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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OLDER OFFICE AND MANAGERIAL PERSONNEL

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Introduction

Office and managerial workers constitute an estimated 21 percent* of the total employed population in America. Questions have been raised from time to time by personnel administrators and others as to whether these millions of white collar workers continue to function efficiently as they grow older, or whether there is a falling off which makes retirement at sixty or sixty-five a desirable requirement in business organizations. To obtain information on this question several well-known organizations were invited to cooperate with the University of Illinois in a survey of the effectiveness of older office and managerial personnel.

Previous studies, published under the titles *The Effectiveness of Older Personnel in Retailing* (Bulletin No. 607) and *The Effectiveness of Older Personnel in Industry* (Bulletin No. 608), disclosed that personnel sixty years of age and older, both in retailing and in industrial work, were considered by their immediate supervisors to be surprisingly able and competent. In the retailing study the sample consisted of 527 older personnel in 22 retail stores, and in the industrial study the sample consisted of 1,525 older personnel in 39 industries. Copies of these studies are available on request to the Bureau of Business Management, University of Illinois, Urbana.

This final study, which completes the trio of studies on older worker effectiveness, consists of evaluations prepared covering 1,025 office and managerial personnel sixty years of age and older, representing all older office and managerial personnel (excluding some top executives) in the following twenty organizations:

* According to the 1950 U. S. Census Summary of Population the total U. employed population is 56 million, of which 5 million are in managerial positions and about 7 million are in clerical and kindred positions.

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As in the other two studies, we have relied in this study on supervisory opinion in obtaining data concerning older worker effectiveness. We have done so because it does not seem that fully objective, laboratory-controlled answers can ever be obtained with reference to the effectiveness of large groups of older workers in different types of work. We feel that evaluations prepared of older personnel by their supervisors are the best indices obtainable of older worker performance and effectiveness.

The survey was conducted by inviting executives in the cooperating companies to give us the number of office and managerial employees on their payrolls who were sixty years of age and older. We then sent these organizations an appropriate number of rating forms. These forms were in turn distributed to supervisors with the request that each worker sixty years of age and older be evaluated. A copy of the rating form which was used is shown in Figure 1.

Note that supervisors were asked "please answer all questions honestly and realistically," and that they were informed that "ratings are entirely confidential." After supervisors had completed their evaluations the rating sheets were sent to the University of Illinois, where they were tabulated on IBM machines.

It will be noted that office and managerial personnel have been grouped together in this survey. This is because these two areas of work are so closely related--working conditions are identical, the kind of work performed is similar, and promotions to managerial positions are frequently made from the office group.

Eighteen of the twenty cooperating organizations have a retirement pension plan covering all employees; however, only twelve of these organizations require all employees to retire at sixty-five.

Characteristics of the Survey Group

Older office and managerial personnel represented about 3% of the total employees in the twenty cooperating organizations. The average age of all personnel included in the survey was 63.9 years. Older personnel included were distributed into age categories as follows:

Age groups	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	Total
Number	655	273	73	24	1,025
Per cent	63	27	7	3	100

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STUDY ON EFFECTIVENESS OF OLDER PERSONNEL

Questions to be answered by supervisors
concerning each employee sixty and over

Initials of employee _____ Sex _____ Approx. Age _____ Supervisory _____
Non-Supervisory _____

Kind of work being performed _____

About how long employed in company _____ years _____

If there were no retirement requirements, how many more years do you feel this employee would be able to continue and do a good job on this kind of work? (Write "indefinite" if employee shows no signs of weakness or decline)

_____ Years

How would you rate the overall performance of this employee?

- _____ Excellent
- _____ Very Good
- _____ Good
- _____ Fair
- _____ Poor

In comparison with *average younger workers* in comparable tasks, rate this employee on:

- Absenteeism: _____ More Absences _____ About the same _____ Fewer Absences
- Dependability: _____ Less _____ About the same _____ More
- Judgment: _____ Poorer _____ About the same _____ Better
- Work Quality: _____ Poorer _____ About the same _____ Better
- Work Volume: _____ Less _____ About the same _____ More
- Getting along with others: _____ Less well _____ About the same _____ Better

What, if any, *age-connected* weakness (of either a mental or physical nature) have you noticed in this employee?

.....

To the supervisor completing this form: please indicate your age group:

- 25-35 _____
- 36-45 _____
- 46-55 _____
- 56-65 _____
- 66 _____

Please answer all questions honestly and realistically
Ratings are entirely confidential

The high percentage of employees in the 60-64 age group is doubtless due to the fact that in twelve of the cooperating organizations employees are not permitted to work beyond the age of sixty-five.

The eldest employee in the study was a man eighty years of age who was employed in an insurance company and whose work consisted of checking insurance applications. He had been employed by his company for less than a year, and was rated by his supervisor as "good." It was reported that he had fewer absences than the average younger worker, and was as good as younger workers in such qualities as dependability, judgment, work quality, work volume, and getting along with others. It was reported that he had no apparent age-connected weaknesses, and that it appeared he would be able to continue to work for an indefinite period.

The 1,025 older employees in the survey group were performing the following duties:

General clerical	48%	Technical clerical	8%
Managerial	18	Accounting	4
Messenger, mail room, and custodial	16	Machine operation	4
		Stenography	2

The General clerical group included such positions as sorter, billing clerk, policy checker, accounts receivable clerk, and order writer. The managerial group included such supervisory positions as Director of Industrial Relations, Supervisor of Traffic Department, Manager of Bond Division, Comptroller, Sales Manager, and Vice President. The technical clerical group included such positions as Statistical Clerk, Actuarial Clerk, Claims Analyst, and Records Examiner.

While it might be expected that most of these older workers had been with their present organization for most of their working careers, it was disclosed that only one-fourth of these personnel had spent 30 or more years with their present organization. Note that nearly half of these older workers had been with their present organization less than ten years:

Length of Service	Percent of Total
1 - 4 years	38
5 - 9 years	11
10 - 19 years	15
20 - 29 years	12
30 and over	24

These figures suggest that postwar shortages in the supply of office and managerial workers have been instrumental in encouraging employing organizations to raise their age limits in employment and to seek recruits from among the older age groups.

The following paragraphs outline the specific findings of the survey with reference to the performance of older workers:

Over-all performance: All employees included in the survey group were given one of the following ratings by supervisors on their over-all performance: excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. In making these ratings supervisors compared the performance of the individual with their own standards of what constitutes a satisfactory employee. The ratings assigned by supervisors to the 1,025 older workers in the survey group were distributed as follows:

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
16%	32%	36%	15%	1%

No important differences were noted in the ratings assigned to employees in the four age categories. While one might expect the favorableness of the ratings to decline sharply as age increased, the figures do not support such an expectation:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and older	AGE IN YEARS
Excellent	17	16	12	13	
Very Good	32	28	52	21	
Good	36	36	26	53	RATINGS IN
Fair	14	17	10	13	PERCENT
Poor	1	3	0	0	
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

It is clear from these ratings that older office and managerial personnel are, for the most part, regarded as capable and efficient by their supervisors. Note that more than three-fourths of these employees were rated as *good* or better. Also, note that cost-conscious managerial personnel rated nearly half of these employees as better than *good*.

There is, of course, a question as to how younger workers in these organizations would have fared in a similar evaluation of over-all performance. Although no ratings of younger personnel were prepared, it seems unlikely that employees under sixty years of age would, as a group, have received ratings more favorable than those given older personnel. This is indicated by the following data in which supervisors have specifically compared the performance of older workers with that of *average younger workers*.

Absenteeism: Older personnel are rated by their supervisors as being much less prone to absenteeism than younger personnel. In preparing ratings on absenteeism, managers and supervisors were requested to compare the absences of older workers with those of *average younger workers*. The ratings for older personnel were distributed as follows:

Reported to have less absenteeism	70%
Reported to have about the same absenteeism	23%
Reported to have more absenteeism	7%

When the ratings are broken down by age categories it is found that absenteeism actually decreases with advancing age. The eldest employees are shown to have less absenteeism than those in the younger groups:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	AGE IN YEARS
Less absenteeism	67	72	81	84	
Same	28	18	11	4	RATINGS IN
More absenteeism	5	10	8	12	PER CENT
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

Various explanations have been offered with reference to the excellent attendance records of older workers. It is our belief that the low absenteeism of older workers can be attributed to the fact that older personnel are more conscientious and stable in their work habits. Since older people are freed of many of their family obligations and since they are apt to have discovered the satisfactions of a regular occupation, they tend to feel a greater incentive to be on the job.

While many people think of older employees in terms of illness and confinement, the findings of this study suggest that modern oldsters employed in office and managerial tasks enjoy an abundance of good health.

Dependability: It is clear that supervisors regard their older workers as having a high level of dependability. The tabulated ratings indicate that better than fifty percent of these senior workers were considered to be *more dependable* than average younger workers:

Reported to be more dependable	57%
Reported to be as dependable	37%
Reported to be less dependable	6%

A study of ratings by age categories indicates that dependability is an enduring quality which continues into advanced age:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	AGE IN YEARS
More dependable	55	57	73	67	
As dependable	40	32	27	33	RATINGS IN
Less dependable	5	11	0	0	PER CENT
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

These ratings belie the belief of some businessmen and personnel managers who reject older workers "because you can't depend on them." Supervisors and department heads, whose own performance is dependent upon the accomplishments of subordinates, have indicated by these ratings that older workers represent a bulwark of stability and loyalty.

Someone asked recently if older workers are dependable simply because they feel they must be in order to hold their positions. This does not seem to be a reasonable conclusion. If an employee were basically undependable and unreliable it seems unlikely that he could or would change merely to retain his position in later years. It seems more plausible to conclude that older workers are more dependable because of the greater stability of their habit patterns.

Judgment: Older personnel in office and managerial tasks are frequently called upon to demonstrate judgment. This survey indicates that supervisors believe that about one-third of their older personnel have better judgment than average younger personnel:

Reported to have better judgment	33%
Reported about the same	57%
Reported to have poorer judgment	10%

There is little evidence to suggest that judgment declines with the passing years. Note that personnel in the age group from 70-74 received the highest ratings of all on the element of judgment:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	AGE IN YEARS
Better judgment	31	32	47	20	
Same	58	56	50	75	RATINGS IN
Poorer judgment	11	12	3	5	PER CENT
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

Work Quality: Management is always interested in the quality of work performed by employees, and should be interested in knowing whether the quality declines as personnel grow older. This study discloses that older personnel are regarded very favorably with reference to the quality of work produced. As before, supervisors were asked to rate older persons in comparison with average younger workers:

Reported to have better work quality	36%
Reported about the same	57%
Reported to have poorer work quality	7%

This indicates that as a rule management has nothing to fear concerning the quality of work produced by older personnel. The study shows that older workers in the various age categories have been rated with remarkable similarity, indicating that the quality of work performance among older personnel is an enduring quality:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	AGE IN YEARS
Better work quality	36	37	37	38	
About the same	57	55	60	58	RATINGS IN
Poorer work quality	7	8	3	4	PER CENT
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

Work Volume: Everyone will doubtless agree that a major criterion in the evaluation of an employee is *productivity*. Business organizations operate for profit and unless employees produce in satisfactory and sufficient volume a company will not remain in business very long. In this survey the work productivity of older personnel was compared with that of average younger workers. The results follow:

Reported to have a higher work volume	21%
Reported to have a volume about the same	57%
Reported to have a lower work volume	22%

These figures, which show that better than three-fourths of older personnel have work production records as good as, or better than, those of younger workers, should be of great interest to personnel men who are looking for new sources of personnel or who may be weighing the feasibility of retiring all employees at sixty or sixty-five.

Ratings indicate that satisfactory work productivity may continue into advanced age categories:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	AGE IN YEARS
Higher volume	22	19	27	13	RATINGS IN
About the same	58	55	50	45	PER CENT
Less volume	20	26	23	42	
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

While there is a decline in volume of work among employees in the advanced age categories, note that well over half of the employees over seventy years of age are reported to be producing a satisfactory volume of work.

Getting Along with Others: It was found that older workers as a group are rated favorably in their human relationships. Each worker was evaluated in comparison with average younger workers. The distribution of ratings follows:

Reported to get along better with others	33%
Reported to get along about the same	60%
Reported to get along less well	7%

Note the ratings assigned to persons in different age groups, as shown in the following table:

	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over	AGE IN YEARS
Gets along better	32	30	42	50	RATINGS IN
About the same	60	65	55	42	PER CENT
Gets along less well	8	5	3	8	
	(655)	(273)	(73)	(24)	NO. IN GROUP

This distribution suggests that older workers as a group are not more difficult to get along with than are younger workers. One-third of these older employees were judged by management to be better than average younger workers in their relationships with others, and close to two-thirds were said to be as good.

Other Findings in the Study

This study of older employees reveals that efficient work productivity may continue at a relatively unimpaired level through the years, provided the individual retains (a) his physical strength, (b) his intellectual ability, and (c) his motivation to work.

(a) Do elder workers in general retain their physical strength for work into advanced years? The answer seems to be an unequivocal yes--particularly in office and managerial types of work. Modern, labor-saving devices and a decline in infectious diseases are resulting in fewer demands on physical energy and strength. As a consequence, workers today may be presumed to be less physically worn and weakened at sixty-five than they were in previous generations.

(b) Is it possible for elder employees to retain intellectual abilities as they grow older? The answer again is yes--provided they continue to use and exercise their minds. That the mind does not necessarily grow dim with age is evident when we consider the intellectual abilities of such famous oldsters as MacArthur, Churchill, Barkley, and Toscanini, and Baruch.

(c) Do elder personnel in general retain their motivation to work? Again, the answer appears to be yes. This conclusion is supported by a study conducted by Edwin Shields Hewitt and Associates of Chicago among employees about to be arbitrarily retired at sixty-five. The study indicated that a majority of these employees would prefer to continue working for a few more years rather than retire on a pension.

Remaining Years of Service

One of the most important questions asked in the study related to the number of additional years of productive service which older personnel can be expected to render to their employers. Does the work life end at sixty-five, or seventy? To obtain supervisory opinion on this point the following question was asked on the rating form:

"If there were no retirement requirements, how many more years do you feel this employee would be able to continue and do a good job on this kind of work? (Write "Indefinitely" if employee shows no signs of weakness or decline)."

The responses were as follows:

Less than 1	5%
1 - 2 years	7%
3 - 4 years	10%
5 - 9 years	18%
10 or more	6%
Indefinitely	54%

These data indicate that supervisors believe a majority of elder workers are capable of continuing well beyond the traditional retirement age of sixty-five. Note that more than half of these older workers displayed no weaknesses which suggested a limit on the number of additional years which they would be able to work.

Age-connected Weaknesses

In evaluating employees on age-connected weaknesses, raters were asked to list only those weaknesses that they regarded as age-connected. In other words, they were not to list traits, such as undependability or stubbornness, unless they considered these traits to be the result of advancing age. The following list shows the kinds of weaknesses observed by supervisors in the order of their frequency:

None	71%
Poor Health	9%
General slowing down	8%
Psychological Difficulties (temperament, forgetfulness, etc.)	7%
Poor Eyesight	2%
Poor Hearing	2%
Physical Weakness	1%

It is startling to observe that less than one-third of the 1,025 employees in this survey group were reported to have age-connected weaknesses, although such weaknesses are commonly attributed to older people in general. More than two-thirds of the employees in the group were reported to be free of the inadequacies and weaknesses popularly associated with the later years.

Influence of Supervisor's Age on Ratings

To provide some facts concerning the long-standing belief that older supervisors tend to think more charitably of older workers than do younger supervisors, rating supervisors were asked to indicate their age group. Performance ratings (excellent, very good, good, fair, and poor) assigned to personnel were compared with the ages of the supervisors assigning the ratings. No evidence supporting the traditional belief is found, as shown in the following:

Ratings Assigned

Age of Supervisors	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
25 - 35	16%	36%	32%	14%	2%
36 - 45	14%	30%	40%	15%	1%
46 - 55	18%	35%	34%	12%	1%
56 - 65	18%	31%	33%	17%	1%
65 & over	17%	28%	11%	28%	16%

As shown in this chart, supervisors in each age group rated their older employees with remarkable similarity. Note that supervisors in the plus 65 age group were slightly more critical of their contemporaries. However, since there were only eighteen rating supervisors in the plus 65 age group, the figures are insignificant.

Summary

While the findings of this study are highly favorable to older personnel we must avoid the tendency to infer more than is actually indicated. There is a suggestion, for example, that older people tend to become more efficient by virtue of their age alone. This, of course, is not true because it fails to consider that the older personnel in this survey represent a selective group in several senses: only those with motivation have continued to work, only those with the best apparent capabilities were selected for employment, and only the fittest have survived dismissal.

The study also suggests that people sixty and over should be selected for office and managerial employment in preference to younger people. This inference is also unsound because it overlooks the necessity in industry to employ younger persons who will be able to give long years of experienced service to the organization and who will be available to replace senior workers who ultimately leave the organization.

The findings of the study do, however, appear to support the following conclusions:

1. Most older workers in office and managerial tasks are considered by their supervisors to be as good as or superior to average younger workers with reference to over-all performance, absenteeism, dependability, judgment, work quality, work quantity, and getting along with others.
2. There is no specific point of age at which office and managerial employees become unproductive. Satisfactory work performance may continue into the eighth decade.
3. A majority of older workers in office and managerial positions are reported by supervisors to have no apparent weaknesses which indicate a limit on the number of additional years which they will be able to work.
4. A majority of older workers in office and managerial positions are reported by supervisors to have no apparent age-connected weaknesses which impair their usefulness as employees.
5. There is no indication that the age of the supervisor has anything to do with the favorableness of ratings assigned to older personnel.
6. Older people should be considered for employment in office and managerial tasks along with younger people. The fact that nearly half of the employees in this survey group have been with their present organizations less than ten years means that these persons must have been hired when past fifty years of age. The fact that supervisors have rated older workers so favorably in this study is evidence that older workers may prove to be highly desirable.
7. It is wasteful of experienced manpower to require all employees in an organization to retire at a fixed age, such as sixty-five. Note that the personnel in this survey who were sixty-five and over were assigned ratings by their supervisors which compare favorably with ratings assigned to personnel under sixty-five years of age.

The three studies in older worker effectiveness, as conducted by the Bureau of Business Management, suggest that any unfavorable attitudes which we may harbor about the usefulness and capacity of older workers should be reappraised. Because there are growing numbers of older people in society, management should make intelligent efforts to use these older skills. The studies which have been conducted indicate that we need not be magnanimous about utilizing older people. There is a growing and imposing assembly of evidence that older workers as a group are considered by their supervisors to be productive and competent--even when their performance is compared with that of younger workers.

How does the performance of older office and managerial personnel compare with that of older workers in retailing and in industry?

The Bureau of Business Management studies, covering 3,077 older workers in 81 different organizations, indicate that older workers have similar characteristics, whether they are engaged in retailing, industrial, office, or managerial tasks. The following table summarizes and compares the basic findings in the three studies on older worker effectiveness.

	Retailing	Industrial	Office & Managerial
Number of employees in sample	527	1,525	1,025
Number of participating firms	22	39	20
Percent of older workers in relation to total personnel in these firms	10	6.5	3
Average age of older workers	65.1	63.9	63.9
Percent of personnel rated Excellent	20	11	16
Percent of workers rated Very Good	29	25	32
Percent of workers rated Good	37	39	36
Percent of workers rated Fair	13	22	15
Percent of workers rated Poor	1	3	1

Absenteeism:

Percent with lower absenteeism than average younger workers	70	63	70
Percent rated about the same	21	27	23
Percent with more absenteeism	9	10	7

Dependability:

Percent rated better than younger workers	58	44	57
Percent rated about the same	38	49	37
Percent rated poorer	4	7	6

Judgment:

Percent rated better than younger workers	Not rated	Not rated	33
Percent rated about the same	Not rated	Not rated	57
Percent rated poorer	Not rated	Not rated	11

Work Quality:

Percent rated better than younger workers	Not rated	32	36
Percent rated about the same	Not rated	60	57
Percent rated poorer	Not rated	8	7

Work Volume:

Percent rated better than younger workers	39	21	21
Percent rated about the same	47	59	57
Percent rated poorer	14	20	22

Getting Along with Others:

Percent rated better than younger workers	31	32	33
Percent rated about the same	54	61	60
Percent rated poorer	15	7	7

Percent of older workers rated as having no apparent age-connected weaknesses	76	67	71
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