (or almost eight times as fast as the total population);

the over 45 years of age group increased 26% (more than four times as fast as the whole population).

Despite this tremendous increase in mature population, employment in the over 65 group rose 100%, while in the over 45 year group, employment rose 51%.

INSTITUTE OF
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS
LIBRARY

JUN 21 1954

In short, employment of older people increased twice as fast as did the older population.

When one considers that the resident employment was 19% higher in 1950 than it had been ten years before, it is all the more significant that the older people have outdistanced the other groups so far as increased employment is concerned. In fact, of the more than half million resident workers added during the decade in New York City, about 82% were people aged 45 or over.

While pointing out that older workers, along with younger workers are much better off, Mr. Pearce felt that older workers unemployed and seeking work, frequently meet with barriers of one kind or another which may interfere with their employment.

The situation in industrial centers other than New York, discloses similar progress. For instance,* in the city of Detroit (1940-1950), population in the over-65 group increased 62.4%, while the overall population increased 13.7%. Men over 65 years old in this city increased 69.9%, while the employment of this group increased 109%. Women in the same age bracket increased 56.1%, but their employment increased 133.3%.

As for smaller cities in Michigan:

in Grand Rapids, men over 65 increased 21% while their employment increased 81.7%;

in Flint, while men over 65 increased in numbers 43%, their employment increased 108.5%.

Albert J. Noetzle Jr., Professor of Business Administration, John Carroll University, made a recent study of the older worker in industry. In reporting his findings based on experience with 35 manufacturing companies in Cleveland, he said:

"Almost without exception, the firms visited regarded their older employees very highly. They appreciated the older workers willingness to work, his loyalty, his backlog of experience, his lower rates of absence and accidents. Many supervisors considered their older workers their most valuable employees. But at the same time nearly all could remember unfavorable exceptions.

"The difference between the advantages and limitations of utilizing older workers in manufacturing depends upon the different concepts of an older worker. At times 'older worker' was defined in chronological terms, but more frequently the term referred to a person with declining abilities, one who was unable to perform satisfactorily the work assigned to him....

"While employers may feel a deep sense of obligation to their older, long-service employees, they were sometimes reluctant to favor the hiring of other older employees."

Generally he found employers willing to hire skilled workers or those with adequate experience. Fear was sometimes expressed of hiring an older person who is a marginal worker or a "drifter" who might not fit in well with the present work force.

* The Michigan Employment Security Commission (Administrative Brief #72)

The NAM urges Broader Acceptance of Older Employees

Over many years past -- going back even into the 20's -- the National Association of Manufacturers has been engaged in continuous promotional activities to highlight the worth of mature individuals in the plant.

Some of this effort is reflected in the substantial progress made in industry in the past quarter century, with employment records in thousands of companies revealing that older workers are placed and kept on the payrolls in greater volume today than at any previous period.

As recently as December 1952, the NAM Board of Directors reaffirmed the Association's position with this statement on "Employment Practices for Older Workers":

"Older workers represent countless years of rich and seasoned experience, judgment and stability and constitute an immensely valuable asset to the nation's work force.

"Employers are urged to observe voluntary hiring practices which give consideration to skills and abilities rather than to arbitrary age factor. The problem of determining proper retirement ages requires continuing study since conditions vary with companies, jobs and individuals."

Through education and leadership, in the newspapers and magazines, in the speeches of the Association's leaders, on the radio and television, NAM drives home the fact that older workers have qualifications which are decided assets in our social and economic life.

At the NAM Institutes on Industrial Relations and in the discussion clinics held with businessmen throughout the country, employers have opportunities to exchange information regarding the performance, attitudes and contribution of the older employee. Encouraged by hearing about successful experience in other plants, the employer is stimulated to do something about the problem in his own company. Thus are additional opportunities opened up for older workers.

Some idea of the progress being made, so far as acceptance of the older worker is concerned is indicated by comparing two NAM membership surveys, as conducted in 1939 and 1951. In both instances employers were asked to rate their older employees as superior, equal, or not equal to younger employees on the basis of Work Performance, Attendance, Safety and Work Attitude. The 1939 survey had 40 years as the dividing line between younger and older workers. In the 1951 study the dividing line was advanced to 45 years, in view of prevailing practice -- a fact significant in itself. The 1939 study covered some 2500 companies; the 1951 survey, about 3600 companies.

Briefly, the comparison indicated that in work performance, while 84.6% of employers in 1939 considered the older worker was equal or better, the figure had advanced to 92.7% by 1951.

The improvement in attendance was even more marked. In 1939, 82.5% of employers rated the older employees as equal or better than the entire group,

while in 1951, 98.1% said that the oldsters were as regular or more regular in coming to work.

As for safety, 86.2% of the 1939 employers gave their older people an equal or better status in avoiding accidents. Fourteen years later this figure had risen to 97.4%.

Older Workers Compared With Younger Workers

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Equal or Superior %</u>		<u>Not Equal %</u>	
	<u>1939</u>	<u>1951</u>	<u>1939</u>	<u>1951</u>
Work Performance	84.6	92.7	15.4	7.3
Attendance	82.5	98.1	17.5	1.9
Safety Records	86.2	97.4	13.8	2.6
Work Attitude	94.8	99.2	5.2	0.8

It would seem that the performance of older workers during the labor shortage of the past decade has done much to improve their position in the work force.

A Twofold Problem

Looking at this whole question realistically, we feel that it is a twofold problem:

- A. The man who matures on his job is generally retained by the employer as a valuable employee whose experience and skill continue to develop as he moves along. With respect to this group, industry has unquestionably done a notable job, keeping them at work in recognition of their productive value.

It is true that long tenure with an organisation gives a feeling of security to an employee (whether seniority is formalized or not) which may make the older person less likely to change companies than the younger employee, but employers retain mature employees on the job because the experience, reliability, knowledge and skill of these people is the mainspring of production. Employers know that it is older more experienced worker upon whom -- in the long run -- he must rely to get out the work.

- B. The man who -- at 45 -- is seeking work presents a more difficult problem, but the very fact that so much progress has been made with reference to group A above, is itself an important factor in meeting the problem of group B.

It is true that manufacturing industry is today employing a higher percentage of older people than ever before. Nevertheless, the constant need for a competent and stable work force, coupled with the trend toward longevity in our population, points to the desirability of even greater utilization of the talents, capacities and experiences of mature people.

As a nation -- and as manufacturers -- we have a stake in making the best possible use of qualified people, both for the sake of the individual who must

achieve satisfaction through our economic system, and for the sake of a productive economy, which needs the skills which older workers have.

While we believe the problem of the new entrant is diminishing, it nevertheless remains a question of real concern. The New York State and Michigan studies cited above, however, give reason to believe that if we attack this problem constructively, we can continue to count on results.

For example, most surveys comparing older workers with the rest of the work force with regard to such important items as work performance and reliability deal with the entire group and not with the more recently hired individual who is along in years. However, the Federation Employment Service in New York City has been actively engaged in getting jobs for this group since 1948. After one year on the job, they checked on the older worker applicants placed in January and June 1951, to evaluate their work performance and their attendance records. In this study, it was found that 83% of these older worker placements had equalled or bettered the productivity of their younger associates, according to their employers. As for absence from work, 81% of the older group stayed away from work less frequently than their younger co-workers, while more than 6% of them had attendance records which equalled those of their juniors. With only 3% of the older workers absenting themselves more frequently than younger employees, it is quite evident that where absenteeism is a serious problem, the antidote could well be the employment of more mature workers.

Information of this sort should be disseminated along with facts regarding the many other advantages which employers can enjoy by giving careful consideration to older job applicants. It is by education of this sort that we will move ahead.

Understanding -- The Key to Solution

If we more fully understand certain underlying factors that must be reckoned with, we are more likely to move steadily toward the goal. For example:

1. It is customary in talking about jobs to think in terms of industry. Actually, manufacturing provides only 25% of the total available job opportunities, which means that for every opening available in industry there are three opportunities in commerce, trade, finance, insurance, wholesaling, retailing, services, transportation and government. In many instances organizations in the fields outside manufacturing have greater opportunities for older job applicants. Success with mature people employed in department stores is particularly noteworthy in this connection.

2. In attempting to remove the roadblocks of prejudice and generalizations about the older worker, we must realize that we are dealing not merely with top management, but with employment managers, foremen, employees, unions and the public generally. The New York State Employment Service, for instance, in its "Guide to Placement and Counselling of Older Workers" warns its own staff thus:

"All staff must exercise particular care to guard against reflecting in their actions, traditional prejudices against older workers and making generalizations about the work capacities or lack of work capacities found in older workers...the necessity for overcoming any discriminatory attitudes or erroneous assumptions on which staff members may operate is of the greatest importance."

3. No industrial establishment -- no employer -- has an obligation to employ any specific group of workers as such -- which action would, in itself, be discriminatory. Its duty to society is to satisfy human desires by producing needed goods or services at a fair profit. Otherwise, it will cease to provide jobs and will go out of business.

Its employment practices must be based on conservation and fullest possible utilization of existing manpower -- through employing, placing, promoting and retaining employees on the basis of their qualifications for the job. Under this concept, age per se should not be a barrier to getting or holding a job.

Employment Based on Qualification for the Job

Employment of people and their assignment to jobs should be determined by matching the individual's skills and qualifications with the requirements of the available position. There is no place in modern competitive business for prejudices and generalizations when it comes to choosing or promoting employees. But, by and large, the employer is likely to approach the task of hiring employees in a realistic manner. For any job opening he will employ the person who, he has reason to believe, will do the best job. And more and more, employers realize that they can't afford to ignore the fact that there is no substitute for experience and the wisdom which comes with age.

Scientific job analysis and evaluation are becoming increasingly common in industry. With factual and exact job specifications, the problem becomes one of proper selection for and assignment to the job on the basis of individual fitness to perform the duties. Anyone who can meet these requirements is a logical candidate for that job, regardless of age, sex, color -- or any extraneous factor which has no relation to qualification. Discrimination of any kind is then automatically eliminated, as are misfits -- for to employ or retain workers in jobs for which they are not fit, is economically unsound and socially unjustifiable.

The Question of "Special Jobs"

While Federal Social Security has drawn a definite line at 65 years of age, it is interesting to note that the average beneficiary waits until he has passed age 68 before applying for benefits. At the same time, many companies are raising the age limit for workers' retirement, making it optional or offering opportunities for employees to continue at work past retirement, so long as this policy does not interfere with the maintenance of a dynamic organization which gives younger employees the needed opportunity to move along to positions of greater responsibility.

To that end, some employers have even gone so far as to design special jobs and working conditions for older workers. This may mean employing the technique of job dilution, for instance -- breaking down certain jobs into simpler sub-tasks thus reducing job requirements so that certain tasks may be performed by older persons.

While some companies may set aside certain types of jobs which they feel are suitable for older persons who are no longer able to continue at their regular work, placement specialists are generally opposed to restricting older applicants as such to certain work.

In its pamphlet "Workers Are Younger Longer", the Bureau of Employment Security, United States Department of Labor, says:

"Especially should firms discourage any practice of restricting older workers to set jobs such as guards, watchmen, elevator operators, maintenance men, cleaners, sweepers and oilers."

Rather than making a special case of the older worker, the positive emphasis of the ability-capacity approach, used so successfully with the handicapped, points the way to similarly effective results with other specialized placements.

The myth that the physically handicapped do not belong in the work force has been pretty well exploded. Since the World War II, the campaign of education and promotion has gained acceptance for the handicapped person as a desirable worker whenever he is properly placed in employment. Today hundreds of thousands of these people are making their contribution in gainful employment and proving that when properly placed in jobs for which they are suited, they are not job-handicapped. Emphasis on the abilities and capacities of the older applicant also makes it easier for him to accept any physical limitations he may have or changes he may be undergoing.

Furthermore, the need for physical strength on the part of the factory worker has rapidly diminished with the accelerated invention of labor-saving devices. At the same time, with the advancements in preventive health programs, both within and outside the plant, the modern oldster is more active, physically healthier and longer-lived than his counterpart of a generation past.

Partial Employment

The search for productive work -- even for the retired worker who may not be employable in competitive industry -- is bearing fruit wherever the problem is attacked with imagination and determination. For example:

1. Sunset Industries, Inc. of Boston, Mass., for instance, has set up three plants -- in Haverhill, Stoneham and Boston -- as demonstration units to prove through practical experience that this age group can be successfully employed by private industry and business. This group operates as a non-profit corporation. It manufactures in the highly competitive textile industry as sub-contractors for existing industrial and business firms who do the selling. Raw material is supplied by the contracting companies and in some cases training is also provided by the cooperating companies. All equipment, supervision, payrolls, and other obligations of a manufacturing or business nature, are the responsibility of Sunset Industries, Inc. This group plans to develop a pattern useful to all industries which will make it possible for them to realize on the long training and abilities of retired workers.
2. Recognizing that a large percentage of older people who want jobs are seeking part time employment, the Federation Employment Service, New York City, in January of this year, launched a project to find part time jobs for older men and women. The Association's campaign is directed at employers and it stresses the part time plan as a productive source of new manpower.
3. Scarcity of skilled manpower has caused some employers to set up branch plants in Florida where retired people are induced to work at least part

time on necessary work.

4. Handicapped older workers who can not meet the requirements of normal employment sometimes find jobs in Sheltered Workshops. These privately operated plants are usually operated under local welfare auspices.

The Responsibility of the Older Worker Himself

The problem of older worker employment is in a greater measure than is generally recognized, a problem which older workers themselves must attempt to solve. Opportunities in any labor market seldom match exactly the desires and skills of the job applicants. Obtaining a job may therefore frequently require adjustments on the part of the applicant to change in kind of work, wages, working conditions and work location. The problem, therefore, becomes one which ultimately the older job seeker must work out for himself.

Frequently the older job seeker is one of his own main obstacles. Suffering from low morale, he too often believes that he is unwanted in the labor market. Instead of accentuating the positive, and underlining his strengths and skills, he builds up the idea of "accent on youth" and magnifies the imagined handicap of age.

Recently I had a visit from the President of the Crown Spring project of the Walt Foundation. I learned of the fine work being done at this school to re-educate older people who are college graduates and who have fallen victim to the stereotype of their age group, the idea that they are senile and should withdraw from productive activities. The function of this school is to help restore the confidence of the individual and fit him to take his rightful place in society.

As people advance in years, this attitude can become, in itself, their most serious handicap. Unless they guard against it, they can easily acquire a "prejudice complex". A forthright determination to steer clear of this disastrous -- and common -- pitfall is the only sure way to overcome it.

And in our attempts to aid the older worker we must be careful not to encourage the false assumption that the individual no longer need look after himself. Whatever is done must be based on the fact that the individual still has the problem of fitting himself into the work force at the highest level that his training and qualifications will permit.

Conclusion

Full utilization of the abilities and skills of our people depends upon an expanding economy. Efforts to provide gainful employment for the older group at the expense of the younger or middle age group would be unrealistic. The problem is one of encouraging the full play of initiative so that men with ideas can strike out into new fields to provide more goods and services for more people. Any move in the direction of discouraging business from taking the risks which make for an expanding economy will tend to lessen job opportunities for everyone.

Activities of groups like yours reassure us that outworn attitudes towards older people are gradually being revised and that solid progress is being made in this campaign to secure for our senior citizens fuller recognition of the contribution they can make to the national good, as well as to their individual self-respect and economic well-being.