

Older workers (1952)



PRODUCTION AT ANY AGE



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As a nation, we have placed sharp accent on youth. We have tended to consider aging as synonymous with disability. Actually, aging is not a state of ill health. Aging is the wages of living.

Today, the steadily advancing age level of our population belies that we are still a nation of young people. In sheer self-defense, if nothing else, we have to reorient our thinking. While the first half of the Twentieth Century has been called the age of the child, during the next fifty years we will be directing our efforts to make the period of maturity more useful and productive.

Who is Old?

Segregating the older worker is wasteful of human resources. It has no place in a complex economy, nor in an aging society with an increasing span of life.

Age itself is relative. In 1900, when the median age of our population was just under 23 years, the person of 45 was in the older age group. Today, however, the median age is just over 30, and in 1975 it is expected to be 34. By 1980, it is estimated that there will be 43 million persons between 45 and 64 years of age, and over 22 million persons past 65. As the age make-up of our population changes, so must our concept of the older person.

What is "Old?"

Age may be considered as chronological, physiological and psychological. Chronological age is the least important because it merely represents the ticking off of birthdays. Physiological as well as psychological age varies with each individual. Consider, for instance, the Bernard Baruchs, the Connie Macks, the Grandma Moses, and the Arturo Toscaninis, who are contributing their talents though past three score and ten.

In employment, it is the skill, ability, and work capacity that count. Each worker must thus be considered on his own individual merits instead of an arbitrary chronological basis. Recognizing the fallacy of relying purely on the calendar, certain management and labor leaders are urging that retirement policies be based on the individual's work capacity and desire for continued employment. This is particularly important in view of the increasing life expectancy. In 1900, for example, a worker retiring at age 65 could anticipate three years in retirement. By 1940, he could expect nearly six years in retirement.

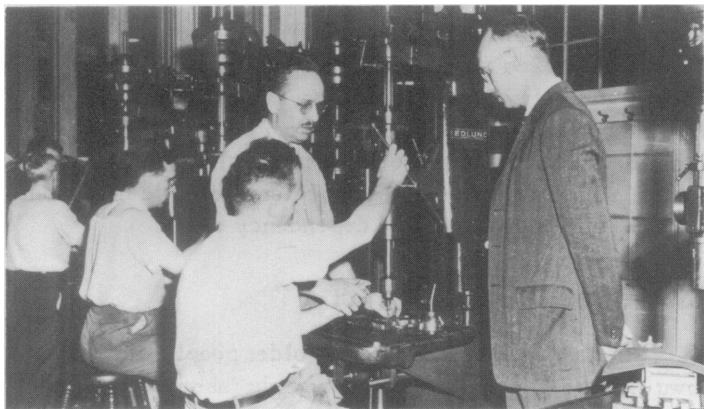
Too Old for What?

The years give as well as take. For physical aging, there are compensations, such as long-maintained skill and an increase in judgment when speed of reaction lowers. There are man-made compensations, too, such as the machine which takes the place of purely physical effort. For every job for which a worker may be too "old," there are a score of others that he can perform.

Older workers can perform competently: Studies show that older workers are more experienced, have fewer outside distractions, are more conscientious, have less wastage, and often are as productive as young workers. Undoubtedly, old age weakens ability on those jobs requiring great energy and

speed. But even on such jobs, it has been stated that the decline from age 50 to 75 is gradual and varies with the occupation.

Older workers can perform safely: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a study of work conditions of about 17,000 workers in a variety of 109 manufacturing industries revealed that the only disadvantage of older workers is that their disabilities last longer once they are injured. But on the whole, they are likely to be absent less frequently and less likely to be injured than the younger worker. The older worker's respect for safety practices not only protects him, but also influences his co-workers.



Older workers contribute to employee morale and productivity: The "old timer" usually has more knowledge of the traditions of the firm, a greater sense of belonging, and a higher sense of loyalty. He inspires confidence and loyalty among the other employees. He is particularly helpful in interpreting to younger employees the changes which the industry has undergone and in helping them to better understand various rules and regulations. The mature judgment and perspective that the older worker has gained through experience enriches the outlook and work of younger employees.

Older Workers Need Productivity . . .

The Economy Needs Production

While older people have a need for regular productive activity, for paychecks, and for the feeling of independence--industry, the community, and the nation also have a stake in the usefulness and economic productivity of older persons. The present high standard of living can be seriously affected by supporting a growing group of people who are not only non-productive but who are also dependent on others for their livelihood and care.

Our changing cultural and economic pattern makes it necessary for the older person to be productive and self-sustaining. For one thing, today's trend toward longer educational preparation makes young people dependent for a longer period of time and delays their entry into gainful work. Because of this later start, early withdrawal from productive employment, either because of hiring prejudices or arbitrary retirement age, places many workers at a particular economic disadvantage and forces them to a state of dependency again.

Assisting the Older Worker

Attitudes: Prejudices against older people must be broken down and widespread changes brought about in attitudes of employers, the community, and the older person himself. Rigid retirement policies based on chronological age urgently need re-examination.

Proper Job Placement: Older workers can do very effective work if the job requirements are matched with individual fitness. Frequently, job placement must be preceded by retraining which will enable the older person to make any adjustments required. State employment services are making special efforts now to counsel and place older workers, and many social agencies are helping in this effort. Through special assistance

of this type, two to three times as many older persons can be placed, according to a Bureau of Employment Security study.

By careful study of its job requirements, the conditions of entry, and the productivity of older workers, industry can help provide much-needed information for the proper placement of older workers.



Training for new and perhaps less strenuous types of work should begin well in advance of the ages when occupational changes may be desirable or necessary. Industry thus has a tremendous opportunity to retain the loyalty and experience of its older workers through a process of retraining and gradual change-over to jobs that will suit individual ages and capabilities.

Health Maintenance: Industry can contribute much to the health and productivity of the older worker by the provision of in-plant health services. In many plants, periodic physical examinations and other preventive services are made available to older members of the supervisory staff. If such services were extended to all workers, great benefit would accrue from detecting, and minimizing the effects of, the chronic diseases and impairments which accelerate the aging process. The essentials of in-plant health services are listed in the companion booklet "The Worker and His Health."

Summary

Stripped of erroneous impressions, employment of the older worker actually represents the reaping of maturity's harvest. In the older-worker group there is a reservoir of training, experience, and judgment, on which industry and the community can draw to mutual benefit. Industry can help to utilize this growing source of manpower through improved job analysis, counseling, and selective placement procedures, matching the job requirements to the physical, mental, and emotional capacities of the older worker. Through preventive services in in-plant health programs, the health and productivity of the older-worker group, a growing segment of the gainfully-employed population, can be effectively maintained.



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